

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 Tech L158.

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

You will take two different first-year seminars: a College Seminar in the fall and a First-Year Writing Seminar in either the winter or the spring. Both are small, discussion-oriented classes in which you will explore a single topic or theme. The College Seminar, though, will also foreground the differences between high school and college and introduce you to skills such as time management and help-seeking that you need to thrive at Northwestern. College Seminar instructors also serve as their students' first advisers in the College. The First-Year Writing Seminar builds on that base and pays special attention to the process of writing and revision.

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.

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

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 available on Canvas.

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 a final paper (30%) and participation in class discussion (70%). There is no final exam. The final paper will be due on Monday December 9th, i.e. Monday of exam week.

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.

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 silent. Your grade will be higher.

There will also be occasional small tasks and assessments, such as the writing of a haiku or limerick, or a micro-quiz on the assigned reading. 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 paper under certain restrictions; it's possible I will forbid it. It's also possible that one of the small tasks during the quarter will involve using AI.

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.