

Can You Believe It?

Fall 2024

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Course Description

You can't believe everything you read or hear. But what can you believe? For example, what justifies our everyday beliefs, like the belief that the sun will come up tomorrow? Also, why do we call some beliefs "scientific," but not other kinds? To answer these questions, we will tackle classic puzzles concerning belief and evidence. We will discuss the problems of induction and confirmation, how to distinguish science from pseudoscience, and the effects of implicit biases. Readings will draw on a variety of sources. Students will complete writing assignments in stages, developing the skills required for clear, concise, and compelling prose.

Learning Outcomes

- Develop critical reasoning skills regarding the justification of belief and evidence.
- Learn to critically evaluate authors' claims, construct arguments, and identify potential contributions to a discourse.
- Produce writing that meets academic expectations regarding clarity, argument, and citation practices.

Course Materials

Williams and Bizup, *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, 12th Edition. (Available at BMC Bookstore and on reserve at Canaday Library)

David Manley, *Reason Better: An Interdisciplinary Guide to Critical Thinking*, available online through Top Hat publishing (Course code to be provided)

Gordon Harvey, *Writing with Sources*. (Available for free online through the Bryn Mawr Library)

Other readings will be available through Moodle.

Assignments

Participation:	Attendance and active participation in course is expected. 10%
Reading questions:	<i>Reason Better</i> has reading questions interspersed throughout. Complete these as you read. 15%
Weekly posts:	Each week you will write a short reflection on the week's material. These will be graded as <i>full credit</i> , <i>half credit</i> , or <i>no credit</i> . 20%
In-class reading quizzes:	There will be two in-class reading quizzes on important material from the book <i>Writing with Sources</i> . 10% (5% each)
First writing assignment:	You will receive a specific prompt. 10%
Second writing assignment:	You will receive a specific prompt. 15%
Final paper	A final paper that builds on you weekly reflections, due during finals week and worth 20%. of your grade.

Weekly reflections:

By **5pm Friday** you will submit a roughly 200 word reflection through Moodle on that week's readings or class discussion. Your reflection should either identify something you found **interesting** (and explain why you found it interesting, perhaps connecting it to your own life or other courses you've taken) or something you found **confusing** (and explain why you found it confusing, with an attempt to make sense of what the author might mean).

Note: you may post anonymously if you choose.

Grading Policies

- Attendance is expected; missing class without an excuse or too many classes will hurt your overall grade. Each student gets two absences without penalty.
- The grading standard for this course is that a "B" reflects a minimal but satisfactory engagement with the material of the course. Anything above a "B" will reflect the quality of work submitted by the student.
- Extensions can be granted on assignments, but you should ask at least a day in advance. If you do not make arrangements beforehand, late papers will be downgraded by 1/3 letter grade per day.

Technology in the Classroom

Please minimize your technology use in the classroom. Students should take notes using a notebook and either bring the readings printed to class or consult their notes. If you choose to use a laptop, please disable your wifi during class. **Please refrain from looking at your phone during class.** If you need an exception to this policy for person reasons, please let me know before class by email or in person.

If you are a student with a disability that has a technology accommodation, please let me know as soon as possible.

Accessibility

Bryn Mawr College is committed to providing equal access to students with a documented disability. Students needing academic accommodations for a disability must first register with Access Services. Students can call 610-526-7516 to make an appointment with the Director of Access Services, Deb Alder, or email her at dalder@brynmawr.edu to begin this confidential process. Once registered, students should schedule an appointment with the professor as early in the semester as possible to share the verification form and make appropriate arrangements. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and require advance notice to implement. More information can be obtained at the Access Services website. (<http://www.brynmawr.edu/access-services/>)

Any student who has a disability-related need to record this class first must speak with the Director of Access Services and to me, the instructor. Class members need to be aware that this class may be recorded.

Title IX

Title IX: Bryn Mawr/Haverford College is committed to fostering a safe and inclusive living and learning environment where all can feel secure and free from harassment. All forms of sex discrimination, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, stalking, domestic violence, and dating violence, are violations of Bryn Mawr/Haverford's policies, whether they occur on or off campus. Bryn Mawr/Haverford faculty are committed to helping to create a safe learning environment for all students and for the College community as a whole. If you have experienced any form of gender or sex-based discrimination, harassment, or violence, know that help and support are available. Staff members are trained to support students in navigating campus life, accessing health and counseling services, providing academic and housing accommodations, and more.

