

California State University
RS 204: Religion, Logic, and the Media
Spring Semester 2012

Instructor: Mary Jane O'Donnell, Ph.D.

Ticket Number: 13338

Classroom: Sierra Hall, Room 192

Course Day/Time: M-W-12:30 p.m. to 1:45 p.m.

Office Hours: M-W: 11:00 am to 12 noon

Office: Room 236, Santa Susana Hall

Telephone: 818-677-5460 (Office hours only.)

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Course Description: This course introduces and encourages students in the use of the basic concepts of logic and critical reasoning. Using these concepts, students will gather, discuss, analyze, and critique material from broadcast, print, or Internet news sources on matters pertaining to religion. Our concern in analysis is not the truth of the statement or personal opinions about it, but rather the analysis of the formal structure of the example itself. This course satisfies the "Critical Thinking" requirement in General Education. A plus/minus grading system will be used.

Student Learning Outcomes for RS 204: This course is intended to enable the student to attain the following outcomes:

- Explain and apply the basic concepts of deductive logic as a dimension of critical reasoning;
- Apply the principles of deductive logic to the critical analysis of statements made about religion in the news and entertainment media;
- Understand the historical and social contexts in which media misunderstand or distort statements made by or about religious groups or spokespersons.

Student Learning Outcomes for General Education Requirement/Critical Thinking:

1. Explain and apply the basic concepts essential to a critical examination and evaluation of argumentative discourse;
2. Use investigative and analytical thinking skills to examine alternatives, explore complex questions and solve challenging problems;
3. Synthesize information in order to arrive at reasoned conclusions;
4. Evaluate the logic and validity of arguments, and the relevance of data and information.
5. Recognize and avoid common logical and rhetorical fallacies.

Goal: Students will analyze information and ideas carefully and logically from multiple perspectives and develop reasoned solutions to problems.

Required Texts:

- David Lawrence Horne, *Straight to the Point: A Primer for a Logical Introduction to Critical Thinking* (Pearson Custom Publishing, 2005)
- Sherry Diestler, *Becoming a Critical Thinker: A User Friendly Manual*. 6th Edition. Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2012.
- Student-selected hard copies of current media examples from mainstream sources for the assignments and the portfolio. These various media examples must be from a wide variety of religions traditions.

Information online:

- Elements and Standards of Critical Thinking Online Model:
http://www.criticalthinking.org/courses/Elements_standards_model.cfm
(Go to “Click to Open”)

Possible Websites to use for research:

Los Angeles Times: <http://www.latimes.com/>

New York Times: <http://www.nytimes.com/>

Washington Post: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/>

Newsweek: <http://www.newsweek.com/>

Time: <http://www.time.com/time/>

USA Today: <http://www.usatoday.com/>

CNN: <http://www.cnn.com/>

Fox News: <http://www.foxnews.com/>

NPR: <http://www.npr.org/>

Colbert Nation: <http://www.colbertnation.com/home>

The Daily Show with Jon Stewart: <http://www.thedailyshow.com/>

The Pew Form on Religion and Public Life: <http://pewforum.org/>

Big Questions Online: <http://www.bigquestionsonline.com/>

Blogs About Religion: <http://www.beliefnet.com/News/2004/08/Best-Spiritual-Blogs.aspx>

The Barna Group: <http://www.barna.org/>

And many more...

Instructor Office Hours: My office hours are posted above. I look forward to working with each of you in class and on an individual basis. Therefore, I urge you to take advantage of my office hours. If you are not able to meet during these hours, you can make an appointment for another time by emailing me. I am happy to discuss any aspect of this course with you, and help you with the assignments. I especially urge you to see me if you are confused about the course or an assignment. Really successful students ask questions!

Communication with Instructor: Please contact me by email, in class, or during office hours with your questions, comments, or requests. Although I have a phone in my office, I will only be available by phone during office hours (except if I am meeting with a student), and I am not assured of getting any messages left on the phone's answering system. Again, I will be delighted to speak with you about your work in this class.

Technological Information: This class will employ Moodle for both student assignments and presentations and to provide students with access to media examples that will be presented in the course. For information and instructions about Moodle, go to:
<http://www.csun.edu/at/training/moodle/lynda.com/students/>

Course Assignments:

- Students will read assigned portions of the textbook for each class. The reading selections are listed in the Course Schedule;
- Exams: There will be five mini-exams, WHICH REQUIRE YOU TO BRING A SMALL SCANTRON FOR EACH (If you do not have a Scantron, you will not be allowed to take the exam);
- Students will research current media sources (television, newspapers, Internet sites, and such) for items about religion, which will be analyzed on the basis of the week's topics, both individually and in groups by students;
- Students will be assigned to find articles, editorials, essays, and such from current media sources (within the month) and write a brief (1-2-page double-spaced pages 12 pt type) analysis of the article based on the assignment's focus;
- Each student assignment will be posted on Moodle so that it may be discussed by everyone in class. Each submission must include a page that contains the information required with your name on the top and the web address of the media example referred to in hypertext;

- Final Portfolios: The student assignments will be the basis for the final portfolio, which will be refined and rewritten to form a coherent, critically-thought out document that illustrates the primary topics covered in each class.

