

PHIL 113A – CRITICAL THINKING
MTWRF – 8:30 – 11:30 a.m.
CLASSROOM: DUKE 113

Instructor:

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About the course:

A while ago, I got a ticket while driving my wife’s car. Because we had recently gotten married and moved into a new house, and we only took care of the forward-mail forms at the very last minute, we failed to receive the notification regarding the registration’s expiration. As a result, I found myself driving a car whose registration had expired. So I got a ticket—and rightly so. Kindly, however, the officer suggested me to go ahead and renew the license online as soon as possible. He thought that I would then have a better chance at getting the judge to forgive the offense. So I did. The day I had to go to court, my wife dropped me off. She was driving her car, of course. When my turn arrived, I explained the situation to the judge and she said that she would forgive the offense if I could just show her the new registration. ‘I don’t have it with me’, I said honestly. ‘My wife has it in her car. She dropped me off. I just have the receipt.’ The judge didn’t like the answer: ‘I am afraid I won’t be able to forgive your offense. I need to see the new registration.’ And suddenly it was evident: given the circumstances, the only way I could have done what the judge was asking me to do, was by means of doing something illegal! ‘Let me see if I understand.’ I replied ‘You asked me to show you the registration of my wife’s car once I told you that she dropped me off in *her* car. In other words: you are telling me that I should have asked my wife for her car’s registration when she dropped me off, forcing her then to drive a car with no registration. But, of course, that is illegal. So it seems to me that given the circumstances I could only have done what you asked me to do if I had committed a crime, and that cannot be what you are suggesting, right?’ Surely, she could have replied that I could have taken the bus, or that I could have driven my own car while my wife waited for me at home. These could have been fine responses to my argument, no doubt, since all she needed to do was to try to question my use of “given the circumstances”. Thankfully, she was convinced, and I got away with showing her the receipt.

This is just an instance of a situation in which we engage in an argument with someone else for a particular purpose. In my case, my purpose was to try to convince the judge to forgive my offense so I wouldn’t have to pay a fine. In other situations, people engage in arguments to convict or acquit defendants, to convince audiences to vote for them, to move their bosses into choosing one business strategy versus another, or simply to persuade a son that he has done wrong and should think about what he did, for a while, in his room. Not all arguments are equally effective, however. Sometimes they fail to bring about what they were set to bring about, either because the clauses of the argument aren’t articulated logically—i.e. the conclusion doesn’t follow logically from the premises—or because we relied on premises that were false or easily contestable, or simply because we underestimated our interlocutor and didn’t foresee that clever riposte which rendered our argument ineffective. Arguing and finding effective ways of counter-arguing is a useful skill that, just like every other skill, improves with practice.

The purpose of this class is to help you improve your argumentative skills. In particular, it will help you to:

- 1) Perfect your capacity to understand the logical structure, the motivation, and the rhetorical force behind an argument;
- 2) Evaluate both the validity and the soundness of an argument, as well as its form of deliverance and appeal; and
- 3) Construct reasonable arguments—whose conclusions follow logically from their premises—while keeping an eye on the most effective way in which they can both communicate the intention of the speaker and bring about the set goal in the interlocutor or audience.

Required texts:

(G&T) Groarke, L.A. & Tindale, C.W. (2008). *Good Reasoning Matters!* OUP.

(J) Jacoby, S. (2008). *The Age of American Unreason*. Pantheon Books.

Grading and class structure:

There will be five evaluation forms, each one for a total of 20% of the final grade. Here's the summary, explained below:

Homeworks (5): 20% Total

Quizzes (2): 20% Total

Group exercise: (2) 20%

Presentation: 20%

Final exam: 20%

Homework: there will be a total of five (5) homeworks due at the beginning of the class as indicated in the schedule. All homeworks will consist of selected exercises from G&T. They will take between 30 and 60 minutes to complete.

Quizzes: there will be two (2) short in-class quizzes. Although the questions won't be extracted from G&T, they will be inspired by the exercises included in the book. Thus, studying these exercises would be a good strategy when preparing for the quizzes.

Group exercise: we will have two days for a group exercise. Most of the work we will be doing in class is largely individual. Students are expected to read the assigned chapters on their own, and to resolve their homework and quizzes in like manner. There will be two days in which students will be divided in small groups in order to evaluate and produce a successful reply to a particular argument. This is actually harder than it sounds. I have selected controversial pieces whose underlying arguments aren't perfectly obvious, so the members of each group may have different opinions as to what the structure of the argument actually is. Convincing the other members of the group that your own interpretation is the right one will require some argumentation. Likewise when it comes to figuring out what the best reply may be.

Presentation: at the beginning of the first class I'll ask students to pick a partner (or maybe two, depending on the size of the class) and the different chapters of Jacoby's book will be assigned, one per group of students. Each class session is actually divided in two parts. In part one we will study the assignment from G&T, and work out a few exercises. Then we'll have a short break. In part two, the students in charge of the assigned chapter from Jacoby's book will present an outline of the chapter and the general structure of the arguments leading toward the main claims

advanced in the chapter. We will then critically evaluate those arguments in the remainder of the class.

Final exam: there will be a final examination in class.

If you ever have any questions concerning an assignment, please contact me immediately. Also, if you have any condition, such as a physical or mental disability, which will make it difficult for you to carry out the work as I have outlined it or which will require extra time on examinations, please notify me in the first two weeks of the course so that we may make appropriate arrangements.

Remember: this course recognizes and adheres to the principles of the Elon Academic Honor Code. Students are expected to be familiar with the code and follow it consistently, regardless of whether the professor is present to enforce it. The Elon Academic Honor Code can be found in the current Elon Student Handbook. Questions about possible violations should be directed to the professor. Suspected violations will be reported to the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs. Any violation will result in a failing grade for the course.

Schedule:

Session	Date	Skill/Topic	Text	Assignment
1	Jan. 6 th	Introduction - Arguments	G&T 1	
2	Jan. 7 th	Arguments and Diagrams	G&T 1, 2	HW # 1
3	Jan. 8 th	Implicit arguments	G&T 3; J. 1	
4	Jan. 9 th	Definitions	G&T 4; J. 2	HW # 2
5	Jan. 12 th	Bias	G&T 5; J. 3	
6	Jan. 13 th	Strong and weak arguments	G&T 6; J. 4	Quiz # 1
7	Jan. 14 th	<i>Group Exercise</i>	J. 5	
8	Jan. 15 th	Syllogisms 1	G&T 7	HW#3
9	Jan. 16 th	Syllogisms 2	G&T 8	
10	Jan. 19 th	Propositional logic 1	G&T 9; J 6	HW # 4
11	Jan. 20 th	Propositional logic 2	G&T 10; J 7	
12	Jan. 21 st	Ordinary reasoning	G&T 11; J 8	Quiz # 2
13	Jan. 22 nd	Empirical schemes	G&T 12; J 9	
14	Jan. 23 rd	<i>Group Exercise</i>	J. 10	HW # 5
15	Jan. 26 th	Fallacies - Conclusion	G&T 14; J. 11	
16	Jan. 27 th	FINAL EXAM		Final Exam