

Syllabus for College Seminar - Topics in PPE

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We will meet twice a week: Mondays & Wednesdays from 9.30am-10.50am in Annenberg G28.

1 Overview

1.1 The College Seminar in general

First, what the 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 foundational discipline requirements or toward most majors' requirements.

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

The College Seminar takes place in Fall quarter. College Seminars are small, discussion-oriented classes in which students explore a single topic or theme. Crucially, they also foreground the differences between high school and college and introduce students to skills such as time management and help-seeking that are necessary to thriving at Northwestern. College Seminar instructors also serve as their students' first advisers in the College.

College Seminars may not be counted toward Weinberg College's foundational discipline requirements, and most departments and programs exclude them from counting toward major and minor requirements.

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 critically, think logically and communicate effectively. These skills will serve you very well in your subsequent career at Northwestern and beyond.

Another goal of the seminar is to familiarise you with academic norms regarding citation and plagiarism.² 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 one of our early meetings.

¹<https://weinberg.northwestern.edu/undergraduate/degree/after-2023/college-seminar-requirement/>

²Please find the time to read "How to Avoid Plagiarism" at <https://www.northwestern.edu/provost/policies-procedures/academic-integrity/how-to-avoid-plagiarism.html>

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 the morality of markets, Arrow's impossibility theorem, the trolley problem, Rawls' theory of justice, effective altruism, 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.**

There are no required books. We'll use sources such as newspaper & magazine articles, academic research papers and podcasts. These will be linked or otherwise made available on Canvas. Each week there will be a Canvas module which outlines the plan for that week's meetings. I'll try to publish each of these by the middle of the previous week.

2 Class rules and procedures

Attendance is required at every class; if you have a legitimate excuse for missing a class, email me in advance. Laptops may not be opened in class - if you anticipate the need to refer to some document or other, print it out beforehand. Cellphones are to be turned off.

3 Evaluation

Grades will be based on participation in class discussion (70%) and on a final presentation (30%).

What determines the 70% of the grade that covers classroom participation? First and foremost, *participation!* I will be looking for comments, interruptions, arguments and questions from all students. The more you talk, the better, even if it's just to ask what someone else means by his or her statement. Second, the ability to interrupt and argue in a civil manner. It is possible that we will all agree with each other all the time, but unlikely and probably undesirable; the ability to argue without losing your cool or train of thought, along with that to recognise and accept when you're mistaken, is essential in academic life.

For many of the seminars there will be a few designated students who are expected to lead the discussion. This does not mean that these students are expected to do all the talking; *everyone* is expected to contribute to class discussions, *every* time we meet. Similarly we will probably have at least a couple of debates, with assigned roles for certain people; even if you are not in such a role you are expected to contribute.³

Important: your participation grade depends less on what you say in class than on how much you contribute and the manner in which you do so. In this seminar it is better to be voluble and nonsensical than to be silently brilliant. Your grade will be higher.

³Think of the 70% as being broken down roughly evenly between structured participation (for example when you are a designated discussion leader) and unstructured.

There might also be occasional small tasks and assessments, such as an in-class writing assignment or a micro-quiz on the assigned reading. If so these will count towards the participation component of the seminar. We'll talk in more detail about all this when we first meet.

3.1 Generative AI

For now all I will say is that any use of generative AI **must be disclosed**. It's possible that I will allow such use in the final presentation under certain restrictions; it's possible I will forbid it.

Undisclosed use of tools such as ChatGPT will be considered a violation of academic integrity.

4 Northwestern University Syllabus Standards

This course follows the Northwestern University Syllabus Standards. Students are responsible for familiarizing themselves with this information.