

How to Reason and Argue: An Introduction to Critical Thinking

PHIL 105 Online
Summer Session II 2020
UNC Chapel Hill

Recommended Synchronous Meetings. TuTh 11:00am–12:00pm.

Instructor. Chris Blake-Turner
Email. chrisbt@live.unc.edu

Office Hours. Tu 10:00am–10:55am, and by appointment.

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1 Course Description

This course is about learning how to think critically. That doesn't mean being skeptical of everything or always trying to win debates. Thinking critically is rather about trying to deepen your understanding by scrutinizing your own beliefs and values, as well as those of others. Critical thinking is the skill most valued by employers.¹ But it's also more than that; becoming a better critical thinker is part of becoming a better person.

2 Learning Goals

This course has six primary learning goals.

Skills. You'll learn how to *identify*, *evaluate*, and *construct* arguments, both orally and in writing.

Content. You'll learn the foundational ideas of critical thinking, including what arguments are and what makes an argument strong or not.

Integration. You'll be able to apply your skills and knowledge not just in the context of a philosophy class, but more importantly in your own lives. Rather than a dry academic exercise, you'll see that thinking critically is integral to much of what we do.

Self-Reflection. You'll interrogate your own beliefs and values. This might involve changing your mind on important issues.

Respect. You'll better appreciate the value of viewpoints different from your own. You'll also be able to engage in respectful disagreement with others on important issues.

Learning How to Learn. You'll think about learning as itself a skill that you can improve over time. In doing so, you'll learn how to become a lifelong learner, something that will be useful whatever you do in the future.

3 Respect and Diversity

Although I take ultimate responsibility, it is up to all of us to create a learning environment that fosters respect for everyone involved. We welcome and value individuals and their differences, including: ability, age, economic status, ethnicity, first language, gender expression and identity, national origin, race, religion, sex, and sexuality.

Note. This is *completely compatible* with being critical of one another's views. Respecting others means taking them and their views seriously. That in turn means examining their views' strengths and weaknesses, asking questions, and offering constructive criticism or

¹ See [this article](#) by the National Association of Colleges and Employers for data.

alternative viewpoints where appropriate. It also means thinking about how the views of others challenge our own, and being open to what they have to teach us. Valuing diversity is not merely a matter of having an attitude, but an important part of thinking critically. This includes:

- Having good reasons for your views while being willing to change your mind.
- Learning to listen to other perspectives and being open to criticism.
- Being charitable in your criticisms of other positions, and not rushing to judgment.
- Learning to express criticisms and differences of opinion in ways that are not personal or hurtful, and that leave space for other voices.

Finally, never be afraid to ask a question or to risk saying something that might be wrong—that’s how we learn. Equally, never be afraid to learn from the questions and answers of others, and to let their views challenge and change how you think. This is especially important in critical thinking, which, rather than a combative hurling of rhetoric in pursuit of personal victory, ought to be a collaborative effort in search of truth and deeper understanding.

4 Required Texts and Technology

There is **no** required text for this course. Any material that you’ll be asked to read will be made available on Sakai.

You’ll need a computer to access Sakai and so your assignments. It’s highly recommended that you make video recordings for some assignments, so a webcam would be helpful.

When we get to diagramming arguments, you’ll have two choices. One option is to diagram by hand and upload pictures in your assignments. If you do this, you must have a camera that can take decent enough photos for me to make out what you’ve written; most modern smartphone cameras will work fine. Alternatively, you can use iLogos, which is a free piece of argument diagramming software available here: http://www.phil.cmu.edu/projects/argument_mapping/

Near the end of the course, you’ll need to record yourself having a discussion with someone. Again, a modern smartphone should be able to do this fine.

5 Communication

I expect you to check the Sakai website and your email regularly. That means once a day, at the *very* least. If you don’t do this, you might miss important communication from me, for instance about an upcoming deadline, or a change to the course structure.

