

# Epistemology

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## **COURSE AND CONTACT INFORMATION**

Course: PL3501F Epistemology

Semester: Fall 2008

Time: T 530 - 830

Place: HC-W6

Prerequisites: PL2500\*

Antirequisites: none\*

(\*See below the policy on prerequisites.)

Instructor: John Turri

Office: V122

Office hours: T 430-520 pm; W 1030-1120 am

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## **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that studies systematically the evaluative dimensions of cognition, the metaphysical basis of those evaluative dimensions, and the terms and expressions used to attribute them, where cognition includes those mental properties, states, activities, and processes involved in the attempt to accurately represent the way things are. Epistemologists study the nature and scope of knowledge, understanding, reasonable or rational belief, evidence, and intellectual performances, achievement, credit, praise, and blame. Increasingly nowadays epistemologists study the language we use to attribute epistemic properties.

This course surveys several fundamental questions in contemporary epistemology, including: What is the nature of knowledge and can we define it? How must our beliefs be structured for us to know, or reasonably believe, anything at all? Do the standards for knowledge shift in different contexts or are they invariant? Must we know what we say? Is knowledge an intellectual achievement? Is there any a priori knowledge, and if so, what is its nature?

## **COURSE GOALS**

There are five main goals of this course. The first three goals pertain to the specific content of the course; achieving them means that you have gained some valuable knowledge about an important area of human inquiry. The last two pertain to your development as a thinker more generally; achieving them means that you have exercised and strengthened valuable intellectual skills. By the end of this course you should:

1. Be familiar with a number of influential views on our main topics.
2. Understand how philosophers have argued for and against these views.
3. Cultivate a critical perspective on those arguments and views.
4. Hone your critical skills through the extraction and assessment of philosophical arguments.
5. Avail yourself of the opportunity to improve at formulating and communicating sophisticated ideas and arguments.

## **REQUIRED TEXTS**

1. Matthias Steup and Ernest Sosa, *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology* (Blackwell, 2005). ISBN: 1405107391 [cited in the schedule as 'SS']

**RECOMMENDED TEXTS**

1. Jim Pryor, “[Guidelines on Reading Philosophy](http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html),” <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html>
2. Jim Pryor, “[Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper](http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html),” <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>
3. Michael Huemer, “[A Guide to Writing](http://spot.colorado.edu/~huemer/writing.htm),” <http://spot.colorado.edu/~huemer/writing.htm>
4. William Strunk, Jr., *The Elements of Style*, <http://www.bartleby.com/141/>

**EVALUATION**

1. *Consultation + outline + presentation + paper* (‘COPP’ for short): This assignment consists of four parts, culminating in an approximately 2,000 word paper. **YOU MUST COMPLETE ALL FOUR PARTS TO EARN ANY CREDIT FOR THE ASSIGNMENT.** This entails that failure to complete *any* part will result in a **zero** for the assignment. Your grade for the assignment will equal your grade for the paper.

First, you will consult with me about a paper topic. The consultation will consist of an email exchange (subject heading ‘PL 3501 consultation’), *initiated by you*, in which: (i) you propose a topic and thesis and then (ii) I consider it and respond by either approving it or requesting alterations; if I approve it, then you move on to the next part of the assignment; if I request alterations, you repeat the process until I approve it. My approval of your proposal *does not* imply that your paper will receive high marks, marks that satisfy either of us, or even passing marks. You will select a topic covered in our readings, as described in the “Topics” column of our course schedule below. Students presenting at the first session for student presentations (hereafter ‘presentation-sessions’) may choose any topic covered up till then; students presenting at the second presentation-session may choose a topic covered between the first and second presentation-sessions, but no others; students presenting at the third presentation-session may choose a topic covered between the second and third presentation-sessions, but no others; etc. Your thesis should be specific and non-trivial, but not overly ambitious. (I can’t define those criteria here; the consultative process will help clarify them for you.) You may of course also speak with me in person about your topic, but you still *must* submit a formal proposal by email. Remember, the email’s subject heading should be ‘PL 3501 consultation’. Prudence suggests that you retain a record of the email exchange. **You complete this first part of the assignment if and only if I approve your proposal.**

