Poli 110F: Critical Reasoning and Consumption

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Class Meetings:	Mon., Wed. & Fri. 2:00-2:50	**Office Hours:**	Mon. 1:00 - 2:00
	WLH 2114		SSB 385

Course Description

All students will engage with the media and encounter reports throughout their lives. There will be reports of scientific breakthroughs, human rights abuses, malevolent conspiracies, and large-scale social action. Some of this evidence will be reliable—some of it will not. While reports are sometimes diligent and careful, others range from poorly conceived to deliberately misleading. As critical consumers, it is our responsibility to distinguish between the two: to carefully and rigorously evaluate the evidence we encounter. How we evaluate these reports may well impact important decisions in our lives: how we vote, whether to dedicate time and money to various pursuits, and even what medication we opt to take.

The aim of this course it to provide the tools needed for this evaluation—to be able to distinguish 'fake news' from real. Each week, we will discuss attributes of reasoned arguments and apply them to political, legal and social examples. We will highlight not only the ways in which arguments are flawed, but also the way to construct ones that succeed.

Students who take this course will be better equipped to evaluate evidence they encounter as they continue at UCSD (and beyond). In addition, they will be practiced at communicating with others: at describing when and where these flaws occur both in discussion and in written work.

Learning Outcomes

Students who complete this course are expected to be able to do the following:

- To analyze evidence contained within news (and other media) reports.

- To understand the persuasive strength arguments (both good and bad) have in society.

- To recognize flawed reasoning in oneself, as well as in others.

- To clearly and persuasively write an argument that calls attention to these flaws.

- To engage in respectful and productive debates with peers about the quality of evidence.

Overview

This course is structured in such a way that we cover a particular aspect of argumentation each week. In the first, introductory week, we discuss reasoning as a dialogue—focusing on the phenomenon of implication, before discussing how conversational norms are violated in presidential debates. In the second week we discuss argumentative validity: an important attribute of successful argumentation. In the third week, we discuss questions that occur within a dialogue, especially the way in which questions can presuppose an answer. We will then discuss issues arising from scientific practice and scientific journalism, before we turn to the role of emotion in discussions. Although emotion is often seen as something which hinders rational debate, it can also serve as evidence.

Roughly halfway through the course, we turn to discussions of biases and fallacies in argumentation. In particular, we discuss confirmation and availability bias (and the relation between the two) as well as the role fallacies play in politics.

The course finishes with shades of grey. We discuss the phenomenon of vagueness, as well as its uses in legal interpretation. We discuss appeals to authority—a necessary, but epistemically risky phenomenon as we navigate the world. Lastly, we discuss ad hominem argumentation and hypocrisy in politics.

Expectations and Evaluations

Students are expected to complete readings and attend the seminar. Because this is a discussion-based class, participation is weighted highly. There will be regular, in-person discussions on Mondays and Wednesdays. In lieu of the regular discussion section on Fridays, there will be a short video and reflection assignment for students to complete.

Students will write three papers for this class. Each paper will involve applying the course material to contemporary cases. These will be 4-6 pages (double spaced). The first paper will be distributed on October 12th and will be due on October 26th. The second paper will be distributed on November 7th and will be due on November 21st. The final paper will be in lieu of a final exam. Each of these long papers will be graded down $\frac{1}{3}$ of a letter grade for each day it is late (unless students have previously been granted an extension). So, if a paper would normally earn a B+ if it is submitted on time, and it is submitted one day late, it will earn a B.

On Fridays, after students watch a brief summary video, they will be asked to identify and discuss a real-world example of the week's topic. For example, in the week when we discuss conspiracy theories, students will be asked to find a news story describing a conspiracy theory—and to analyze that theory in light of the course material. These weekly responses should be brief—roughly a page in length. Their goal is for students to practice applying the class's concepts to real-world examples. While the responses are expected to demonstrate an understanding of and engagement with the class material, it is not expected for them to be as polished as the longer essays. The grading for these is coarse-grained: students will receive 0 points if they do not complete the response, 1 point if they complete it in a way that demonstrates serious misunderstandings or lack of engagement with the course content, and 2 points if they complete it in a way that reflects a strong understanding.

