Poli 110: Critical Reasoning and Consumption

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**Class Meetings:** Mon., Wed. & Fri. 3:00-3:50  
**Office Hours:** Thurs 1:00 - 1:50

**Course Description**

All students will engage with the media and encounter reports throughout their lives. There will be reports of scientific breakthroughs, human rights abuses, malevolent conspiracies, and large-scale social action. Some of this evidence will be reliable—some of it will not. While reports are sometimes diligent and careful, others range from poorly conceived to deliberately misleading. As critical consumers, it is our responsibility to distinguish between the two: to carefully and rigorously evaluate the evidence we encounter. How we evaluate these reports may well impact important decisions in our lives: how we vote, whether to dedicate time and money to various pursuits, and even what medication we opt to take.

The aim of this course is to provide the tools needed for this evaluation—to be able to distinguish ‘fake news’ from real. Each week, we will discuss attributes of reasoned arguments and apply them to political, legal and social examples. We will highlight not only the ways in which arguments are flawed, but also the way to construct ones that succeed.

Students who take this course will be better equipped to evaluate evidence they encounter as they continue at UCSD (and beyond). In addition, they will be practiced at communicating with others: at describing when and where these flaws occur both in discussion and in written work.

**Learning Outcomes**

Students who complete this course are expected to be able to do the following:

- To analyze evidence contained within news (and other media) reports.
- To understand the persuasive strength arguments (both good and bad) have in society.
- To recognize flawed reasoning in oneself, as well as in others.
- To clearly and persuasively write an argument that calls attention to these flaws.
- To engage in respectful and productive debates with peers about the quality of evidence.
Overview

This course is structured in such a way that we cover a particular aspect of argumentation each week. In the first, introductory week, we discuss reasoning as a dialogue—focusing on the phenomenon of implication, before discussing how conversational norms are violated in presidential debates. In the second week, we discuss questions that occur in a dialogue, especially the way in which questions can presuppose an answer. In the third week, we turn to the role of emotion in discussions. Although emotion is often seen as something which hinders rational debate, it can also serve as evidence. We then discuss science and scientific journalism—focusing both on issues with scientific practice and the gap between what science shows and what is reported.

Roughly halfway through the course, we turn to discussions of biases and fallacies in argumentation. We discuss confirmation and availability bias (and the relation between the two) as well as the role fallacies play in politics. After discussing how arguments go wrong, we discuss how they go right: what argumentative validity consists of.

The course finishes with shades of grey. We discuss the phenomenon of vagueness, as well as its uses in legal interpretation. We discuss appeals to authority—a necessary, but epistemically risky phenomenon as we navigate the world. Lastly, we discuss ad hominem argumentation and hypocrisy in politics.

Expectations and Evaluations

Students are expected to complete readings and attend the seminar. Because this is a discussion-based class, participation is weighted highly. In addition to contributing to discussions, students will be expected to find real-world examples of the phenomena we discuss and present them to the class.

Students will write three papers for this class. As with the presentations, each paper will involve applying the course material to contemporary cases. Each paper will be 5-8 pages (double spaced). The first paper will be distributed on January 25th and will be due on February 1st. The second paper will be distributed on February 17th and will be due on February 24th. The final paper will be in lieu of a final exam.

The breakdown of grades for this course is as follows:
- 20% First Paper
- 20% Second Paper
- 30% Third Paper
- 30% Participation
Academic Integrity

You are expected to conduct yourself with honor and integrity throughout this course. UCSD’s policy on academic honesty is the following:

“Integrity of scholarship, otherwise referred to as academic integrity, is essential for an academic community, including UC San Diego. Academic integrity is built on a foundation of honest, responsible, fair and trustworthy scholarly activity. Without it, the degrees we confer, the research we conduct, and our reputation all diminish in value.

Thus, the University expects that both faculty and students will adhere to its standards of academic integrity. The UC San Diego Policy on Integrity of Scholarship (herein the “Policy”) states the general rules associated with student integrity of scholarship. The Procedures for Resolving Alleged Violations of the Policy (herein the “Procedures”) are found at https://senate.ucsd.edu/media/389895/procedures-for-resolving-alleged-ai-violations.pdf and authorized by the San Diego Division of the Academic Senate’s Educational Policy Committee.”

Academic honesty involves adequately citing the sources you rely upon, not stealing other students’ exams or papers, not cheating on exams, and not plagiarizing any work. Anyone who is found to be dishonest will automatically fail the class and be reported to the UCSD Academic Integrity Office. If you are unsure whether something constitutes academic dishonesty, contact me BEFORE submitting your work.

Reading Schedule

**Introduction**
01/04 None
01/06 Argument as a Reasoned Dialogue Walton
01/08 Uncooperativeness in Political Discourse: Violating Gricean Maxims in Presidential Debates Buddharat et al.

**Circular Argumentation**
01/11 Questions and Answers in Dialogue Walton
01/13 Question Begging and Analytic Content Elgin
01/15 No Class

**Emotions in Argumentation**
01/18 No Class
01/20 Appeals to Emotion Walton
01/22 The Problem of Propaganda Stanley

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Science and Scientific Journalism
01/25 When Ice Cream Sales Rise, so do Homicides. Coincidence, or Will Your Next Cone Murder You? Peters
01/27 Bastoy: The Norwegian Prison that Works James
01/29 FIRST PRESENTATIONS

Confirmation and Availability Bias
02/01 A Machine for Jumping to Conclusions Kahneman
02/03 Availability, Emotion, and Risk Kahneman
02/05 SECOND PRESENTATIONS

Errors and Fallacies
02/08 Inductive Errors, Biases, and Fallacies Walton
02/10 How Trump Buried the National Debate in Logical Fallacies Neuron
02/12 THIRD PRESENTATIONS

Valid Arguments
02/15 No Class
02/17 Valid Arguments Walton
02/19 Novel Argumentation and Attitude Change: The Case of Vinokur Polarization Following Group Discussion

Arguments in Natural Language
02/22 Natural Language Argumentation Walton
02/24 Vagueness in Law and Language Waldron
02/26 No Class

Appeals to Authority
03/01 Appeals to Authority Walton
03/03 Expert Intuition—When Can We Trust It? Kahneman
03/05 FOURTH PRESENTATIONS

Ad Hominem and Hypocrisy
03/08 Personal Attacks in Argumentation Walton
03/10 Ad Hominem Argumentation in Politics Borouali
03/12 FIFTH PRESENTATIONS