Second, AT LEAST TWO DAYS prior to your presentation, you will submit to me by email a detailed outline or rough draft of your presentation (hereafter ‘presentation text’). The presentation should be approximately fifteen minutes long, so plan accordingly. Your goal should be to present a clear, intelligent argument for your thesis. Save your work in Rich Text Format (.rtf) and name the file after this pattern <PL3501\_lastname\_firstname\_presentation>. (If I were to turn in a presentation to myself, the filename would be ‘PL3501\_Turri\_John\_presentation’.) Attach your file to an email with the subject heading ‘PL 3501 presentation’, and send it to me. Prudence suggests that you retain a record of the email exchange. Compose your work in a standard 12-point font, with 1.5 inch margins all around; don’t include a title page; number the pages. **You complete this second part of the assignment if and only if you email me your pre-**

**sensation text at least two days before your assigned presentation time.**

Third, you will deliver your presentation to the class at the assigned time and receive helpful feedback. We will listen carefully and sympathetically, and try to help you improve your paper by respectfully asking questions or making friendly suggestions. Your presentation will be a low-tech affair: handouts are fine, but no Powerpoint, slides, or other multimedia displays allowed. (I impose this restriction to encourage you to master the content, which is challenging enough, rather than engage in the sort of showmanship that often accompanies multimedia displays.) **You complete this third part of the assignment if and only if you deliver your presentation at the assigned time.**

Fourth, taking into account feedback from your presentation, you will write an approximately 2,000 word paper defending your thesis. Your goal should be to present a clear, intelligent argument for your thesis and respond to any credible objections raised at your presentation. Your paper is DUE FIVE DAYS AFTER YOUR ASSIGNED PRESENTATION TIME. Save your work in Rich Text Format (.rtf), name the file after this pattern <PL3501\_lastname\_firstname\_paper>, and submit it to turnitin.com via the paper assignment link on this course's WebCT/OWL site. (If I were to submit a paper, the filename would be 'PL3501\_Turri\_John\_paper'.) Then, attach it to an email with subject heading 'PL 3501 Paper' and send it to me. Compose your work in a standard 12-point font, with 1.5 inch margins all around; don't include a title page; number the pages. Late papers will be penalized five points per day. **You complete this fourth part of the assignment if and only if you submit a paper as instructed.**

2. Final Exam: We will have a comprehensive final exam during the final-exam period, as scheduled by the registrar, covering material from both readings *and lecture*; date TBA.
3. Class Participation: Outstanding class participation will improve your final mark for the course.

Your thoughtful participation during class will greatly enhance this course. I welcome and encourage discussion throughout our meetings. Arguments, examples, etc. presented in the readings, as well as any aspect of class discussion, are fair game. You should come to class having carefully read the assigned material, and ready to answer these questions: What question does the author address? What is the author's thesis? How does the author argue for that thesis? What strengths and weaknesses do you detect in the author's arguments? Lacking an answer to those questions, you should at least have intelligent questions to ask about aspects of the reading that seem important but are nevertheless puzzling. Remember, you needn't have a groundbreaking criticism to report, or a compelling theory of your own to defend. Sometimes asking a question can be as helpful and productive as answering one. The more of us involved in class discussion, the more we'll all benefit from the course, and the more we'll all enjoy ourselves.

**NOTE:** *Merely* attending class does **NOT** count as participating! As should be obvious, in order to earn marks for participation, you must participate. To participate, attendance is *necessary but not sufficient*. If you never participate, you will earn no credit for participation, even if all your written work for the course is superb.

4. Attendance: Attendance at all student presentations, for the entire presentation, is mandatory. For each unexcused absence at a presentation, you will lose **five points off your paper's grade**. (Leaving early or showing up late counts as an absence.) Absence from a pre-

sentation will be treated exactly the same way as an absence from an exam. Presentation sessions are scheduled for 10/14, 11/4 and 12/2.