The College strongly encourages all students to report any incidents of sex discrimination and/or sex-based harassment. Please be aware that all Bryn Mawr/Haverford employees (other than those designated as confidential resources such as counselors, clergy, and health-care providers) are required to report information about such discrimination and harassment to the Bi-College Title IX Coordinator.

Information about the College's Sex Discrimination and Sex-Based Harassment Policy, reporting options, and a list of campus and local resources can be found on the College's website:

Bryn Mawr College Sex Discrimination and Sex-Based Harassment Policy:

https://www.brynmawr.edu/sites/default/files/migrated-files/Bryn-Mawr-College-Sexual-Misconduct-Policy_2020-2021.pdf

Haverford College Sex Discrimination and Sex-Based Harassment Policy:

https://www.haverford.edu/sites/default/files/Office/Haverford-College-Sex-Discrimination-and-Sex-Based-Harassment-Policy_Aug-2024.pdf

Notes on Academic Integrity

I regard plagiarism as a very serious matter. In this class, plagiarism consists of work taken partially or entirely from an uncited source (online content, a peer, a published article, etc.) and assumed as your own. Any use of AI to write for you is also considered plagiarism. If I have reasons to suspect plagiarizing, I will ask that you report yourself to the Bryn Mawr Honor Board. See the Bryn Mawr Honor Code and Honor Board Hearing Process in the Student Handbook for more information.

Tentative Schedule of Readings

Note: Please complete the reading and be prepared to discuss on the day it is listed. This list may be updated as the semester progresses. Please check back for the latest version of the syllabus on Moodle.

Week 1: Introduction to course

Tuesday

- No reading; Introduction to course

Thursday

- Hume on induction: the *Treatise*

Week 2: Humean skepticism

Tuesday

- Hume on induction: the *Enquiry*

Thursday

- *Writing with Sources* Chapters 1 and 2
- Reading **quiz** in class on these chapters only

* First assignment due Saturday 5pm *

Week 3: What is reasoning?

Tuesday

- Manley, Chapter 1, "Reasoning"
- Harris, T. "How Technology Hijacks People's Minds"

Thursday

- *Writing with Sources* Chapters 3 and 4
- Reading **quiz** in class on these chapters only

Week 4: Challenging beliefs

Tuesday

- Manley, Chapter 2, "Mindset"
- C. Thi Nguyen, "Escape the Echo Chamber"

Thursday

- Williams and Bizup. *Style*, 12th Edition, Lessons 1 and 2, "Understanding Style" and "Correctness"

* First assignment revisions due Monday 5pm *

Week 5: Clarity and argument

Tuesday

- Manley, Chapter 3, "Clarity"

Thursday

- Williams and Bizup, Lessons 3 and 4, "Actions" and "Characters"

Week 6: The ethics of belief

Tuesday

- William Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief"

Thursday

- William James, "The Will to Believe"

Week 7

Fall break!

Week 8: Belief and Assessing evidence

Tuesday

- William James, "The Will to Believe"

Thursday

- Williams and Bizup, Lessons 5 and 6, "Cohesion and Coherence" and "Emphasis"

Week 9: Can you believe the news?

Tuesday

- Manley, Chapter 5, "Evidence"

Thursday

- Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, *Manufacturing Consent*, Excerpt

Week 10: Bias, Generalizations, and the News

Tuesday

- Williams and Bizup, Lesson 12, "The Ethics of Style"
- Excerpts of recent criticism of the NYT

Thursday

- Manley, Chapter 6, "Generalizations"

Week 11: Causal reasoning

Tuesday

- Williams and Bizup, Lesson 7, "Motivation"

Thursday

- Manley, Chapter 7, "Causes"

Week 12: When to change your mind

Tuesday

- Williams and Bizup, Lesson 8, "Global Coherence"

Thursday

- Manley, Chapter 8, "Updating"

Week 13: What's your sign?

Tuesday

- Paul R. Thagard, "Why Astrology is a Pseudoscience"

Thursday

- No class (Thanksgiving)

Week 14: Decision theory

Tuesday

- Manley, Chapter 9, "Decisions"
- Amartya Sen, "The Formulation of Rational Choice"

Thursday

- Williams and Bizup, Lesson 9, "Concision"

Week 15: Expanding horizons

Tuesday

- Williams and Bizup, Lessons 10 and 11, "Shape" and "Elegance"

Thursday

- Robin Wall Kimmerer, "Mishkos Kenomagwen: The Teachings of Grass" from *Braiding Sweetgrass*