

Katia Vavova (evavova@ntholyoke.edu) | 217B Skinner | *office hours*. W 2-3:30, Th 1:30-2:30

About the course. This first year seminar is a critical thinking boot camp. Students will learn to charitably interpret, logically reconstruct, and critically evaluate arguments. The arguments come from classic and contemporary readings in philosophy about God, free will, and morality. We will focus on questions such as: Does God exist? Is it rational to believe in God? What should I do if I want to do the right thing? When is it ok to criticize other cultures? How much do I owe to others? Do we have free will? Can we ever be held responsible for anything? Students will come out of the class better thinkers, better writers, and better equipped to tackle difficult questions like these with rigor and care.

Learning goals.

1. **Thinking:** *to hone your critical thinking skills.* You'll do this by questioning assumptions, and analyzing, evaluating, and constructing arguments. You'll have to provide reasons and consider counterarguments for what you believe.
2. **Reading:** *To become close, careful, critical readers of difficult and challenging texts.* You'll practice interpreting texts and using textual evidence to support your claims and arguments.
3. **Comprehension:** *To become familiar with some big questions and learn what important thinkers have said about them.*
4. **Communication:** *Finally, to learn to write in clear, accessible, and persuasive prose.* You'll do this by writing frequently, drafting and revising, and thinking reflectively about your own development as a writer.

"Did I miss anything" friends.

Name	Contact

Commitment to Sanity. I don't check email after work hours or weekends. I respond as promptly as I can, but not always on the same day. I am always happy to clarify anything, but I don't answer questions clearly answered on the syllabus or in the assignment instructions. Double check the materials I've provided and ask your "Did I miss..." friends before emailing with general questions about the class, assignment, instructions, materials, or etc.

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Tentative Schedule. Please do the readings in the order in which they are listed. Readings are available on Moodle. Please print and bring hard copies to class.

Date		Due	Reading
Th 9/8	<i>How to College</i>	WW01	Syllabus for this course. (Seriously. All of it. Don't skim.) Harry Frankfurt (2005) "On Bullshit". Group presentation Instructions.
F 9/9		SA01	
T 9/13 Th 9/15		WW02	Vavova, How to read like a pro... Then: reread Frankfurt.
F 9/16		SA02	
Sat 9/17		EA	Email assignment due via email by noon.
T 9/20 Th 9/22		WW03	George Orwell (1946) "Politics and the English Language" Ken Bain (2012) "What makes an expert?" Hidden Brain episode (2018) "Rebel With a Cause"
F 9/23		SA03	
T 9/27	God exists!	WW04	Samuel Clarke (1706) The Cosmological Argument (selection)
Th 9/29			<i>Academic expectations session with Deans (Gamble Auditorium).</i>
		SA04	
T 10/5 Th 10/6	Bet on it!	WW05	Blaise Pascal (1670) "The Wager"
F 10/7		SA05	
T 10/11			<i>No class. (October Break)</i>
Th 10/13			<i>Catch up day.</i>
T 10/18 Th 10/20	God can't exist.	WW07	J.L. Mackie (1955) "Evil and Omnipotence"
F 10/21		SA07	
Sat 10/22		AP	Attack Paper due on Moodle by 8 pm.
T 10/25 Th 10/27	God & Good	WW08	William Lane Craig (2004) "God and Objective Morality: A Debate" Louise Antony (2011) "Good Minus God"

Date		Due	Reading
F 10/28		SA08	
T 11/1 Th 11/3	Moral judgments.	WW09	Mary Midgley (1983) "Trying out one's new sword"
F 11/4		SA08	
T 11/8 Th 11/10	Helping others.	WW10	Peter Singer (1972) "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"
F 11/11		SA10	
T 11/15 Th 11/17		WW11	Susan Wolf (1982) "Moral Saints" (selection)
F 11/18		SA11	
Sat 11/19		DP	Defense Paper due on Moodle by 8 pm.
T 11/22			Catch up day.
Th 11/24			No class (November Break)
T 11/29 Th 12/01		WW13	Paul Holbach (1770) "The Illusion of Free Will" Video: two Crash Course in Philosophy episodes.
F 12/02		SA13	
T 12/6 Th 12/8		WW14	Susan Wolf (1988) "Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility"
		SA14	
T 12/13			Catch up day.
Fri 12/16		CQ	Comprehension Quiz due on Moodle.
T 12/20		FP	Final Paper due on Moodle

Requirements.