In turn, I will respond to your emails within 24 hours. I’ll also do my best to grade anything you do within 24 hours. I’ll usually respond and grade more promptly than this, but there are times when it might take me the full 24 hours.

6 Course Overview and Rationale

This course is structured differently from most courses, perhaps from any other course that you've taken. I'll first give an overview, then my rationale for setting it out this way, then a detailed explanation of the components of a Step.

Overview

With two exceptions, everything you do in this course will be at your own pace. (I'll get to the exceptions soon.) The vast majority of the course consists in a series of Steps, which you'll work through as quickly or as slowly as you like. Each Step has you working on a certain skill. There are videos and practice exercises to help you learn the skill.

You cannot move on to the next Step until you have passed the Final Assessment at the end of the current Step. What the Final Assessment is depends on the skill: it could be a quiz, an argument diagram, or something else. If you fail the Final Assessment for a given Step, I'll give you feedback and you'll practice some more. Then, when you're ready, you'll take the Final Assessment again. Depending on the Step, this might be the very same Final Assessment, or a new one. You can take a Final Assessment as many times as you need to. (I'll explain how the grading works for all this later, on p. 9.) Once you've passed the Final Assessment, you unlock the next Step.

Example. You've successfully made it to Step 3—Diagramming Simple Arguments. You watch the videos, do some practice exercises, and get some feedback from me. After doing some more practice you feel like you're ready to take the Final Assessment. You don't pass the Final Assessment on the first attempt. You get more feedback from me and do some more practice. This time you feel like you're *really* ready. You take the Final Assessment again and pass! You can now start working through Step 4—Diagramming Complex Arguments.

The exceptions to this self-paced structure are the Learning Portfolio and the Final Exam. Everyone needs to take the Final Exam at the same time to ensure fairness. I'll say more about the Learning Portfolio assignments later (p. 8), but they're to help you reflect on your learning and need to be roughly evenly spaced throughout the semester to be effective.

Rationale

The reason the course is structured this way is based on four simple ideas.² First, learning to think critically is less about learning facts and information, and more about learning a series of complex skills and habits. Second, the best way to learn skills and habits is to practice them by *doing* things. Third, the best way to learn a *complex* skill (like evaluating an argument) is to break it down into simpler skills (like identifying a conclusion, diagramming the argument's logical structure, and so on). Fourth and finally, you're coming to this course

² I have adapted the course structure from Cahill, A. J. and Bloch-Schulman, S. (2012). "Argumentation Step-by-Step: Learning Critical Thinking' through Deliberate Practice." *Teaching Philosophy* 35(1): 41–62.

with a specific level of experience and familiarity with each of these skills. So you might need a different amount of practice on some of the components than your classmates.

The Step-by-Step course structure makes a lot of sense, given these four ideas. It focuses on skill development, rather than learning facts. It emphasizes learning by doing. It breaks complex skills down into simpler ones which build on each other cumulatively. And, because you're mostly working at your own pace, the Step-by-Step structure allows you to spend more time on the skills you need to practice more, and less on the skills you need to practice less.

The Anatomy of a Step

Each Step is designed to help you hone a particular skill, and will typically build on the previous Steps.

Although sometimes there will be others, each Step includes three central parts: *watch*, *practice*, and *demonstrate*.

Watch. You'll begin each Step by watching some videos associated with that Step. The videos come in different types. Some videos explain how to do that Step's skill; other videos are detailed examples of that skill being applied; and others situate this Step within the overall trajectory of the course. (For a few Steps, you might be asked to read some brief materials as well.)

Practice. This is the heart of each Step. You'll practice that Step's skill until you've gotten it down. You're not on your own here! As well as giving you feedback on your practice attempts, I'll provide extra practice materials if you need or want them.

Demonstrate. You'll demonstrate mastery of Step's skill by taking a Final Assessment. Only once you've passed the Final Assessment will you unlock the next Step and be able to progress. Don't worry; if you fail the Final Assessment, you'll be able to take another one. But, at least usually, you'll first need to practice some more; you can't just keep retaking the Final Assessment until you get lucky and pass. More on this later (p. 9).