Students may skip 2 of these weekly responses while still receiving full credit (so, students should aim to complete 7/9 of the weekly responses). While I encourage students to complete them during the scheduled hour of class, the responses will be officially due on Sunday at 11:59 pm. **Responses submitted after this time will not be accepted for credit.**

The breakdown of grades for this course is as follows:

20%   First Paper
20%   Second Paper
20%   Third Paper
20%   Friday Responses
20%   Participation

Academic Integrity

You are expected to conduct yourself with honor and integrity throughout this course. UCSD's policy on academic honesty is the following:

"Integrity of scholarship, otherwise referred to as academic integrity, is essential for an academic community, including UC San Diego. Academic integrity is built on a foundation of honest, responsible, fair and trustworthy scholarly activity. Without it, the degrees we confer, the research we conduct, and our reputation all diminish in value.

Thus, the University expects that both faculty and students will adhere to its standards of academic integrity. The UC San Diego Policy on Integrity of Scholarship (herein the "Policy") states the general rules associated with student integrity of scholarship. The Procedures for Resolving Alleged Violations of the Policy (herein the "Procedures") are found at

https://senate.ucsd.edu/media/389895/procedures-for-resolving-alleged-ai-violations.pdf and authorized by the San Diego Division of the Academic Senate's Educational Policy Committee."

Academic honesty involves adequately citing the sources you rely upon, not stealing other students' exams or papers, not cheating on exams, and not plagiarizing any work. Anyone who is found to be dishonest will automatically fail the class and be reported to the UCSD Academic Integrity Office. If you are unsure whether something constitutes academic dishonesty, contact me BEFORE submitting your work.

Reading Schedule

Introduction

09/23	None	
09/26	Argument as a Reasoned Dialogue	Walton
09/28	Uncooperativeness in Political Discourse	Buddharat et al.
09/30	First Responses	

Emotions

10/03	Appeals to Emotion	Walton
10/05	The Problem of Propaganda	Stanley
10/07	Second Responses	

Circular Reasoning

10/10	Questions and Answers in Dialogue	Walton
10/12	The Problem of Circularity in Evidence, Argument, and Explanation	Hahn
10/12	**First Prompt Distributed**	
10/14	Third Responses	

Scientific Journalism

10/17	Inductive Errors, Biases and Fallacies	Walton
10/19	Bastoy: The Norwegian Prison that Works	James
	When Ice Cream Sales Rise, so do Homicides. Coincidence, or Will Your Next Cone Murder You?	Peters
10/21	Fourth Responses	

Conspiracy Theories

10/24	The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories	Van Prooijen
10/26	When do People Believe Conspiracy Theories?	Van Prooijen
10/26	**First Paper Due**	
10/28	Fifth Responses	

Confirmation Bias

10/31	A Machine for Jumping to Conclusions	Kahneman
11/02	Availability, Emotion, and Risk	Kahneman
11/04	Sixth Responses	

Natural Thought

11/07	Natural Language Argumentation	Walton
11/07	**Second Prompt Distributed**	
11/09	Vagueness in Law and Language	Waldron
11/11	Seventh Responses	

Appeals to Authority

11/14	Appeals to Authority	Walton
11/16	Expert Intuition—When Can We Trust It?	Kahneman
11/18	Eighth Responses	

Valid Arguments

11/21	Valid Arguments	Walton
11/21	**Second Paper Due**	
11/23	No Class	
11/25	No Class	

Ad Hominem

11/28	Personal Attacks in Argumentation	Walton
11/30	Ad Hominem Argumentation in Politics	Borovali
12/02	Ninth Presentations	