- Weekly Writing & Self-Assessments (WW1-WW14 and SA1-SA14): 45%
Note, there are <14; names refer to week number (WW14 = Weekly Writing 14)
- Email Assignment (EA): 250-500 words, 5%
- Attack Paper (AP): 500-750 words, 10%
- Defense Paper (DP): 750-1000 words, 15%
- Comprehension Quiz (CQ): 10%
- Final Paper (FP): 1000-1200 words, 20%

Formatting and expectations:

1. All work submitted for this class should use standard formatting (12 pt font, 1" margins, double spaced) and be submitted as a PDF to Moodle.
2. Your target audience when writing for this class is an intelligent tween who is unfamiliar with the material. Your writing needs to be clear to *her*, not me or to your classmates. Whenever you are wondering if you should include or explain something, ask yourself: will the tween understand what I'm saying? That is your best guide to good, clear writing. Our rule of thumb is: *explain more than you think you need to using fewer words than you think you need to.*

Weekly Writing.

- **Why.** To guide you through the reading, prepare you for class discussion, and provide practice writing and arguing.
- **What.** I'll post questions to Moodle with instructions. This is a brief assignment, so be direct—answer the questions, cite any sources, clearly define jargon, and explain using examples. Most writing is too wordy—once you are sure you've answered the question completely and defined/explained anything technical, you should err on the side of fewer rather than more words.

Important. Your target audience for this class is an intelligent tween unfamiliar with the material. Your writing needs to be clear to *her*, not to me or to your classmates.

Also, all writing should be standard formatting (12 pt font, 1" margins, double spaced).
- **When/how.** Submit your responses to Moodle the night before class; instructions there.
- **Feedback.** I won't provide comments on these assignments because we will discuss them in class (see Presentations below). By the end of the week, you should have a clear understanding of all of the questions discussed. You'll test this by doing a self-assessment on Friday.
- **Grading.** Each Friday, you will complete and submit a self-assessment assignment on Moodle. This assignment will require you to reflect on your work and grade your earlier writing. I will read your assessments and either concur with the grade or explain my disagreement. The grading is, in this way, an opportunity to communicate, clarify expectations, acknowledge difficulties, and recognize progress.

Presentations.

- **Why.** To learn by doing; to practice communicating complex ideas clearly and simply; to teach you how to take control of your education. These are the backbone of the course. They are an opportunity for you to practice the skills necessary for achieving every one of our learning goals: critical skills, close reading skills, comprehension skills, and writing & communication skills (see above).
- **What/When/How.** Groups will be randomly assigned one of the weekly reading questions. Their task is to answer it *together* (not just to select the "best" answer from the group, and present that answer to the class). Students in the non-presenting groups are expected to helpfully interrupt the presenting group with questions and clarifications; they are, thus, also on the spot.
- **Feedback.** Feedback is live and in-person during class from all of us.
- **Credit.** Presentations aren't graded, but don't miss them. They are the heart of the class—the place you get to practice and test out your speaking, writing, *and* critical thinking skills. (Writing too, because the same rules apply for good *writing* as apply for good *presenting*, and your classmates and I will be interrupting with suggestions and improvements.)

Email assignment.

- **Why.** To practice writing at the right level of clarity and accessibility; to demonstrate understanding of material.
- **What.** Write a short (max 500 words) email to a friend or family member. Pick someone who has never taken philosophy before, but who you think will actually read and respond to your email. In the email, you'll explain an argument or idea that we've discussed in class. You'll actually send the email.
- **When/how.** Send as an email to your friend and bcc me.
- **Feedback.** I'll provide feedback using the Email Assignment Rubric.
- **Credit.** To succeed on this assignment you must be accurate and clear. Aim for a level of precision typical in a standard paper, but make it much more accessible. For example, avoid jargon; if you can't avoid it, explain it immediately. Your explanations and clarifications should always be backed by a simple, compelling, and clear examples (or a single example you tweak as necessary). Even though this is an email, not a traditional paper, you still need to give credit where credit is due, so find a way to cite your sources (accurately and fairly, if more casually).