**Breakdown:** Your grade for the course will be calculated as follows:

COPP: 50%

Final exam: 50%

**NOTE:** You must complete *all* assignments (including exams) to pass the course.

### **PROVISIONAL COURSE SCHEDULE**

I will distribute a schedule of readings and a bibliography on the first day of class, and post them on WebCT.

### **GENERAL POLICIES**

#### 1. Plagiarism

A student's assignments must be in his or her own words. Every time a student makes use of another person's words or ideas, the student must acknowledge his or her intellectual debt through the appropriate use of quotation marks and citations. Failure to do so constitutes plagiarism, a major academic offense. Simply put, plagiarism is passing off another person's work as your own. Students are required to read the Huron University College Statement on Plagiarism (<http://www.huronuc.ca/pdf/FASSonPlagiarism.pdf>). If you still have questions about plagiarism, consult your instructor, Department Chair, or Dean, and the style manuals available at the Reference Desk of the Huron University Library.

You may be required to submit any written work for analysis by commercial plagiarism-detection software. For example, I may require you to submit it to turnitin.com. (Alternatively, I may submit it myself, after you've turned it in.) All work thus submitted will be included as a source document in the reference database for detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted. A licensing agreement, currently between UWO and turnitin.com, governs use of this service. Computer-marked multiple-choice tests or exams may be subject to submission for similarity review by software that detects unusual coincidences in answer patterns that may indicate cheating.

The default penalty for plagiarism is ***failure in the course***. The more advanced the course or student's standing, the more entrenched that default status becomes. It is virtually infeasible for more advanced students.

#### 2. Scholastic Offenses

Read this: <http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/scholoff.pdf>.

#### 3. Academic accommodation

When you request academic accommodation on medical grounds, your request will be granted **ONLY IF** you provide documentation indicating that the condition's onset, duration and severity made it unreasonable to expect you to fulfill your academic responsibilities. When you request accommodation on non-emergency non-medical grounds, you are ***strongly advised*** to do so ***well in advance*** of the relevant date.

You will be allowed to make up an examination *only if* you missed it either because of medical reasons, because of compassionate grounds involving close family, or other substantial non-medical reasons. (In the special case of final examinations, examination conflicts also warrant accommodation.) In any case, you must provide written documentation. Documentary guidelines and instructions for document submission can be found here: [http://www.huronuc.ca/faculty\\_arts\\_social\\_science/academic\\_counselling/](http://www.huronuc.ca/faculty_arts_social_science/academic_counselling/).

Huron students required to provide documentation must submit it directly to the Academic Services Center in the West Wing; non-Huron students must submit it directly to their home Dean. The appropriate authorities and I will then confer. I will try to accommodate you when scheduling a makeup exam, but you will ultimately be expected to retake the exam at the time and place I indicate.

Late assignments *will not be accepted* unless circumstances are extraordinary and you provide an excuse acceptable to me. I will find an excuse acceptable only if you present it to me *privately during my office hours*. Do not discuss such matters with me in front of other students. I may at my discretion require you to provide documentation or refer you to the academic counselor. If I require you to provide documentation for a late assignment, then if you are a Huron student, you must submit it directly to the Academic Services Center in the West Wing; if you are a non-Huron student, you must submit it directly to your home Dean. The appropriate authorities and I will then confer.

The following excuses will not suffice for missing a deadline: 'I overslept', 'I have a lot of work due in other classes around this time', 'I didn't read that in the syllabus', 'I didn't think that was a strict requirement', 'I didn't hear that announcement in class', 'I didn't see that announcement on WebCT/OWL', etc. This list is illustrative, not exhaustive; many other excuses will similarly fail to suffice.

What I say here about 'late assignments' applies to *all deadlines* for the course, whether specifically tied to an assignment or not.

