

# Syllabus for Freshman Seminar - Topics in PPE

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Feel free to get in touch with any problem, any time. We will be talking one-to-one over Zoom quite a bit as part of the class, but we can also arrange meetings separately.

## 1 Overview

### 1.1 The freshman seminar in general

First, what the freshman seminar is *not*: it's not a lecture course; it's not a general or introductory survey of a field (for example, this seminar is not an introduction to economics); it does not count toward Weinberg College's distribution requirements or toward most majors' requirements.

So what is it? It's worth lifting the following quote directly from the WCAS website:<sup>1</sup>

First-year seminars are the key component of your first-year experience as a Weinberg student. Seminars are small, writing- and discussion-oriented courses geared to the investigation of a specific theme or issue and intended to hone your abilities as a critical thinker and effective writer. Successful completion of the first-year seminars, in fact, is the primary way for Weinberg students to satisfy the College's writing requirement.<sup>2</sup> All first-year students are expected to take two first-year seminars, except in unusual circumstances...

First-year seminars do not count toward Weinberg College's distribution requirements, and most departments and programs exclude them from counting toward major and minor requirements. They do not have prerequisites and do not provide a general survey of a discipline; instead they focus on a narrow but exciting aspect of a field. At the same time, they foster a more personal relationship with faculty members than is possible in larger courses. Your fall seminar instructor will be your adviser for your first quarter.

To which I'll add the following: the central purpose of the seminar is not really to teach you about politics, philosophy or economics. It is instead to improve your ability to read carefully, think logically, speak effectively and write clearly.<sup>3</sup> These skills will serve you very well in your subsequent career at Northwestern.

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.weinberg.northwestern.edu/undergraduate/degree/first-year-seminar/>

<sup>2</sup>For more on the WCAS writing requirement see <http://www.weinberg.northwestern.edu/undergraduate/degree/writing-proficiency/>

<sup>3</sup>I encourage use of the Writing Place, a peer-tutoring center located in the University Library; see <http://www.writing.northwestern.edu/>

Another goal of the seminar is to familiarise you with academic norms regarding citation and plagiarism.<sup>4</sup> Many students come to Northwestern ignorant of these norms; this can lead to serious problems, for example if a professor confuses such ignorance with wilful violation of accepted codes of conduct. We will talk about academic integrity in our first meeting.

## 1.2 This freshman seminar in particular

In this seminar we will survey disparate topics in politics, philosophy and economics. Exactly what we end up covering will depend a little on what most interests the group, but provisional topics include moral intuitions and their evolution, the trolley problem, Rawls' theory of justice, the ethics of nationalism, the economic effects of immigration, how economists and regular people think about risk and uncertainty, prediction markets and the wisdom of crowds, the pros and cons of a basic income policy. The aim is to find interesting things to read, talk and write about.

This is a good time to note that **there are no prerequisites for this seminar, and no prior knowledge of anything will be assumed.**

## 2 Structure and evaluation

If this were a normal quarter we would meet regularly as a group and discuss the topics at hand. Given the circumstances, and given my general scepticism regarding Zoom meetings with more than a few people, I am abandoning that strategy. Instead I will meet you individually or in small groups (twos or threes), with perhaps the occasional jamboree where we all get together.

These smaller meetings will take place during the scheduled class times (Mondays and Wednesdays, 11.30am-12.50pm). I will mix up the groups so you all get to know one another, and will send out the timetable for each week's meetings no later than the preceding Friday.<sup>5</sup> In these smaller meetings we will talk about the assigned readings, and I might ask you to begin by summarising the main ideas therein. Hopefully I will also have time simply to check in with each of you and chat a bit. One nice thing about the seminar is that it is an informal way for advisers to keep in touch and see how the quarter is going; this is another reason I prefer the smaller groups.

Participation will be worth 40% of your grade. In this seminar participation means showing up to our meeting (whatever its size) and being able to demonstrate that you've read, and thought about, what you were supposed to. I don't mind if there were parts of the readings you did not understand, just so long as it's clear you tried.

The remaining 60% of your grade will be based on your writing. Each week you will have the chance to turn in a response paper, a short (500-1000 word) essay that engages with one of the assigned readings for that week. There will be nine opportunities to turn in a response paper, and **you must turn in at least six**. I will grade each paper you hand in, and the best four will count towards your class grade (15% each). Response papers are due at 6pm on Friday of each week, and should be submitted via Canvas in pdf form.

There is no final exam.

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<sup>4</sup>Please find the time to read "How to Avoid Plagiarism" at <http://www.northwestern.edu/provost/students/integrity/plagiarism.html>

<sup>5</sup>If I haven't done this, email me and complain.

### 3 Course materials

There are no required books. We'll use sources such as newspaper & magazine articles, academic research papers and podcasts. These will be made available on Canvas.

### 4 Schedule of seminars & readings

The schedule of required readings will be on Canvas. I have a provisional sequence in mind, but might change some topics depending on how the first couple of weeks go.

In addition to the reading on the topics I choose, I will 'push out' to you some resources (articles, videos) selected by the University that you might find useful. These will concern study techniques, navigating the academic bureaucracy, how to think about a major, etc.

### 5 Recording policy

All instructors have been asked to include the following statement on all syllabi this quarter.

*Unauthorized student recording of classroom or other academic activities (including advising sessions or office hours) is prohibited. Unauthorized recording is unethical and may also be a violation of University policy and state law. Students requesting the use of assistive technology as an accommodation should contact AccessibleNU. Unauthorized use of classroom recordings - including distributing or posting them - is also prohibited. Under the University's Copyright Policy, faculty own the copyright to instructional materials - including those resources created specifically for the purposes of instruction, such as syllabi, lectures and lecture notes, and presentations. Students cannot copy, reproduce, display, or distribute these materials. Students who engage in unauthorized recording, unauthorized use of a recording, or unauthorized distribution of instructional materials will be referred to the appropriate University office for follow-up.*

I am not going to record our Zoom meetings, and neither should you. If I decide to change this policy I will let you know beforehand.

I expect everyone to have their camera on during meetings. If for some reason you don't want this, let me know beforehand and we can discuss it.