Papers (AP, DP, and FP).

- **Why.** Final paper - to pull together and demonstrate the skills and understanding you've acquired. Mini papers - to practice the skills you'll need to complete the final paper and to demonstrate understanding of the material.
- **What.** In the final paper, you'll present and critically analyze an argument from the readings. You'll reconstruct it, explain it, and raise *one* objection to *one* premise. You'll consider a reply and then provide a verdict; i.e., you'll explain what the upshot is and what we should think, in the end. I'll provide further instructions as well as a sample essay closer to the due date. But by that point, you'll have done assignments which tackle the tasks necessary for critically analyzing an argument. Specifically, in AP, you'll have presented an argument and raised an objection. In DP, you'll raise an objection to an argument I'll provide, and respond to that objection.
- **When/how.** Submit papers to Moodle as a PDFs.
- **Feedback.** Feedback on AP and DP will be provided within two weeks using a relevant rubric; comments only provided for final papers upon request.
- **Credit.** Papers are evaluated along two or more of these three dimensions (whichever are relevant): clarity, accuracy, and critical thought.

Comprehension Quiz (CQ).

- **Why.** To demonstrate your understanding of the material we've covered in class and to motivate the right kind of engagement with the material throughout the semester (specifically with weekly writing questions and in-class discussions).
- **What.** A selection of questions that you've already answered from the weekly writing assignments.
- **When/how.** Open book, take home.
- **Feedback.** None provided.
- **Credit.** Answers evaluated along the usual dimensions: clarity, accuracy, and critical thought. To give complete, clear answers, don't forget our writing rules of thumb: write to an intelligent

tween and (to do so) explain more than you think you need to using fewer words than you think you need to.

Participation. In this class, student voices dominate the discussion.

- **Why.** First, we learn best by doing: by asking questions, hazarding guesses, and testing out your ideas. Second, we learn from one another: when others question us, echo our contributions back to us, and challenge us. It's part of your responsibility, as a member of this college community, to contribute. Finally, communication is an important skill—for success in college and beyond. This is your chance to practice and master it.
- **Trouble?** Shy? Nervous? Me too! My heart still races sometimes when I raise my hand at a professional gathering or talk. (Or when I teach...) Participation is more difficult for some of us than others. But writing papers, understanding the readings—these too are more difficult for some of us than others. They are all skills we must work on. If you have trouble speaking in class, please see me and we will work on it together—just as we would on any other challenge.
- **How and how much?** You don't need to talk just for the sake of talking. But it is also very important to not wait for brilliance or insight to hit you before raising your hand. Much of both learning and contributing to discussion involve asking simple, clarifying questions. I'll expect you to do at least that much regularly. As a rule of thumb, try to ask at least one question per class.
- **Important.** Usually, class will have the following structure. Groups will be randomly assigned one of the weekly reading questions to discuss and present to the class. Presentations should be aimed at our usual audience, the uninformed tween, and not your classmates or professor. These presentations are an opportunity to practice communicating complex ideas clearly and simply. The rules are the same as for our writing: use fewer words than you think you need to explain more than you think you need, and remember your target audience. Students in the non-presenting groups are expected to interrupt the presenting group with questions and clarifications. This is to everyone's benefit: the presenting group learns to do better, and the non-presenting groups make sure they've understood the material. (That last one is important for everyone, because, but not only because, the material will be on the final.) This is also the way that the presenting group is able to gauge whether they've clearly communicated the ideas, and whether their audience has understood. (If they don't get enough questions, or they aren't sure whether others understand, they will also ask questions—just as your professors sometimes do.)

Attendance. I expect you to attend every class. That's where the action happens, and where I give away all the answers. You cannot succeed in this class without excellent attendance. I know this so well from experience that I no longer penalize absences. Missing class lowers your grade enough on its own. Of course, things will happen and you may sometimes have to miss class because of illness (including mental), emergency, or religious observance. If you must miss class, be in touch as soon as possible. I don't need a detailed explanation or excuse—I will trust that you had a good reason—I just want you to acknowledge the missed class and state your plan for catching up. That plan should include a live meeting with classmates who will take you through what you missed in class; gathering all materials, handouts, etc., from Moodle; studying the material and notes from the class you missed; and, finally, coming to office hours with questions and comments on the readings.