4. Attendance

Except where explicitly noted, my default procedure is to not officially take attendance. Nevertheless failure to attend class regularly will *significantly* reduce your chances of performing well in the course. I *will not* recapitulate by email points made in lecture or class discussion. I will make important announcements in class, which absent students will miss (obviously); ignorance of such announcements *will not* excuse you from completing any course requirements on time.

I reserve the right to begin officially taking attendance any time during the term, especially if I judge attendance to be unacceptably poor. I further reserve the right to require students to give class presentations (individually or in groups) and to administer pop quizzes, and adjust the marking scheme accordingly, if I judge attendance to be unacceptably poor.

5. Participation

I reserve the right to require students to give class presentations (individually or in groups), and to administer pop quizzes, and adjust the marking scheme accordingly, if I judge student participation in class discussion to be unacceptably infrequent.

6. Reading

You are required to do the assigned reading for this course (obviously). I strongly advise you to read each assigned reading at least twice prior to class, and again once after classroom discussion. I reserve the right to administer surprise quizzes (and adjust the marking

scheme accordingly) if students appear to not be doing the reading.

When reading, try to answer these questions: What question does the author address? What is the author's thesis? How does the author argue for that thesis? What strengths and weaknesses do you detect in the author's arguments? Lacking an answer to those questions, you should at least have intelligent questions to ask about aspects of the reading that seem important but are nevertheless puzzling.

7. Quizzes and ad hoc presentations

I do not anticipate administering surprise quizzes or requiring ad hoc presentations, but as stated elsewhere in these policies, I reserve the right to do so for any of several reasons, including unacceptably poor attendance, participation, and preparation. Each such quiz will be worth between one and five percent of the final grade. Barring exceptional circumstances (which, if they occur, I will inform you of), I will administer no more than three surprise quizzes in a term. Each such presentation will be worth between one and five percent of the final grade. Barring exceptional circumstances (which, if they occur, I will inform you of), I will require of you no more than three such presentations in a term.

8. Grading review

Although rare, serious grading mistakes sometimes occur. If you wish to discuss a mark with me, you must first, within a week of receiving your mark, provide to me a detailed and specific written account of your concerns. I *will not* discuss marking disputes in person unless I have first read your written account and judged there to be a prima facie plausible case that something is amiss. Note well: upon review, your mark may be raised *or lowered* as the case merits. Barring special circumstances I will not review a mark later than two weeks after I **first** attempt to return the assignment (which implies, for example, that if you're continually absent when I attempt to hand back marked assignments, you will forfeit your opportunity to request a review).

When inquiring about a mark, remember that the following statements are irrelevant to an assignment's merits: 'I'm applying to competitive programs, and this mark will hurt my chances', 'A mark like this will prevent me from graduating with honors', 'I will not graduate if I earn marks like this in the course', 'I am on academic probation, and marks like this will prevent me from continuing my studies here', 'I have never gotten a mark like this before', 'I showed you a draft of this and you did not tell me it would earn a mark like this', 'When you looked at a draft of this you did not make this criticism', etc. This list is illustrative, not exhaustive; many other considerations are similarly irrelevant. Some considerations may be irrelevant to an assignment's merits, though not absolutely irrelevant.

9. Drafts

Students sometimes ask me to provide feedback on drafts. I am often willing to do so, and the feedback almost invariably leads to improvement. However, some students labor under false assumptions about this process. Sometimes students assume that my providing feedback assures a high mark, or a satisfactory mark, or at least a passing mark. But that assumption is not true. Sometimes students assume that if I do not criticize something in a draft, then I am tacitly approving of it and thus will not, or may not properly, criticize it in the final, graded draft. But that assumption also is not true. Some students assume that their merely passing along a draft will earn them a higher mark. But that assumption is also not true.

A bit of advice: if I point out some error in a draft you've asked me to review, take special

care to ensure that the error does not reappear in the final draft. If such errors reappear, the final draft will be marked more harshly.

10. Usage

English usage will matter greatly in the evaluation of all written work. Grammatical mistakes will count heavily against an assignment. Grammar counts. Clarity counts. Spelling counts. Diction counts. Focused paragraphs count. Topic sentences count.