Synchronous Meetings

Although this course can be done asynchronously, it is often very helpful to have synchronous interaction time.

Coworking Meetings

There is no participation or attendance grade for this course. Nonetheless, I highly recommend that you attend the synchronous coworking meetings on Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11:00am–12:00pm.

These meetings are not lectures. It's just a time for you to work on your critical thinking skills in a friendly environment where you can get help if you need it, from your peers or from me. Think of it as the virtual equivalent of getting together to work in a coffee shop.

Office Hours

If you ever need or want to talk to me one-on-one, I have an office hour on Tuesday, 10:00–10:55. I am also available by appointment at other times; just drop me an email and we'll set something up.

I want to hear from you, so please do drop by to chat about the course, or anything else that's on your mind!

7 Course Requirements and Breakdown

Requirement	Percentage of Overall Grade
Step 0—Navigating the Site	1%
Step 1—Determining Arguments	3%
Step 2—Isolating Conclusions	3%
Step 3—Diagramming Simple Arguments	15%
Step 4—Diagramming Complex Arguments	25%
Step 5—Evaluating Arguments: Acceptability	5%
Step 6—Evaluating Arguments: Relevance	5%
Step 7—Evaluating Arguments: Grounds	5%
Step 8—Writing Evaluations	7%
Step 9—Constructing Arguments	8%
Learning Portfolio	5%
Final Exam	18%

I am required to assign you at least 10 pages of written work, not including the Final Exam. Your Final Assessments for Steps 3–9, and your Learning Portfolio assignments, meet this requirement.

Breakdown of Requirements

Step 0—Navigating the Site

This Step is about getting to know each other and our online learning environment.

The Final Assessment will involve making and uploading an introductory video.

Step 1—Determining Arguments

The first Step to becoming better at thinking critically is to be able to tell whether something is an argument or not.

To demonstrate mastery of this skill, you'll take a multiple-choice quiz.

Step 2—Isolating Conclusions

Once you've determined that something is an argument, you need to be able to identify its conclusion.

To demonstrate mastery of this skill, you'll take a quiz that will involve a mixture of multiple-choice questions and some written responses.

Step 3—Diagramming Simple Arguments

In order to start evaluating arguments, you need to be able to understand their logical structure. In this Step, you'll start to develop that skill by diagramming short-to-medium-length arguments.

The Final Assessment for this Step will involve a short multiple-choice quiz and drawing some argument diagrams. You'll have the option to do the latter by hand, or digitally through the freely available software iLogos: http://www.phil.cmu.edu/projects/argument_mapping/

Step 4—Diagramming Complex Arguments

This Step builds on the previous one, by extending your diagramming skills to longer, more complicated arguments.

The Final Assessment for this Step will involve diagramming complex arguments.

Step 5—Evaluating Arguments: Acceptability

Now that you can reconstruct the logical structure of an argument, you will begin to learn how to evaluate an argument. The first thing to learn is how to evaluate whether the premises are acceptable.

The Final Assessment for this Step will involve diagramming arguments and assessing their premises for acceptability, as well as explaining your reasoning.

Step 6—Evaluating Arguments: Relevance

Even if the premises of an argument are acceptable, they may or may not be relevant to the conclusion. This Step develops the skill of evaluating arguments along the dimension of relevance.

The Final Assessment will involve diagramming arguments and assessing their premises, sometimes just for relevance, and sometimes both for relevance and acceptability, as well as explaining your reasoning.

Step 7—Evaluating Arguments: Grounds

The next Step in argument evaluation involves determining whether the argument's premises provide sufficient grounds for its conclusion. An argument's premises might be both acceptable and relevant, but not give sufficient evidence for the conclusion.

The Final Assessment will involve diagramming arguments and evaluating the premises for both acceptability, relevance, and sufficiency of grounds, as well as explaining your reasoning.

