

Introduction to Course

There are at least two kinds of university courses: fact-oriented and skills-oriented. Obviously, this is a rough distinction—all university courses teach a fair number of facts, and many aim at teaching a number of skills, and there is often some overlap between the two. Even so, different courses emphasize different things. A course in Latin American history will be more fact-oriented, while a course in C++ programming will be more skills-oriented. This course in critical thinking is going to be very skills-oriented.

What skills will this text attempt to teach? There is, essentially, only one skill involved in critical thinking. The ability to see the evidential relationships between things a person might believe and the reasons a person might have for believing these things. In other words, a critical thinker is a person whose beliefs are justified by evidence, who can tell in an instant whether another person's claim is supported, who can distinguish good arguments from bad ones, and who knows what must be discovered in order to answer a question one way or another. Critical thinking is not an easy skill to teach, but by giving you a basic framework for understanding reasoning in the abstract, and by asking you to examine a wide variety of readings and asking you to think deeply about them, this course will do what it can to develop this skill in you to as high a level as possible.

Critical thinking is not something that can be graded directly. Hence this course also attempts to teach a second, related skill: clear, reasonable argumentation. A person who realizes what is wrong with an argument can usually express this in speech or writing, but sometimes a person is more insightful than articulate. Since only statements (as opposed to thoughts) can be evaluated in a course, another aim of this course will be to make you more articulate in your reasoning. You will (I hope!) learn not only to see the logical connections between beliefs and evidence, but also to express to others what these connections are.

In practical terms, the fact that this course emphasizes skills training means that there will not be a lot to memorize, and what there is to memorize will not be very complex. This might make it sound like the course will be an easy one, but I would caution against such an inference. Math and programming courses also have little to memorize, but they are not easy courses as a result. In general, if you are an argumentative person, and your friends and family complain that you "pick apart" everything they say, then you probably already have a large dose of the skills to be taught; if you are quite the opposite, then you may find it more difficult. Either way, good luck!

Before starting, though, you are probably owed a warning. Although this course will attempt to teach you a skill, no undisputed theory of what this skill is exists. That is, philosophers are still debating what it is to be reasonable, to be rational, and to argue logically. They are still debating the nature of truth and meaning. They are even debating what it is to argue. (Just think about that for a second. In this field, we even argue about what arguments are! That's why I love philosophy.) In part, this is because philosophers are lovers of controversy. But it is also because the topics central to philosophy are deeply puzzling and have no easy answers. In practical terms, this means that although this course will attempt to teach you to think critically, there is no widely accepted theory of what, exactly, critical thinking is. The characterization of critical thinking given above is this course's idea of critical thinking, but other philosophical texts might disagree.

If no one knows with certainty what critical thinking is, is it pointless to teach it? Fortunately; no. No one knows for certain what consciousness is, but when you go for surgery, the anesthesiologist can still make sure that you are not conscious. (And a good thing, too!) No one knows for certain what gravity is (the latest theories are still in dispute), but that doesn't stop anyone from landing a spacecraft on Mars. Such examples show that it is not always necessary to know exactly what something is in order to know, for practical purposes, how to deal with it. The same is true of critical thinking. It is not actually necessary to know *exactly* what rationality is, or reasoning, or truth, in order to become more rational in your reasoning, and more likely to believe what is really true.

Course description

The *University of Manitoba Undergraduate Calendar* gives the following description of this course:

A course which helps students to think clearly and critically, and to present, defend, and evaluate arguments. The instructor will discuss good and bad reasoning, everyday fallacies, some specific argument forms such as the categorical syllogism, and ways and means of defining words. Students may

not hold credit for PHIL 1290 (or 015.129) and any of: PHIL 1291 or PHIL 1320 (or 015.132) or PHIL 1321 (or 015.132).

This will be a practical, skills-oriented version of a critical thinking course, aimed at heightening your awareness of the nature of arguments and what makes them better or worse. Readings will be drawn from popular culture, contemporary science, economics, and other sources.

Course goals

Because thinking critically is a skill, the primary goal of this course is to make you better at that skill, which amounts to making you more sensitive to the evidential relationships between ideas.

Because thinking critically is a skill that is practiced entirely inside your own mind, however, it is not practical to teach it without also teaching some related skills. The secondary goal of this course is to teach the related skills of interpreting arguments made by others, evaluating them, and making good, clear arguments of your own.

