



NAZARBAYEV
UNIVERSITY

PHIL 141: Critical Thinking

Spring 2022

Ted Parent, ted.parent@nu.edu.kz
Office Hours: TBA, and by appointment.

This syllabus is subject to revision at the discretion of the instructor.

Course Description

We are constantly being given reasons to do and believe things: buy a product, support a cause, accept a job, judge someone innocent or guilty, judge that fairness requires us to do some household chore, and so on. Assessing the reasons for doing or believing these things calls upon us to think carefully and accurately. This course will help you improve your skills at giving and assessing reasons.

Course Aims and Outcomes

Although the course will give you a solid introduction to informal logic, the understanding of this material is not an aim in itself but a means of realizing a diverse set of skills, most of which fall under three headings:

1. Identifying Flawed Reasoning

We will cover a number of methods and principles to help us identify flawed reasoning. This includes studying informal fallacies, formal fallacies, scientifically improper cases of explanation and prediction, and the cognitive biases that lead to the commission of these errors. Crucially, we will work through a number of exercises to help make these methods and principles habitual and applicable to your own lives.

2. Using Tools for Effective Thinking

The aim is not just to avoid bad reasons, but also discern good reasons. There are several heuristics we will study that guide us toward better ways of thinking. Among these are methods for identifying air-tight deductions, and methods for identifying scientifically proper predictions and explanations. Again, working through exercises will help make the applicability of these guidelines natural.

3. Fostering a “Critical” Attitude

The hope is to increase awareness of how often people think in illegitimate ways and how conclusions are often motivated by nonrational forces. This should encourage a “critical” attitude toward the ideas of our families, peers, culture (including its traditions, authorities, and institutions)—plus an awareness that your own mind is fallible. A critical attitude does not imply

being argumentative for its own sake; that can be unproductive. Rather, it means *making sure that the reasons for a claim are adequate*. This means checking the reasons for yourself. At the same time, we must open to learning from others and giving due respect to experts—although recognizing experts can be tricky, and we shall also study situations where deference to experts is inappropriate.

Course Assignments:

1. **Participation** in the online discussion boards, in the live sessions etc., is worth 10% of the final grade. (Good attendance is *assumed*, meaning that it does NOT count toward your participation grade. However, poor attendance will hurt your participation grade: Obviously, you can't participate if you don't attend!) Regarding the discussion boards, note that you can always post anonymously and still get credit: Moodle shows me your name, but you will remain anonymous to the group. How much should you participate? Well, if you don't participate *at all*, don't expect to get a passing grade for participation! Yet you can earn an 'A' here without talking at every chance. Indeed, *quality matters much more than quantity*, and you certainly should avoid dominating the discussion. NOTE WELL: There are other ways to participate, including:
 - Successfully answering spot checks
 - Emailing me or visiting our office hours with questions/comments
 - Emailing me to share with the class videos, websites, or other content that is relevant to the course
2. **Homework** is due three times during the semester (see the schedule below). These are graded satisfactory/unsatisfactory and are collectively worth 9% of your final grade.
3. **Quizzes** occur four times during the semester (see the schedule below). Each is worth 15% of your final grade. The homeworks are designed to prepare you for the quizzes; many times, they feature the same type of exercises. In all cases, if you can do the exercises from the homeworks and have absorbed the readings, you will be well prepared for the quizzes.
4. **Presentation** during the unit on Scientific Thinking is worth 6% of the final grade.
5. **Essay** on Plato's "Crito" is due at the end of the term (5 pages max). Further instruction will be provided later. The essay is worth 15% of the final grade.

Course Policies:

- The answer keys to homeworks and quizzes will be posted after the due date/time has passed. For this reason, *no late assignments are accepted*, PERIOD.
- If you have special needs because of a disability (psychological or physical), I am very happy to arrange accommodations. But please contact me about such arrangements ASAP.
- For the live sessions, *please do not be late* and *remember to mute your microphone* when you are not speaking. I would also LOVE if you unmuted your video, but I understand if you have limited bandwidth.
- Discussions *must* proceed in a respectful and well-mannered fashion. This course can be difficult, and no one should be made to feel stupid. Relatedly, taking an aggressive tone is inappropriate. It usually signals that the goal is to "win" a dispute, rather than to co-operate in the mutual pursuit of understanding. I reserve the right to remove you from the live session if you violate these basic norms of courtesy.

- Be forewarned that the majority of the feedback on your work will be critical. But *please* do not take any of these criticisms personally! Loads of critical feedback is simply how academic philosophy operates. And my intent is *certainly* not to belittle or discourage you, but to sharpen your writing/thinking skills.
- The Student Code of Conduct is in effect for this class. See <https://nu.edu.kz/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/NU-Student-Code-of-Conduct.pdf>. Plagiarism is sometimes unintentional—visit the following tutorial from Cornell University to learn how to recognize plagiarism: <https://plagiarism.arts.cornell.edu/tutorial/exercises.cfm>
**This is very important information. I take plagiarism very seriously. Make sure that this issue does not arise for you in this class.
- The grading scale at Nazarbayev University (as set by the Registrar) is as follows:

Percentage	Letter Grade	G.P.A. scale
95-100	A	4.0
90-94.9	A-	3.67
85-89.9	B+	3.33
80-84.9	B	3.0
75-79.9	B-	2.67

70-74.9	C+	2.33
65-69.9	C	2.0
60-64.9	C-	1.67
55-59.9	D+	1.33
50-54.9	D	1.0
<50	F	0.0

General Advice:

- Be sure to PRINT OUT the reading materials. Studies show that we learn better by reading hard copies versus reading a computer screen.
- Some students find logic to be especially difficult. I thus recommend getting an *early start* on the homeworks and getting a *logic buddy* as well. However, logic buddies must not simply divide up the homework exercises and share answers. Rather, you should complete all exercises individually, and then get together to *compare* your work. When discrepancies arise, you can then figure out the right answer together, which is often *highly* effective in learning logic. **But note:** No collaboration is allowed for the quizzes. This counts as academic dishonesty.

Schedule

[Items listed inside square brackets are optional]

WEEK ONE
Aug. 15-21

Intro to the Course. Buddha, “Kālāma Sutta;” Graham, “What You Can’t Say” (excerpts); *Handout:* Pessimism about Arguments; *Video:* Ruth Chang, “Hard Choices” [*Video:* evidencebasedwisdom.com, “Developing Wisdom;” *Handout:* Decision Theory Primer]

Psychological Obstacles. Vaughn, ch. 4 of The Power of Critical Thinking (excerpt); 3 *Handouts:* Cognitive Biases, What is the Ideal Setting for Inquiry?; S.L.O.W. decision tool; 7 *Videos:* Laurie Santos on Cognitive Biases [*Handout:* Defense Mechanisms; Kenyon & Beaulac, “Critical Thinking Education and Debiasing”]

WEEK TWO

Aug. 22-28

Psychology (continued).

Fri., Aug. 27: First Quiz due by 11:30pm

WEEK THREE

Aug. 29-Sept. 4

Five Types of Argument. 3 *Handouts*: Intro to Arguments; Premise and Conclusion Indicators; Criticizing the 5 Types of Argument

WEEK FOUR

Sept. 5-11

Deductive Forms & Formal Fallacies. Howard-Snyder et al., ch. 1 of The Power of Logic (excerpt); 3 *Handouts*: Famous Forms; Formal Fallacies; Necessary versus Sufficient Conditions

WEEK FIVE

Sept. 12-18

Arguments and Argument Forms (continued).

Tues., Sept. 14: First Homework due by 9am

Fri., Sept. 17: Second Quiz due by 11:30pm

WEEK SIX

Sept. 19-25

Informal Fallacies. *Handout*: Pseudo-Deductions; *Movie*: 12 Angry Men

WEEK SEVEN

Sept. 26-Oct. 2

Informal Fallacies II. 2 *Handouts*: Fallacies of Unwarranted Premises, Devious Rhetoric; Dennett, ch. 2 of Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking (excerpts)

WEEK EIGHT

Oct. 3-9

FALL BREAK—NO CLASS

WEEK NINE

Oct. 10-16

Fallacies (continued). Vaughn, “Experts and Evidence;” 2 *Handouts*: Website Evaluation Checklist; Are Emotions Relevant?

Tues., Oct. 12: Second Homework due by 9am

Fri. Oct. 15: Third Quiz due by 11:30pm

WEEK TEN

Oct. 17-23

Scientific Thinking. Foresman et al., chs. 6 and 9 of The Critical Thinking Toolkit (excerpts); 3 *Handouts*: Are You Prone to the Base-Rate Fallacy?; What Makes for a Good Scientific Theory?; The Bradford Hill Criteria [Haack, “Correlation and Causation: The Bradford Hill Criteria in Epidemiological, Legal, and Epistemological Perspective”]

WEEK ELEVEN

Oct. 24-30

Scientific Thinking II. Earp, “Mental Shortcuts;” Gorski & Novella, “Clinical Trials of Integrative Medicine;” Rosa et al., “A Close Look at Therapeutic Touch;” *Handout*: Remarks on Scientism

WEEK TWELVE

Oct. 31-Nov. 6

Science (continued)

Tues., Nov. 2: Third Homework due by 9am

Fri., Nov. 5: Fourth Quiz due by 11:30pm

WEEK THIRTEEN

Nov. 7-13

Dialectic: Objections & Replies. Plato “Crito;” MLK, “Letter from a Birmingham City Jail” (excerpt) [*Handout*: Historical Background on MLK’s letter; Huemer, “Why People are Irrational about Politics;” Shafer-Landau, “Ethical Subjectivism” (excerpt)]

WEEK FOURTEEN

Nov. 14-20

Applying It to Your Writing. Rosenberg, chs. 5 and 6 of The Practice of Philosophy (excerpts); 2 *Handouts*: How to Address Objections; Writing Advice

WEEK FIFTEEN

Nov. 21-27

Critique as a Way of Life. Herman & Chomsky, Preface to Manufacturing Consent; Baggini & Fosl, “Foucaultian Critique of Power;” Forseman et al., excerpts from ch. 10 of The Critical Thinking Toolkit [Chomsky, Afterward to Failed States (excerpts); *Handout*: Coping with Ecological Despair]

Plato Essay due during Finals week. (Exact date/time TBA).