11. Communication

Students are required to check regularly their campus email accounts, as well as the WebCT/OWL site for this course. Important announcements about readings and assignments may be made via those media. Ignorance of such announcements will not excuse you from handing in any assignment on time. By far the best (and preferred) way to contact me is at the email address listed at the beginning of this syllabus. Do not leave me a voicemail, as I check my messages rarely and sporadically.

12. Email

I usually respond to email queries within a couple days. But remember: email is *emphatically not* a substitute for attending class or coming to office hours. I have no obligation to respond to emails that ask questions along the following lines: ‘What did I miss in class today?’, ‘I missed the lecture on X—could you tell me what that was about?’, ‘I’ve forgotten about Y—could you remind me of the details?’, etc. This list is illustrative, not exhaustive.

A bit of advice: ungrammatical—which would include unpunctuated—emails tend to give a bad impression, even if they do not count towards your grade.

13. Office hours

I encourage you to visit during office hours. If you are puzzled by some material we have covered, it is best to come with a well-defined question already formulated. If you missed a class, visiting office hours is the appropriate way to catch up on missed material. NOTE: DO NOT COME TO MY OFFICE WHILE YOU ARE ILL. Doing so is worse than rude, and I will not take kindly to it.

14. Counseling and support services

Huron philosophy students needing counseling about their program of study or related matters should contact Dr. David Conter. For other academic matters relating to counseling, community-based learning, career development, writing services, cross-cultural services, or international opportunities, visit the Academic Services Center in Huron’s West Wing. Also see [http://www.huronuc.on.ca/faculty\\_arts\\_social\\_science/academic\\_counselling/](http://www.huronuc.on.ca/faculty_arts_social_science/academic_counselling/).

15. Letters of recommendation

I will write a letter of recommendation for a student *only if* she or he has taken *at least two courses* from me. I may make special exceptions for first- or second-year students, so ask me.

16. Recording devices

Lectures may be recorded *only if* permission is given *in advance*. Lectures are intellectual property, and unauthorized use of them constitutes theft.

17. Technological devices

Students may not use technological devices (e.g., laptops, PDAs, cell phones, etc.) in the classroom for *anything not directly* related to the content and purpose of current classroom discussion or activity. Using such devices for any other purpose disrupts and distracts student and professor alike, and inhibits effective instruction and learning. No electronic de-

vices are allowed during examinations, quizzes or like assessment.

18. Extra credit

There will be no extra credit assignments, so make your regular work count.

19. Internet sources

For all assigned work in this course, you may *not* cite *any* Internet resources, except for (a) those explicitly assigned, (b) those I explicitly grant special permission for *in advance* (a typical example might be a relevant journal article or book available electronically through the library), and (c) the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (Note that this excludes Wikipedia.)

20. Students with disabilities

Accommodations for students with disabilities are typically arranged through student services. But you should feel free to approach me with any concerns you might have.

21. Late adds

Students joining this course late are responsible for completing *all* the assigned work due prior to their joining. I will not track them down to ensure they complete the work: it is entirely their responsibility.

22. Official syllabus

The official course syllabus is distributed in hard copy on the first day of class and posted on the WebCT/OWL site for this course. Any syllabus posted elsewhere (including on Huron's philosophy department website or on my personal website) is *unofficial* and students *should not* rely on it. The official takes precedence over the unofficial in *all* cases (which is why you should rely on the official).

23. Prerequisites (and antirequisites)

Senate regulations state that you are responsible for ensuring that you meet all course prerequisites. (The same applies to so-called "antirequisites," which are really just prerequisites to have *not* taken certain courses.) If you have neither met all the prerequisites nor received special written permission from your Dean to enroll, then you may be removed from the course and it will be deleted from your record. In the event that you are dropped for this reason, then the decision may not be appealed, and you will receive no adjustment to your fees. No information about prerequisites (or antirequisites) contained in this syllabus is guaranteed to be accurate; you rely on it entirely at your own risk; check the academic calendar for the latest information.