

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
 - $\frac{1}{3}$ Paper #1
 - $\frac{1}{3}$ Paper #2
 - $\frac{1}{3}$ Paper #3
- $\frac{1}{4}$ Two exams
 - $\frac{1}{2}$ Midterm
 - $\frac{1}{2}$ Final
- $\frac{1}{4}$ Class preparation, participation, engagement

You can choose what to write about. I'll give you suggestions in class. Some students take such freedom as an opportunity to grab a paper someone else wrote. Don't do that. If you get caught, you fail the course. It's happened. More than once.

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, participation, and engagement, 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.

Now this does not mean you need to actually talk a lot in class. You can be introverted, reserved, and naturally quiet. In nearly every class I teach, the highest possible class-participation grade goes to someone who speaks only once or twice per class. They don't dominate any conversations, but I can tell they are actively engaged with the material. They come to class having taken notes on what they read. They've marked up their texts. In class, they listen attentively and follow the discussion carefully. I can at any moment bring them into the conversation.

But also: 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 to practice. Seize the opportunity.

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.

Any *unexcused* absence will straight-up reduce your class participation grade by one third of a letter grade. With four unexcused absences, you'll fail the class.

But even excused absences will cause you trouble. Being sick on, say, the day we discuss Tocqueville, does not mean you needn't learn Tocqueville while all the other students need to. Tocqueville will be on your exam just as for other students. If a few weeks later, in class, we compare Tocqueville to Du Bois, you don't get to say, "Oh, I wasn't here for Tocqueville."

Even a doctor's note does not excuse you from learning the day's material. Your grade is for everything we covered in class, not just the things we covered on days you came. So, if you are sick or injured, you need to judge which will hurt you more: dragging yourself to class or working hard later to catch up on what you missed.

Often your best choice is to (1) keep up with the reading, (2) come to class and just let me know you won't be able to participate much. Don't expect much sympathy from me if you use a doctor's note to get out of class but then show up for athletic practice later the same day.

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. Most of your note-taking needs to be on the pages of the book we are discussing.

Contacting me and getting together

I'll reserve office hours in 515 Fayerweather Hall after every class. But to be sure I'm there and available, 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 the Office of Student Conduct. I tell them my suspicions. They investigate. They act promptly and decisively. If they say you cheated, you fail the course.

Having an outside group handle this ensures fairness. It's unfair to you if I harbor suspicions that you cheated, and it's unfair to other students if you cheat and I do nothing. So I call on the experts and they decide.

Study Guides

We will read some of the most studied texts in history. It is easy to find summaries and analyses of them. 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, Spark 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.

Books

Please get the following books, in these editions. Page numbers listed in the assignments are to these editions.

Appleman, Philip, ed. *Darwin*. Third edition. A Norton Critical Edition. W. W. Norton, 2001.

Burke, Edmund. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Oxford World's Classics. Reissue. Oxford, 2009

Danon, Frantz. "On Violence." *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, 2004.

Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver. A Norton Critical Edition. W. W. Norton, 1999.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. Vintage Books, 1995.

Gandhi, Mohandas K. *Hind Swaraj* or *Indian Self-Rule*. Any English edition will do, but here is one for less than you could print one yourself: *Indian Self-Rule*. Classic Thought Series. CreateSpace, 2015.

Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Revised edition. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. Cambridge, 2012.

Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty, Utilitarianism, and Other Essays*. Oxford World's Classics. New edition. Oxford, 2015.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. Edited by Walter Kaufmann. Vintage Books, 1989.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Basic Political Writings*. Translated and edited by Donald A. Cress. Second ed. Hackett, 2011.

Smith, Adam. *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Get any printing of the sixth edition, the one from 1790, such as the Glasgow edition edited by Raphael and Macfie and printed by Liberty Fund, the Penguin edition of 2009, or Dover Philosophical Classics printing.

Smith, Adam. *The Wealth of Nations*. Modern Library, 2000.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America and Two Essays on America*. Translated by Gerald Bevan. Penguin Classics. Penguin, 2003.

Tucker, Robert C., ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Second edition. W. W. Norton, 1978.

Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and a Vindication of the Rights of Men*. Oxford World's Classics. Reissue. Oxford, 2008.

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, January 19. Introduction. In class we'll look at records and writings from the eighteenth century. E.g., [William Blackstone on private property](#), [Condorcet on future progress of the human mind](#), some timelines.