Step 8—Writing Evaluations

Diagrams are extremely helpful for understanding the structure of arguments. But you need to be able to communicate your evaluation of an argument to those who are unfamiliar with argument diagrams.

The Final Assessment involves picking an argument from a source on a topic that you're interested in, and writing an evaluation of it. The evaluation will be written in prose and should have no unexplained jargon in it: it should be understandable by someone who hasn't taken this course.

Step 9—Constructing Arguments

Now that you're adept at evaluating others' arguments, it's time to develop the skill of putting forward your own argument. This Step focuses on constructing a written argument.

The Final Assessment will involve picking a topic that you're interested in and writing a 2-page essay arguing for a compelling thesis. This topic could be the same as Step 8's, or different, depending on what you prefer.

Learning Portfolio (LP)

Progressing through the Steps is the primary way you'll achieve the Skills and Content Learning Goals for the course (p. 2). They'll also help you achieve the other Learning Goals of Integration, Self-Reflection, Respect, and Learning How to Learn. But to really delve into these latter goals, you'll put together a Learning Portfolio throughout the semester.

This consists in 5 pieces of reflective writing. They should be about half-a-page long, but you're welcome to write more if you'd like. The point of these assignments is for you to reflect openly and honestly on your learning, and on your beliefs and values. There are no right or wrong answers, as long as you engage sincerely with the task.

LP I—An Invitation to Critical Thinking. We'll begin by getting a sense of how we each perceive critical thinking and philosophy. We'll also set some of our own goals for the course. This assignment is due Friday June 26th.

LP II—Everyday Critical Thinking. We'll start integrating what we're learning in the course with our everyday lives. We'll commit to plans of action for improving our critical thinking skills in everyday life. This assignment is due Thursday July 2nd. (Not the Friday, as that's a university holiday for Independence Day.)

LP III—Checking In. We'll check in and see how the LP II plan is going. What's worked well and what hasn't? How might we change the plan in light of that? We'll also check on the goals we set in LP I. Are we progressing towards them? What can we do to make measurable progress? This assignment is due Friday July 10th.

LP IV—Reflecting on Your Beliefs and Values. Towards the end of the course, we'll see how, if at all, we've changed as a result of the course. Have we changed any of our beliefs and values? What about our attitudes toward critical thinking or philosophy itself? This assignment is due Friday July 17th.

LP V—Critical Thinking Beyond This Course Finally, we'll think about what we've learned in this course and how to put it into practice once the course is over. This assignment is due Friday July 24th.

Final Exam

The exam will be a mixture of: multiple choice questions, argument diagrams, and argument evaluations.

It is on Monday July 27th, from 3:00pm–6:00pm. (**Note.** I do not have control over this scheduling.)

The exam is not designed to catch you out. That does not mean it will be easy. But, if you've progressed diligently through the Steps, you should do fine in the exam.

8 Grading

Completing the course requirements will give you a total score for the class out of 100, which I'll convert to your final letter grade as follows:

A	A⁻	B⁺	B	B⁻	C⁺	C	C⁻	D⁺	D	F
94	90	87	84	80	77	74	70	67	60	0–59

Steps

With the exception of Step 10, all the Steps are graded pass/fail. That means that when you pass the Final Assessment, you get the number of points associated with that Step (see the table on p. 6). Passing a Step will typically require getting the equivalent of an A on the Final Assessment. So passing is not merely passing, but rather demonstrating *mastery* of that Step's skill. I will clearly indicate what this amounts to in each Step, so that you can be sure of what is required for you.

If you do not pass the Final Assessment for a given Step, you will be able to take it again. This might involve doing the very same Final Assessment—for example, on Step 9, you'll keep rewriting your argument until it's of good enough quality. Or it might involve taking another version of the Final Assessment, such as a different quiz.

There is no limit, in principle, to the number of times you can retake a Final Assessment. **But that doesn't mean you can just keep trying to do it as many times as possible until you pass.** If you don't pass a Final Assessment, you'll need to practice more and you'll usually only be able to retake the Final Assessment when I judge that you're ready. So you shouldn't attempt a Final Assessment until you're comfortable with the practice material. If you've worked through that material and are still unsure, reach out to me.

