

Contemporary Civilization

Tuesdays and Thursdays 8:10am–10:00am

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Nearly every fundamental ethical and political issue in contemporary civilization has been discussed before. The nature of justice. How we can know right from wrong. Rights of the individual. Standards of good government. Sources of authority. Religion. Science and religion. Disagreements over religion. Power. Whatever the issue, smart people before you have been there and argued about it.

In this course, we'll study some all-time classics—the questions, answers, and debates you better be familiar with if you want to jump into the conversation—arguments and challenges you better have heard if you want to be sure your own views are right.

You'll be forced to identify and then reaffirm or reject your own premises. You'll have to read and listen carefully and critically, think broadly and deeply about important issues, and communicate effectively, in writing and discussion. You'll practice arguing about charged topics, with people who are as smart as you are but who disagree with you. You'll have to take positions on issues you have only peripherally thought about. You'll make important decisions about the kind of person you want to be.

You'll read a lot, write a lot, and, if all goes as planned, have a lot of fun!

Course grade

Your course grade will be based on (1) three short papers, (2) two exams, and in general (3) your engagement with the class week in and week out, weighted as follows:

- $\frac{1}{2}$ Three papers, each 1000–1200 words
 - $\frac{1}{4}$ Paper #1
 - $\frac{1}{4}$ Paper #2
 - $\frac{1}{2}$ Paper #3
- $\frac{1}{4}$ Two exams
 - $\frac{1}{3}$ Midterm
 - $\frac{2}{3}$ Final
- $\frac{1}{4}$ Class preparation and participation

I retain the discretion to put more weight on later work for students who improve significantly. You should be judged on what you know and can do when you leave the course, not on where you were when you started.

Paper topics will be assigned, though if you have done well on your first papers and on your third want to explore something outside what I assigned, let me know.

Grades

The College would like professors in this course to reduce grade inflation, and I can appreciate that. Last fall, 62% of students got some sort of A, up from 57% the year before. I don't expect the number of As in my section to be significantly different than in other sections. But I do expect my students might need to work a bit harder. I have high expectations for class participation and especially for writing.

Class preparation, participation, engagement

When I say that $\frac{1}{4}$ of your grade is for class preparation and participation, I'm serious. I do not mean showing up for class. I mean active engagement with the material week in and week out.

Read and think about the assigned readings *before* class. You need to show me, *for every one of our meetings*, that you have read and thought about the assignments, and you must be ready, *in every one of our meetings*, to engage in analytical discussion with me and your classmates.

Before class read the material, mark up the text, make marginal notes, write yourself bullet points that summarize the author's position. Form judgments about what you've read. Be ready to share and defend those judgments. Be ready to counter opposing ones.

No matter what career you pursue, you will find yourself in this position again: Sitting in a meeting with fifteen or twenty colleagues, trying to get them to buy into your proposal. This is a chance to prepare for that, and practice.

Now this does not mean you need to actually talk a lot in class. You can be reserved and naturally quiet. In fact, maybe you are the kind that would rather write up a short memo before the meeting, or talk one-on-one with whoever is running the meeting, or be given the floor for a short presentation. Fine. For you, let's do that. You can email me a couple paragraphs before class summarizing your reactions. You can ask me beforehand to call on you for something in particular. In fact, with this many students in the class, we might need to avail ourselves of these alternatives more than we otherwise would.

In whatever way works best for you, you need to show me that you are, week in and week out, fully engaged with this material

Absences, deadlines, classroom

Clearly, missing class will be a problem. The College's policy in this course is that every class meeting is mandatory. There is a good reason for that.

Do not miss any class without letting me know. If your doctor says you are sick or your coach says you have an away match, I will ask you to find some way to make up what you missed..

Any *unexcused* absence will definitely hurt your grade. With four of them, you'll fail the class.

Also, do not turn papers in late. Do not ask for extensions. Do not ask for an "incomplete" grade in the course.

I'm not going to allow any laptops or phones in class. They are invariably a distraction. And there is just no need for them. The only notes you need to take in this class are those you write on the very pages we are reading. So again: No laptops, no phones.

Contacting me and getting together

I'll hold office hours in 612 Fayerweather Hall after every class. Let me know if you plan to stop by. If you want to get together and those times don't work for you, let me know and we'll figure out another.

Workload

I expect you to spend three to four hours reading and studying for this course between the Tuesday and Thursday classes, four to five hours between Thursday and Tuesday.

But that won't really be enough when you have papers due. So plan ahead. Read ahead and don't wait to write your papers at the last minute.

Cheating

Don't cheat.

Here is the standard boilerplate that the College wants you to see:

Columbia College is dedicated to the highest ideals of integrity in academia. Therefore, in Literature Humanities and Contemporary Civilization, any instance of academic dishonesty, attempted or actual, will be reported to the faculty chair of the course and to the dean of the Core Curriculum, who will review the case with the expectation that a student guilty of academic dishonesty will receive the grade of "F" in the course and be referred to dean's discipline for further institutional action.

And the Honor Code that students of the College have adopted:

I affirm that I will not plagiarize, use unauthorized materials, or give or receive illegitimate help on assignments, papers, and examinations. I will also uphold equity and honesty in the evaluation of my work and the work of others. I do so to sustain a community built around this Code of Honor.

My own warning is this: I don't like dealing with plagiarism and other forms of cheating. So I don't. I dump the problem on whatever university administrator is responsible. My experience is that standard processes can be brutal.