Thursday, January 21. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the excerpt in the PDF.

Tuesday, January 26. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*. “Introduction and Plan of the Work” (pp. xxiii–xxvi); book I, chapters 1–4 and 7–8 (pp. 1–32 and 62–99); book II, introduction and chapter 3 (pp. 299–301 and 360–380); book III, chapter 1 (pp. 407–12); book V, conclusion of chapter 1 (876–878). In all, about 100 pages. Sample of American founding documents, in PDF.

Thursday, January 28. Rousseau, *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, pp. 1–25; *Discourse on Inequality*, part I, pp. 45–69, including note xv on page 117. In all, about 50 pages.

Tuesday, February 2. Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, part II, pp. 69–92; *On the Social Contract*, pp. 155–83, 188–201, 210–30, 241–52. In all, about 100 pages.

Thursday, February 4. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, pp. 1–33. Only 32 pages but it will feel like a hundred. Plan accordingly.

Tuesday, February 9. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, pp. 33–51. Again, very difficult reading.

Thursday, February 11. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, pp. 3–22, 32–38, 47–53, 58–63, 75–79, 88–97, 105–116, 121–128, 135–142, 172–179, 195–204, 248–250. In all, about 100 pages.

Tuesday, February 16. Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Chapters 1–4; chapter 5, sections 1 and 4; and chapter 9. In all, about 110 pages.

Thursday, February 18. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. Volume 1. Part 1, chapters 3 and 4, and part 2, chapters 1, 4, 6, and 7 (pp. 58–71, 201–202, 219–227, and 269–305). In all, about 60 pages.

Tuesday, February 23. **First paper due, at the beginning of class.** Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. Volume 2. Part 1, chapters 1, 2, and 5; part 2, chapters 1, 5, and 7; part 3, chapter 12; and part 4, chapters 2, 3, 4, and 6 (pp. 493–503, 510–518, 583–587, 595–600, 604–609, 696–700, 777–790, and 803–809). About 55 pages.

Thursday, February 25. Mill, *On Liberty*. Just over 100 pages.

Tuesday, March 1. Mill and Taylor, *Subjection of Women*. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “Address to the Legislature of New York,” available here: <http://www.nps.gov/wori/learn/historyculture/address-to-the-new-york-legislature-1854.htm>. Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman”; see both <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ain%27t_I_a_Woman%3F. In all, about 110 pages.

Thursday, March 3. Comte, "Catechism of Positivism," excerpt in PDF. About 70 pages.

Tuesday, March 8. 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.

Thursday, March 10. Mid-term Exam.

Tuesday, March 22. Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, "On the Jewish Question," pp. 26–46; "Estranged Labor" and "Private Property and Communism" from the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pp. 70–93; *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, parts I, II, and IV, pp. 473–91 and 499–500, *Capital*, part 1, chapter 1, sections 1 and 2, pp. 302–12. In all, about 75 pages.

Thursday, March 24. George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All! or Slaves without Masters*, excerpt in the PDF. About 80 pages, but not too hard.

Tuesday, March 29. **Second paper due, at the beginning of class.** Darwin, *Origin of Species*, chapters 3, 4, and 14; *Descent of Man*, chapters 2, 3, and 21. In all, about 100 pages.

Thursday, March 31. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, Preface and First Essay, pp. 15–56. Only about 40 pages.

Tuesday, April 5. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, Second Essay and some Hegel?

Thursday, April 7. Gandhi, "On self-rule." About 75 pages, but not dense.

Tuesday, April 12. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* and "Souls of White Folk." About 170 pages. Plan ahead.

Thursday, April 14. Frank Johnson Goodnow, *The American Conception of Liberty and Government*. Woodrow Wilson, "The Liberation of a People's Vital Energies." John Maynard Keynes, *The End of Laissez Faire*. In PDFs. In all, about 80 pages.

Tuesday, April 19. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, part 1, chapter 1, and all of part 3 except 1.4 The Composition of Forces and 2.3 The Examination. In all, about 150 pages.

Thursday, April 21. Fanon, "On Violence." 60 pages.

Tuesday, April 26. Current events. We'll pick some current or recent events and examine them in light of all that we have read in the course.

Thursday, April 28. **Third paper due, at the beginning of class.** Wrap-up.

Final exam.