Step 10's Final Assessment is not graded pass/fail, but is simply out of 10 points. You won't have an opportunity to retake it once you've submitted it. (I'd love to be able to give you that opportunity, but there's not enough time in the course!)

Learning Portfolio

Each LP assignment is worth 1 point, for a total of 5 points towards your overall grade. The assignments will be graded pass/fail: 1 point for a pass, 0 for a fail.

They are due at 11:59pm sharp on the due date. Unless otherwise informed, submit them to through the Sakai Assignments page. They do not need to be anonymized.

I am extremely generous about granting extensions **in advance of the deadline**. I am extremely *ungenerous* about late assignments for which an extension was not granted. **Late LP assignments will receive 0 points.**

This is to ensure fairness. I realize that things come up, that your lives are busy, and that for a whole host of reasons you may need some more time to work on an assignment. So do talk to me about an extension ahead of time. But if you don't, and you turn in an assignment late, that's not fair to those students who handed their work in on time.

Final Exam

The exam will be out of 90 points. I'll divide your score by 5 to get a contribution out of 18 towards your overall grade.

Plagiarism and the Honor Code

You are expected to abide by UNC's Honor Code, and refrain from any kind of academic dishonesty, including cheating and plagiarism. It is worth considering plagiarism in more detail; it is a serious breach of academic integrity and will be unpleasant for all involved, if it occurs.

The UNC Instrument of Student Governance defines plagiarism as "deliberate or reckless representation of another's words, thoughts, or ideas as one's own without attribution in connection with submission of academic work, whether graded or otherwise." Just as you are bound by the Honor Code not to plagiarize, I am bound by it to report suspected cases of academic dishonesty of any kind to the Honor Court.

As well as copying text verbatim, plagiarism includes:

- Failing to cite a source properly.
- Closely paraphrasing a source without citing it.
- Copying the structure of an argument or idea without citing it, even if you put it in your own words.
- Copying from work that you have previously submitted for this class, or another.
- Doing any of the above unintentionally.

I strongly recommend taking the plagiarism tutorial at <http://guides.lib.unc.edu/plagiarism>. If you are ever in any doubt as to whether something constitutes plagiarism, check with me before doing it.

9 Schedule (Subject to Change. Last Updated 10th July 2020)

The Steps can be done in your own time, **but the Final Assessments must be submitted before the final exam. You will get no credit for any Step Final Assessment turned in after the final exam starts.**

Here are the due dates for the Learning Portfolio assignments and the final exam time.

Requirement	Due Date
LP I	Fri June 26 th
LP II	Thurs July 2 nd
LP III	Fri July 10 th
LP IV	Fri July 17 th
LP V	Fri July 24 th
Final Exam	Mon July 27 th 3:00pm–6:00pm

All the Steps can be completed on your own time. While I hope this is ultimately helpful, it might also seem daunting. So here is a suggested schedule for the Steps, with the dates by which it might be good to have completed each Step. It really is *suggested*: you don't need to stick to it; but if you go at least as fast as this suggested schedule, you'll be sure to be on track for completing all the Steps.

Step	<i>Suggested Completion Date</i>
Step 0—Navigating the Site	Mon June 22 nd
Step 1—Identifying Arguments	Weds June 24 th
Step 2—Isolating Conclusions	Fri June 26 th
Step 3—Diagramming Simple Arguments	Thurs July 2 nd
Step 4—Diagramming Complex Arguments	Fri July 10 th
Step 5—Evaluating Arguments: Acceptability	Weds July 15 th
Step 6—Evaluating Arguments: Relevance	Fri July 17 th
Step 7—Evaluating Arguments: Grounds	Mon July 20 th
Step 8—Writing Evaluations	Weds July 22 nd
Step 9—Constructing Arguments	Sun July 26 th