Study Guides

It is easy to find summaries and analyses of the texts we'll read—these are some of the most studied texts in history. I don't think it's cheating to avail yourself of those summaries and analyses. In fact, I recommend you do so. Most of the editions we'll use contain guides right there in the book. You can read those or encyclopedia articles, Cliffs Notes, scholarly articles, even whole books about these books.

But use those other readings to help you understand the assigned ones. Don't try using them as substitutes. A major point of our discussions will be to determine which competing interpretation is correct. If you are thinking "Wikipedia says . . .," you are at the beginning of understanding some text, not the end. Your project is to decide who is correct—you, me, Wikipedia, some random person on the Internet, one of your classmates, or none of the above. To decide, you'll need to study what the author wrote, not just what someone said the author wrote.

Finally

I consider past student evaluations of my courses and the comments available at www.ratemyprofessors.com and www.johnmccaskey.com to be fair. If they are, you will find me supportive but demanding (especially in class engagement and in the quality of your writing), the readings thought-provoking, classroom meetings stimulating and fun, and the course overall very rewarding. I'll do all I can to ensure you do.

Assignments

In addition to the itemized readings, I want you to read Michael Harvey's *The Nuts and Bolts of College Writing*. In fact, I want you to read it repeatedly throughout your writing career. I do. It's only 85 pages. The wiser students will have read much of it before the first paper is due.

The classes will be conducted mostly as seminars, not lectures. You must read the assigned material *before* classes. Come ready to discuss it. I and your fellow students will assume we can, without warning, ask you to jump into the conversation.

Here are the assignments, as of now. We'll adjust as we go.

Tuesday, September 8. Introduction. No reading before class.

Thursday, September 10. Plato, *Republic*, Books I–II.

No class on Tuesday, September 15. I'll have just gotten married the Saturday before. We'll add a class later.

Thursday, September 17. Plato, *Republic*, Books III–VII.

Tuesday, September 22. Plato, *Republic*, Books VIII–X.

Thursday, September 24. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books I, II, and III:1–5.

Tuesday, September 29. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books V, VII:1–8, VIII, and X.

Thursday, October 1. Aristotle, *Politics*, Books I, III:6–13, IV:1–2, VII:1–3, and VIII:1–3.

Tuesday, October 6. **First paper due, at the beginning of class.** Hebrew Bible, *Exodus* 1–24, *Deuteronomy* 1–6; 1 *Samuel* 2, 8–10, 17–20; *Ecclesiastes*.

Thursday, October 8. New Testament, *Matthew* 3–7, Romans, Galatians.

Tuesday, October 13. Augustine, *City of God*, I.P-4, 15-36; II.2, 14; III.31; IV.1-4; V.P-1, 8-26; VI.P; VIII.1-12; X.32 [last paragraph]

Add chapters 2 and 3.

Thursday, October 15. Augustine, *City of God*, XI.1; XII.6-8, 23; XIII.1-8, 13-15, 19; XIV.1-4, 8, 10-19, 22-28; XVIII.1, 54 [last paragraph]; XIX.13-17, 21, 24, 26-28; XXII.6, 28-30

Tuesday, October 20. The Qur'an, Suras 1, 114, 112, 111, 107, 98, 96, 68, 63, 56, 39, 26, 17, 12, 2-4.

Thursday, October 22. Mid-term review. No new reading assignments. We'll take a day to catch up (if needed) and review the first half of the course.

Tuesday, October 27. Mid-term Exam.

3-8

Thursday, October 29. Medieval Philosophy: Ibn Tufayl, *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* (selections); Al-Ghazali, *The Rescuer from Error*; Thomas Aquinas, selections from St. Thomas on Politics and Ethics (pp. 3-7, 14-29, 30-38, 46-53).

Tuesday, November 3. University holiday.

Could move this out one day later. Make it the following Tuesday.

Thursday, November 5. Second paper due, at the beginning of class.

Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, I.P-13, 16-18, 29, 32, 34, 42, 55, 58; II.P-3, 29; III.1, 3, 7-9, 22, 34, 43.

In the next several weeks, we need to squeeze in one make-up class, for that day we missed in mid-September. So we'll need to figure out the dates here:

[] New World. Sepulveda, *Democratizes Alter* and *Vitoria, On the American Indians* (pp. 231-51, 264-65, 271-72, 277-91)

\$8.15 for the Vitoria

[] Protestant Reformation. Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian Man," "On Government Authority," and "The Twelve Articles of the Peasants."

[] Protestant Reformation. Calvin, "The Institutes of the Christian Religion" and "On Civil Government" (<https://www1.columbia.edu/sec/acis/ets/readings/chr/calvin/calvcivi.htm>).

[] Scientific Revolution. Galileo, *Letter to Christina*. Francis Bacon, *New Atlantis*.

Scientific Revolution. *Descartes*, Introduction and preface.
Correspondence of Descartes and Elisabeth (selections). *Passions of the Soul*, §§1–12, 17–31, 35–50, 151–156, 211–212.

Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan*, introduction, 1, 5–6, 10, 12–16.

Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan*, 17–21, 26, 29–31, 46–end.

John Locke, *Second Treatise*

John Locke, *Second Treatise*

Thursday, December 10. **Third paper due, at the beginning of class.** Wrap-up.

Friday, December 18, 1:00pm–4:00pm. Final exam.