Finally, the tertiary goal of this course is to familiarize you with the standard vocabulary used in discussing critical thinking. This includes being familiar with the terms "premise" and "conclusion," the idea of entailment, and a number of fallacies.

Course materials

Required materials

The following required materials are available for purchase from the [University of Manitoba Bookstore](#). Please order your materials immediately, if you have not already done so. See your [Distance and Online Education Student Handbook](#) for instructions on how to order your materials.

Readings package

Distance and Online Education Readings Package. PHIL 1290, Critical Thinking. 2004.

Distance and Online Education Student (DE) Student Resources

In your course website there are links for the following:

- Contact Distance and Online Education Staff
- Distance and Online Student Handbook
- Distance and Online Education Website

Evaluation and grading

You should be familiar with the University of Manitoba's policies on plagiarism, cheating, and examination impersonation as outlined in the General Academic Regulations and Requirements section of the University of Manitoba Undergraduate Calendar. Note: these policies are also located in your *Distance and Online Education Student Handbook*, or refer to Student Affairs at <http://www.umanitoba.ca/student/advocacy>.

There are three assignments and one take-home exam for this course. The assignments are worth 20% each and the final exam is worth 40%.

Distribution of marks

Evaluation	Percentage
Assignment 1	20%
Assignment 2	20%
Assignment 3	20%
Final examination	40%
Total	100%

Course overview

This course in Critical Thinking is quite straightforward. There are eight units and a package of readings. For each unit of the course, read the corresponding course reading, and then do the exercises described at the beginning of the unit. Some of these exercises are simple, and just involve answering questions based on that unit of the text. Others are more complex and will require that you do one or more of the readings in the package of readings.

Once you have done the exercises for one unit, you are ready to discuss your answers with your instructor and classmates. Submit your responses by clicking on Course Discussion on the course homepage. Your instructor and other students will then post feedback on your points, questions for clarification, or additional statements to add to your original argument. If you want to respond to another student's comments, you can do so by replying in the same manner as sending an e-mail response.

It is important to note that your instructor will not respond to each posting. They will oversee the discussions and periodically join in to help guide and facilitate them when necessary. The general goal of these exercises is for you to start and build a discussion with your classmates based on the questions asked in the course manual.

Your answers to the questions will not be graded, they are provided to give opportunities to help you understand the concepts in the unit rather than just trying to memorize them. In addition, engaging in these exercises will help you in developing skills necessary for your assignments and your final exam. Therefore, while there is no initial grade assigned to these exercises, doing them should help in attaining the overall grade you desire for this course.

Refer to the Course schedule to guide you regarding when certain units, and their accompanying questions should be discussed. Once discussion of one unit has been completed, you are ready to go on to the next unit. If you are having technical difficulties in regards to participating in the discussions, please contact your instructor.

Course topics

The course is organized in the following way:

Unit 1 Basic Argument Structure

- Basic theoretical claims
- Interpretation: Identifying arguments
- Interpretation: Identifying premises and conclusions

Unit 2 Basic Argument Evaluation

- Evaluating arguments
- Rational beliefs
- Rationality and truth
- Relevant premises

Unit 3 Sophisticated Interpretation of Arguments

- Indirect and implicit premises and conclusions
- Choosing the right words
- Subconclusions

Unit 4 Sophisticated Evaluation of Arguments

- Rational belief
- Target audience
- Responsibility for the argument
- Background knowledge

Bonus #1 A sample argument

Unit 5 Logic

- Uses of the word “logic”
- Entailment
- Proof
- Definitions

Unit 6 Value Theory

- Basic value theory
- Identifying evaluative statements
- Evaluating arguments involving values
- Moral arguments
- Practical arguments

Unit 7 Fallacies

- The fallacy of hasty generalization (secundum quid)
- The fallacy of attacking the person (argumentum ad hominem)
- The slippery slope fallacy
- The fallacy of appealing to ignorance (argumentum ad ignorantiam)
- The fallacy of appealing to popular opinion (argumentum ad populum)
- The straw man fallacy

Unit 8 Probabilistic Reasoning

- Absolutely basic probability theory and decision theory
- Probabilistic guessing
- Common faults in probabilistic and statistical arguments

Bonus #2 Truth

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