

Critical Thinking and Methods of Inquiry
LDST 250, Section 4

Spring 2023

Course Syllabus

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Meeting Requests: Please contact me via email to set up an appointment.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

One characteristic feature of humans is our **liability to hold mistaken beliefs**. Unfortunately for us, it often turns out that we just have things wrong—sometimes badly wrong. We can think that we know things when in fact we do not. This problem is particularly acute for leaders. Leaders often face problems to which answers are not obvious. Accordingly, we might say that they can find themselves at the “epistemic margins” of social, political, and professional life. For example, they are frequently innovators and, so, must rely upon knowledge bases that are even more limited than are the knowledge bases upon which we rely in our everyday dealings in the world. This feature of leadership is important: leaders must sometimes take greater chances and face greater risks than do most individuals—both self-regarding and other-regarding chances and risks. In many ways, then, this is a course in **self-leadership**. How can we be expected to lead others in the right direction, we might ask, if we are misleading ourselves?

First, humans face a myriad of familiar **defects of reasoning**. In this course, we will begin with a **humanities-based approach** to how our reasoning goes awry. Most of the major defects of reasoning identified by philosophers can be put under the headings of “questionable premises” or “invalidity.” We sometimes reason from unfounded beliefs, and our beliefs often fail to support the conclusions that we want to draw from them. The goal in the first part of the course is to learn to notice and, ultimately, avoid these defects in our own reasoning.

Recognition of these problems, especially those at the level of argumentative premises, should lead us to consider whether, and how, we know things more generally. Is there such a thing as **objective truth**, or is all “truth” **relative**? Is knowledge even possible—that is, should we settle for **skepticism**? What are the strengths and weakness of standard ways of knowing—for example, **rationalism** and **empiricism**? What is the role of the **internal** and **external** perspective with respect to claims of knowledge? Can we trust the **testimony** of others? Does the truth of knowledge claims depend on **context**? What is the place of **intuition** in epistemology? In the second part of the course, we will consider these basic epistemological questions.

In the third part of the course, we will consider a **social scientific** argument for the claim that reasoning and knowledge—indeed, thinking—are under attack. Moreover, advocates of this

claim suggest that some false beliefs originate where we would least expect it: the university. Here, our goal will be not only to learn what social scientists, especially in the discipline of psychology, have to say about the challenges to critical thinking—indeed, wisdom—but also to apply what we have learned in the course to critically engage with their arguments and supporting cases.

As both a leader and a student of leadership, you will be presented with information from a variety of sources and in areas in which you have little to no expertise. You therefore need skills for making **your own judgments** about arguments and about the information on which these arguments rest. Because leadership turns on influencing others—on always being ready to justify oneself by means of an appeal to **rational persuasion**—you will also need to be able to give **cogent arguments** for your beliefs. You must be able to make a convincing argument that you are right and that others should accept (and, thus, act on) the beliefs that you have. In addition, if the social scientists are correct, you will need a sophisticated understanding of how people (including yourself) are actually inclined to think—often to the detriment of finding the truth. These leadership competencies fit with what you will need to be successful as a student of leadership: the ability to move among different **disciplines** and **methodologies** in the humanities and social sciences that come to bear on a multidisciplinary education.

This course aims to provide the necessary means for developing these fundamental leadership competencies. In the end, its success will depend in large part on your willingness to engage yourself fully in readings, assignments, discussions, and class exercises. To facilitate this kind of engagement, I use assigned seating. I also regularly call on people and give **Periodic Quizzes**, which will (usually) be unannounced. **Attendance** affects your **Periodic Quizzes** grade (if there is a quiz when you are absent), and—in all likelihood—your **Tests** grades. You should email me in advance if you will be unable to attend class. **Do not attend class if you are symptomatic or ill.**

Please note that **we begin and end on time** and that students are expected to remain in class for the entire class period. You may use computers and tablets in class, but permissible usage is restricted to the course-related activities of note taking and accessing course readings.

Recording class sessions or meetings is strictly prohibited. Unnecessary devices must be silenced and placed out of view during class. All students should minimize distractions and respect the rules of standard classroom etiquette.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- Students should learn to identify formal and informal fallacies in the reasoning of others— **with speed**, because arguments move very quickly—and how to avoid these fallacies in their own thought and in written and verbal communication.
- Students should have a sophisticated view of the nature and limits of claims to knowledge.
- Students should become aware of the challenges to critical thinking and arrive at considered conclusions about their implications for our understanding of leadership.
- Student should be able to apply course skills in the study and exercise of leadership.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Jennifer Nagel, *Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind* (New York: Penguin, 2018).

REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

Your final grade will be determined as follows:

1. Periodic Quizzes—25%
2. Test 1—25%
3. Test 2—25%
4. Application Paper—25%

Grading legend:

A+	97-100
A	93-96
A-	90-92
B+	87-89
B	83-86
B-	80-82
C+	77-79
C	73-76
C-	70-72
D+	67-69
D	63-66
D-	60-62
F	50-59

HOW TO DO WELL IN THIS COURSE

Pretty much failsafe in my experience!

1. Attend all classes. Worry less about note-taking than staying engaged. I will provide necessary notes.
2. Complete all practices problems and readings in advance of class meetings.
3. Be an informed participant in discussions by drawing directly on the texts.
4. Ask questions in class and/or schedule a meeting with me when you do not understand the material.
5. Learn from mistakes you and others make in class, on quizzes, and on tests.

DEADLINES AND SCHEDULED EXAMS

I take class time, deadlines, and scheduled exams very seriously. In fairness to your classmates, emergencies should be brought to my attention as soon as possible before the deadline or scheduled exam. Please note that computer problems *never* constitute an acceptable excuse. **I do not accept late work, but I will accept and grade incomplete work.**

SCHEDULE (subject to change as the course progresses)

W Jan 11	Introduction to Arguments and Epistemology Goldstein, “Our Moment of Truth” (Blackboard)
F Jan 13	Formal Logic
W Jan 18	Formal Logic
F Jan 20	Epistemology: Nagel, Chapter 1
W Jan 25	Informal Logic
F Jan 27	Epistemology: Nagel, Chapter 2
W Feb 1	Informal Logic
F Feb 3	Epistemology: Nagel, Chapter 4
W Feb 8	Informal Logic
F Feb 10	Epistemology: Nagel, Chapter 5

W Feb 15 CATCH-UP DAY

F Feb 17 **Epistemology:** Nagel, Chapter 6

W Feb 22 **Informal Logic**

F Feb 24 **Epistemology:** Nagel, Chapter 7

W Mar 1 **Informal Logic**

F Mar 3 NO CLASS

Spring Break

W Mar 15 **Informal Logic**

R Mar 16 MCDOWELL INSTITUTE SPEAKER: Roosevelt Montás (5 p.m.)

F Mar 17 REVIEW

W Mar 22 **Test 1**

F Mar 24 **Epistemology:** Nagel, Chapter 8

W Mar 29 Lukianoff and Haidt, Introduction & Part I

F Mar 31 Kahneman, Chapters 5, 6, & 7 (Blackboard)

W Apr 5 Lukianoff and Haidt, Part I & Part II

F Apr 7 Lukianoff and Haidt, Part III

W Apr 12 Lukianoff and Haidt, Part III

F Apr 14 **Test 2**

W Apr 19 Lukianoff and Haidt, Part IV

F Apr 21 **Course Wrap-up**

W Apr 26 **Application Paper emailed to me in MS Word by 12:00 p.m. Monday, April 24, or Tuesday, April 25, strongly preferred.**