

**Department of Philosophy – University of Guelph  
Critical Thinking PHIL 2100 Fall 2010**

Tuesday 7-8:50

Tutorials at various times, once a week

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### **Course Objectives & Description**

An argument is a set of statements (the *premises* of the argument) that is intended to provide rational support for some further statement (the *conclusion* of the argument). We use arguments to convince ourselves and others that some view or position is rationally supported. The purpose of a critical thinking class is to make you better at identifying, analyzing, criticizing, writing about, and constructing arguments. The core text for this course is *The Pocket Guide to Critical Thinking*. It provides the basic tools for recognizing, analyzing, and criticizing arguments. The other course text is *How To Think About Weird Things*. The authors of this book focus on various pseudoscientific topics in order to emphasize where people tend to go wrong when they come to believe weird things (e.g. that a flashing light is an alien UFO; that the world was created 8000 years ago, that truth is what you believe is true, that there is nothing special about science as opposed to, say, astrology). The course ranges widely over a number of important philosophical topics: truth, knowledge, scientific method, bad reasoning. It also introduces important and useful concepts in the psychological study of reasoning as well as logical concepts. The course is lecture-based, with plenty of opportunity for students to raise questions and to *engage in argument*. Tutorials, described below, occur once a week, at various times. Lectures and tutorials differ in their goals and purpose: lectures are designed to introduce students to basic concepts in a somewhat decontextualized way; tutorials are designed to give students a chance to critically assess longer pieces from magazines, the internet, academic writing, etc. The ultimate objective of the course is practical: to help the student develop useful tools for reasoning in any context.

### **Course Evaluation**

1. 2 assignments submitted in class (20% each = 40 % total)
2. Midterm test (20% )
3. Tutorials (20%)
4. Final examination (20%) -- cumulative

**Assignments** are due on the dates noted below. They will differ in nature, depending on the material covered. Some questions on an assignment may not be marked.

### **Texts**

1. *The Pocket Guide to Critical Thinking* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), Richard Epstein.
2. *How To Think About Weird Things* (6<sup>th</sup> edition), Theodore Schick Jr. and Lewis Vaughn.
3. Material available from course website.

You are *responsible* for gaining access to the website. Assignments will not be made available in paper format, nor will grading comments be available in a paper format. Assignments, however, must be handed in as hard-copy.

### **Academic Misconduct**

The University of Guelph takes a very serious view of Academic Misconduct. Included in this category are such activities as cheating on examinations, plagiarism, misrepresentation, and submitting the same material in two different courses without written permission. Students are expected to be familiar with the section on Academic Misconduct in the Undergraduate Calendar, and should be aware that expulsion from the University is a possible penalty. If an instructor suspects that academic misconduct has occurred, that instructor has the right to examine students orally on the content or any other facet of submitted work. Moreover, in the College of Arts it is expected that unless a student is explicitly given a collaborative project, all submitted work will have been done independently.

### **When You Cannot Meet a Course Requirement**

When you find yourself unable to meet an in-course requirement because of illness or for compassionate

reasons, please advise the course instructor [or other designated person] in writing, with name, address, and e-mail contact. Where possible, this should be done in advance of the missed work or event, but otherwise, just as soon as possible after the due date, and certainly no longer than one week later. Note: if appropriate documentation of your inability to meet that in-course requirement is necessary, the course instructor, or delegate, will request it of you. Such documentation will rarely be required for course components representing less than 10% of the course grade. Note from instructor: I accept no late work without documentation (see above). Assignments are either accepted or not accepted. The penalty for late work without documentation is as follows: it is not accepted. For students with documentation, a makeup assignment may be necessary.

## Information on tutorials

For most tutorials, there will be a text to read and a series of questions to answer. The text and the questions will be available at the website for this course. (On a few occasions, there may be a more structured quiz in the tutorial.) You will discuss the text in the tutorial. Bring the text and 2 copies of your answers to the questions to the tutorial. Hand in your answers to the tutor at the beginning of the class. He or she will grade them, and return them to you next class. The grading will be on a very simplified scale: 1 = unacceptable; 2 = acceptable; 3 = good. What the grade descriptors mean: “unacceptable” = in the judgement of the TA, no real effort is made to answer the questions; “acceptable” = questions are taken seriously and the student answers them all; “good” = student has responded thoughtfully to issues raised by the questions. When the course is over, The TA may raise but not lower your overall tutorial grade on the basis of the quality of participation in the tutorial. The grade may be raised by up to 5 marks out of the total tutorial component. This decision is at the discretion of the TA and is not based strictly on attendance.

Example: The tutorial component of the course is worth 20 % of the final grade. The TA will calculate this component as follows: the best 5 tutorial assignments will constitute the grade. Example: If your 5 best assignments are all “good,” then your mark is 5 times 3 (15/20). Suppose, as well, that you have contributed to discussion on a regular basis, and helped to make the tutorial good. Then, obviously, the TA will increase your mark—say by 4 marks. Thus your total tutorial grade = 19/20.

In tutorial, we are more interested in the seriousness with which you take these assignments than any specific right answers. It is true that some answers are better than others, and we will strive to find them. but we, as philosophers, exhibit significant tolerance for differences of view. We do expect those different views to be supported by reasons: an “opinion” without a reason is just a prejudice.

### Readings, Assignment Dates

*The pocket guide to critical thinking (PGCT)*

*How to think about weird things (WT)*

#### Week 1

Sept. 14 PGCT, Chapter 1.1 & 1.2

No tutorial

#### Week 2

Sept. 21 PGCT Chapter 1.3 & Ch. 2.1 [very important chapter!]

Tutorial # 1: animal rights

#### Week 3

September 28 PGCT 2.2 , 2.4

Tutorial # 2: famine, affluence & morality

**Assignment #1 is available from the website.**

#### Week 4

Oct 5 PGCT Chapter 2.5 & 2.6

Tutorial #3: science & religion

**Week 5**

October 12 PGCT Ch. 3

Tutorial # 4 : 9/11 conspiracy

**Assignment # 1 is due in class.**

**Week 6**

October 19 PGCT Ch. 3 (continuation)

Tutorial # 5: discussion of Assignment #1 + a diagnostic quiz in tutorial that counts as the quiz.

**Assignment # 1 is returned in tutorial**

**Week 7**

October 26. **Midterm test in class**

Tutorial # 6: TBA

**Week 8**

November 2. WT Chapters 1 & 2

Tutorial # 7 : possibility

**Assignment # 2 is available from the website**

**Week 9**

November 9. WT Chapter 4 [Ch. 3 provides background material on fallacies, and is not the topics of lectures: overlaps with PGCT]

Tutorial # 8 : **Midterm test is returned and discussed in tutorial**

**Week 10**

November 16. WT Chapter 5

Tutorial #9 : the sanctity of human life

**Week 11**

November 23 26 PGCT 4.1 & 4.4

Tutorial #9 : Cultural relativism

**Assignment # 2 due in class.**

**Week 12**

November 30. WT Chapter 6

Tutorial # 10: **Assignment # 2 is returned in tutorial**, tutorial is devoted to discussion of Assignment #2