Readings. Most of the readings we look at, especially the short ones, are dense and quite tricky. Give yourself time to digest them—read them, put them aside, then read them again the next day. I recommend a three step approach.

First, skim the article. Note where the thesis and major argument(s) are. Don't worry too much about understanding while you're skimming. You're just trying to get the lay of the land. (You will absorb more than you realize.)

Second, carefully read each piece *before* we discuss it in class. Use the reading questions to help focus your attention. Again, note where the action is: mark arguments, note their premises and conclusions. Along the way, jot down questions and confusions so you can raise them during our discussion.

Third, skim the reading again after we've discussed it. It should be much easier to understand at this point. Edit your notes: correct any misunderstandings and jot down any new thoughts you have. (These notes will come in handy for later assignments.) If you're still unclear about something, get help: talk with classmates, come by my office hours, etc.

This is the minimal number of times and ways you should do the readings each week. I realize that this is a lot, but it is crucial for your reading skills and comprehension.

Late policy. Three principles guide my late policy.

1. Work should be assessed on its quality and on whether it demonstrates learning.
2. Each assignment has a purpose; that purpose can only be fulfilled within a certain timeframe.
3. Deadlines allow us to organize our time and learning and to meet our goals.

Thus, late Weekly Writing assignments will not be accepted for credit. Besides writing practice, these assignments fulfill three goals: for you to (1) practice working through and understanding the readings on your own, (2) prepare for class discussion, and (3) show me where you're struggling. Can't meet these goals without completing the assignment on time.

Late *papers* will be accepted up until the day that we discuss them together in class (this day won't be announced, and will vary, but it will typically be within a couple of weeks). After that, they will not be accepted for credit. However, you'll still want to get papers in by the due date otherwise I cannot guarantee you comments. This is not about punishing you for getting in late work. It's about enabling me to schedule my time and our class.

Final exams cannot be accepted late, by Mount Holyoke policy.

Getting your assignments in on time allows us to stay together as a class—to discuss assignments after everyone has finished and long before the next assignment is due (so you have time to reflect and improve). We all have so many demands on our time, and we need to be able to plan ahead. If people complete assignments late, they fall behind, cannot contribute to class discussions, and can hold us back during assignment based in class activities. Worse yet, they hurt their own learning.

Meeting deadlines is thus an opportunity to show respect: respect for yourself, your time, and your learning; respect for your classmates' time and learning; and respect for my time and my teaching. That said, I won't be offended or assume you're disrespectful if you don't manage to do that. Things happen; we can't always do what is best. First and foremost, I'm here to help. If you're struggling, don't hesitate to talk to me.

Secret assignment. Good job! You found the (a?) secret assignment! Your job, for next time, is to Google “m&m clause” and learn what that is. Then, write a brief email to a friend or relative explaining this secret assignment and what the point of it is. Copy that into a document. On that same document, tell me whether you found this assignment annoying, amusing, or what, and why. Finally, ask at least one question about the syllabus or the class, and share at least one thing you are concerned or excited about. Print this out bring it to the next class.

Academic Integrity. Upon entering Mount Holyoke College, you each signed a pledge to uphold the honor code. It is your responsibility “to read *A Guide to the Uses and Acknowledgment of Sources* and the Student Handbook, which define the standards adopted by the College; to observe the established procedures in preparing assignments and writing papers and examinations, and to submit as [your] own only that work that [you have] originated” (https://www.mtholyoke.edu/deanofstudents/student_handbook). I expect you will all honor the pledge you signed. Therefore, **everything you turn in should be your own work and in your own words**. If your discussions with friends, dogs, parents, etc., were helpful, cite them. Credit all sources appropriately, even (especially) Wikipedia and anything from your Googling bounty.