Course Requirements:

- Attendance is mandatory. Any absence must be excused in advance, or if that is not possible, must be accompanied by a documented explanation. If a student has three or more unexcused absences, the student's grade will be lowered by 20%.
- You must be fully prepared for each class. All assignments must be read prior to the class they are assigned, and all readings must be brought to class.
- You must fully participate in the class by asking/answering questions, fully participating in group discussion, and fully engaging in any other activity of the class.
- Please make sure you attend to your personal needs before or after the class. You may not leave during class. No cell phones, texting, or Internet use for anything other than class work.
- All papers must be written according to basic scholarly standards appropriate for university level work. Not only does this include proper grammar, punctuation, and syntax, but also serious reflection on your topic. There are many sources to help you with your writing assignments. The most important is the Writing Program at CSUN's Learning Resource Center, Room 408, Bayramian Hall, 818-677-2033 or go to: <http://www.csun.edu/lrc/writing.html>
- All papers/assignments must be turned in or posted on Moodle on the date listed. Unless students present a written and documented reason why an assignment is late or will be late, which is accepted by the instructor, the grade will be deducted one letter grade per day.
- Any evidence of plagiarism will result in a failing grade, certainly for the item plagiarized, but also for the course.

Grading:

- Class participation and attendance: 20%
- Presentations/Assignments: 20%
- Five Exams: 30% (6% each)
- Final Portfolio: 30%

Course Schedule:

Week 1: January 23-25

- **January 23:** Introduction
- **January 25:** Research Materials Review: your assignment is to review the "Elements and Standards" chart in the "Information Online" section of the syllabus and check out each of the websites listed in this section. Assignment: Look for three recent articles about religion. Post them on Moodle for the class to discuss.

Week 2: January 30-February 1

- **January 30:** An Overview of Current Issues in Religion in the News
- **February 1:** Read Diestler: Foundations of Arguments, 2-19; Horne, Critical Thinking and Logic vii-viii; Logic: What is it? 3-9

Week 3: February 6-8

- **February 6:** Student Presentation/Assignment: Each student will post on Moodle one example of an argument and present the following: 1.) Summarize the argument being made in your own words, and 2.) identify the three parts of the argument (issue, conclusion, and reasons) and the purpose of the argument (for persuasion, for explanation, for discovery analysis, and for recording inferences.) Give the web address of the media example used in hypertext. This will be a demonstration of what will be expected for the portfolio, which will be due at the end of the course.
- **February 8: First Exam/Issues in Religion**

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- **February 8: First Exam (Bring small Scantron!!!)**
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Week 4: February 13-15

- **February 13:** Read Diestler: Values and Ethics, 36-59
- **February 15:** Student Presentation/Assignment: Each student will find one recent “editorial” in a newspaper or magazine about a religious issue. Briefly summarize the argument being made in your own words. Identify the three elements of the argument and the value assumptions using the Toulmin method (claims, reasons, warrants) that are being made, whether explicitly or implicitly. Use the same format as directed with the first assignment.

Week 5: February 20-22

- **February 20:** Read Diestler: Reality Assumptions, 74-88
- **February 22:** Student Presentations: Post on Moodle an example of an argument about a religious issue. Summarize the argument in your own words and identify its assumptions about reality using the Toulmin method. Include web address of media example in hypertext.

▪ **February 27: Second Exam (Bring small Scantron!)**

Week 6: February 27-29

- **February 27: Second Exam/Issues in Religion**
- **February 29:** Read Diestler: Deductive Reasoning, 79-97

Week 7: March 5-7

- **March 5:** Read Horne: Formal Logic, 89-97
- **March 7:** Continue with Horne: Formal Logic, 89-97

Week 8: March 12-14

- **March 12:** Student Presentations
- **March 14:** Student Presentations

▪ **March 19: Third Exam (Bring small Scantron!)**

Week 9: March 19-21

- **March 19: Third Exam/Issues in Religion**
- **March 21:** Read Diestler: Reasoning Errors, 224-260

Week 10: March 26-28

- **March 26:** Read Horne: Elements of Non-Argument Persuasion and Common Deductive Fallacies, 39-60
- **March 28:** Student Presentations: Post on Moodle an example of an argument about a religious issue from the media that relies on reasoning errors and/or reasoning fallacies. Identify the components of the argument and the kinds of errors/fallacies used. Include web address of media example in hypertext.

Week 11: April 2-4

- Spring Break!!!

▪ **April 11: Fourth Exam (Bring small Scantron!)**

Week 12: April 9-11

- **April 9** Student Presentations, continued.
- **April 11: Fourth Exam/Issues in Religion**

Week 13: April 16-18

- **April 16:** Read Diestler, Inductive Arguments: Statistical and Causal Generalizations, 120-159
- **April 18: Student Presentations** Post on Moodle an example of an argument about a religious issue from the media that uses statistical or causal generalization. Summarize the argument in your own words. Identify the components of the argument. Include web address of media example in hypertext.

Week 14: April 23-25

- **April 23:** Read Diestler, Controlled Studies, Expert Testimony, and Analogy, 160-201
- **April 25:** Student Presentations: Post on Moodle examples of arguments about a religious issue from the media that uses a controlled study, expert testimony, and analogy. Summarize the argument in your own words. Identify the components of the argument. Include web address of media example in hypertext.

▪ **April 30: Fifth Exam (Bring small Scantron!)**

Week 15: April 30-May 2

- **April 30: Fifth Exam/Issues in Religion**
- **May 2:** Portfolio Prep

Week 16: May 7-9

- **May 7:** Portfolio Prep
- **May 9:** Portfolios Due

• **May 9: Portfolios Due**

No Final Exam