

Econ 101: Progress in the AI Age

Northwestern University, 2025 Fall, Tue/Thu 11:00 am - 12:20 pm; Kresge 2-435

Prof. Scott Ogawa (sogawa@gmail.com)

Description: We will read Steven Pinker's *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* and use it to discuss the sources and ramifications of Progress, broadly defined. Focus will nevertheless be placed on *economic* progress, especially in recent centuries. Additional readings, topics, and discussion will be based on student interests and input. And as this is 2026 and this course is about progress, how could we possibly *not* talk about what may be the greatest innovation of our lifetime (or maybe ever?): Computers that are capable of *thinking* -- or perhaps not. Either way, we will discuss A.I.

Expectations:

- Class attendance is required and active participation is expected.
- Complete reading assignments the night before class, and come willing and able to contribute to a discussion.
- If you cannot meet any of these expectations then please send me an email in advance.
- Also, no cell phones in class. Using a cell phone during class will result in a grade reduction. You are encouraged to leave your phone in your dorm room; otherwise, there will be a basket to leave it in upon entering the classroom.

Readings and Quizzes: A typical class will start with a short reading quiz and chance for brief writing reflection. We will then discuss topics as they come up. By midnight prior to class: Every student is expected to do the reading and complete a short online assignment (generate reading-quiz questions and discussion questions). Other short assignments (such as oral presentations or in-class writing assignments) may also be assigned, always with advance notice.

Optional Final Paper: There will be a short (likely 2-3 pages) *optional* final paper due during finals week (when our *scheduled* final exam time concludes -- though submit earlier if possible). It will be on a topic of your choosing. To get an A in the class you must submit a paper with an original and interesting idea that relates to any topic that comes up during the quarter. You must then defend this paper during an oral examination at the end of the quarter.

Office Hours: There are no official office hours for this class but my door is always open. Please just send me an email to set up a time to meet. Also, we will have at least two scheduled meetings during the quarter (one with regard to winter classes).

Reading: In addition to *Enlightenment Now*, we may read individual chapters from the following books:

- *The Beginning of Infinity*, David Deutsch
- *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman
- *The Anxious Generation*, Jonathan Haidt
- Other articles and short readings that will be distributed.

Evaluation

- Class participation, including attendance and participation (15%)
- Quizzes and (some) in-class writing assignments (70%)
- Final paper and corresponding oral defence (up to 15%)

This course follows the [Northwestern University Syllabus Standards](#).