Outside sources. You *do not* need to read any additional material beyond the assigned reading—and I don’t encourage it. If you think it might be helpful to read one or two additional articles connected to your topic—especially if you’re having trouble understanding it, I am happy to give you additional reading suggestions. You may also find searching the following sources helpful: philpapers.org, plato.stanford.edu, and mtholyoke.edu/lits. Do not blindly rely on what you Google, however, and remember to *always* cite your sources—whatever they are (friends, dogs, Wikis,...).

Assistance. Besides myself, there are many resources to help you succeed in this class.

- * You should go to the SAW Center (<https://www.mtholyoke.edu/academics/academic-support/speaking-arguing-and-writing-program/saw-center>) for help on your assignments. Well-trained peers are there to look over your drafts, help you plan your arguments, etc. There are drop-in hours, and you may go as many times as you want.
- * There may be a SAW *mentor* in this course. If there is, go to them. They are there for live help: reading read drafts, organizing thoughts, and so forth.
- * I encourage students who are not confident in their English language abilities to turn to the MHC ESOL program (<https://commons.mtholyoke.edu/mhcesol/>). The program is run by Mark Shea, who really knows his stuff and can guide you toward getting the resources and assistance you need.
- * In order to receive reasonable accommodations for a disability, you must register with Disability Services (<https://www.mtholyoke.edu/directory/departments-offices-centers/disability-services>). This office will provide a letter describing the appropriate accommodations. Once you have this letter, set up an appointment with me and we will discuss how to accommodate you.
- * If there is anything I can do to help you learn, don’t hesitate to get in touch.

Class conduct. Philosophy, someone once said, is thinking in slow motion. Transcribing we say in class is not engaged, slow thinking. It may be helpful for you to take notes during class. But your notes should be brief: perhaps a key definition, a question you want to think more about, or an argument we reconstructed. Your energy is better spent actively engaging with the material:

asking questions, participating in the conversation, sharing your thoughts, and, sometimes, making mistakes out loud. I will do the same.

Since we'll all be testing out ideas and making mistakes, it's crucial that we turn to one another with open minds and respond to each other's contributions with kindness. If you don't like what someone is saying, don't attack them, attack their idea—with logic, reasoning, and argument, not with malice or anger. This is especially important during discussions of sensitive topics. Please silence all devices and store them in your bag during class. The empirical evidence is pretty clear that devices in the classroom impede learning—of those using them and of the rest of the class.

If you believe that your learning will suffer if you do not have access to certain technology, please let me know—whether or not you have an official accommodation. As always, be open and communicate with me about what you think you need in order to succeed in class. I'm here to help you learn.

Ghosting. Almost every semester, I have at least one student who stops coming to class and stops answering emails partway through the term. This is usually because the student is overwhelmed with work and/or struggling with anxiety or depression. They then reappear shortly before the end of the term, frantic to figure out how they can avoid failing the course. If you are struggling with anxiety or depression, or even just starting to feel overwhelmed, you are not alone. Many college students experience these sorts of struggles. I strongly encourage you to talk to the *Counseling Service in the Health Center (413-538-2037)*. They are professionals and they care very much about your well being. If you are comfortable, I also encourage you to let me know that you're struggling. I'm not a mental health professional, but I also care about your well being and I can better help you manage your assignments if I know that you're struggling when you're struggling, instead of weeks or months later.

Recording Policy. To encourage active engagement and academic inquiry in the classroom, as well as to safeguard the privacy of students and faculty, no form of audio or visual recording in the classroom is permitted without explicit permission from the professor/instructor or without a letter from AccessAbility Services, signed by the faculty member, authorizing the recording as an accommodation. Authorized recordings may only be used by a student who has obtained permission and may not be shared or distributed for any reason. Violation of this policy is an infraction of the Mount Holyoke Honor Code and academic regulations and will result in disciplinary action.

Title IX Reporting Policy: Responsible Reporters. Under College policy, and in accordance with Title IX, all faculty are considered responsible reporters. Responsible reporters must promptly report to the Title IX coordinator when they receive information that could reasonably raise a concern that gender-based or sexual misconduct may have occurred. The purpose of this disclosure is to ensure that students are made aware of their reporting options and resources for support. For more information about reporting options at Mount Holyoke, including confidential and anonymous reporting options, please visit: mtholyoke.edu/go/StudentHandbook.