

Popular Myths about Human Behavior: 85-119

Basic Course Information

Course: 85-119, Popular Myths about Human Behavior

Instructor: Dr. Terri Huston

Students: This is a first-year seminar, so your classmates are probably also first year students enrolled in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences (H& SS).

Location: Class will be held in Baker Hall 340A, unless an announcement is made in class. We'll be going on at least one field trip for which we'll be meeting at another location.

Time: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 12 – 1:20 pm. We'll start promptly at 12:00, so please arrive on time.

Blackboard Url: <http://www.cmu.edu/blackboard/>

Contacting Me Outside of Class

email: th1w@andrew.cmu.edu

Phone: 268-4353

Office: Cyert Hall 124

Office hours:

Dates	Times	Location
Mondays	4:00 – 5:00 pm	Skibo Coffeehouse, in the U.C.
Tuesdays	1:30 – 2:30 pm	In my office, Cyert Hall 124
Other days / times	Schedule an appt by email	In my office, Cyert Hall 124

Course Objectives

The purpose of this course is to examine several beliefs about human behavior that are currently popular in American culture. I am calling these beliefs “myths” because they all have some basis in scientific research, but many have been generalized and applied in ways that I believe stray far from the meaning of the original science. Some of these myths have become so embedded in our culture that they are passed on as unquestioned. For instance, you’ve probably heard the adage that “two heads are better than one.” Although that’s sometimes the case, it certainly isn’t always, and in this class, you will learn to question this commonly held belief as well as many others.

When you pass this course at the end of the semester, you will be able to:

- Identify popular beliefs about human behavior that are suspicious
- Hypothesize as to why these beliefs are treasured, believed, and propagated
- Learn the basic scientific evidence that challenges or supports these beliefs
- Determine for yourself whether each belief is an accurate reflection upon human behavior or whether it is a well-intentioned but misleading myth and be able to argue that position
- Conduct observational field research or library research to determine whether certain myths are supported by empirical evidence
- Discuss these issues thoughtfully and respectfully both in class and on an internet class discussion board
- Write clearly and concisely about the content of the class as well as your own role in the discussion process
- Propose a research study about one of the popular beliefs at CMU

Texts and Readings

You are required to do all of the readings listed on the course calendar – both the readings in the texts that you purchase as well as the readings on e-reserve.

Texts. There are two textbooks for this course that you will need to purchase, and both of these books can be found at the bookstore:

- *Mind Myths: Exploring Popular Assumptions About the Mind and Brain* (1999), edited by Sergio Della Salla
- *The Myth of the First Three Years: A New Understanding of Early Brain Development and Lifelong Learning* (1999), written by John T. Bruer

We will be using *Mind Myths* for the first six weeks of class so it is imperative that you purchase this text immediately. In fact, our reading for the second day of class is Chapter 1 of this book, so if you haven't already bought this book, please do so on the first day of class. *The Myth of the First Three Years* will be our primary text for the 7 – 9th weeks of class, but I advise you to buy this book now as well because there is a stack of used, less expensive copies in the bookstore that may disappear if you wait. I tried to keep the costs of the texts down because I know that academic textbooks are incredibly expensive.

Readings. In addition to these texts, we will be reading a variety of articles from periodicals, journals, magazines, and book chapters. I designed this course to cover a range of topics in cognitive, developmental, social, and organizational psychology with the hopes that everyone's interests will be explored, but that means that we'll be reading from a wide range of sources. These readings are listed according to their author and date on the course calendar. As stated earlier, these readings are required – they are not optional. The readings will be available on e-reserve, which means that you can access them online and either read them online or print them out. I strongly recommend that you print out all of the readings so that a) you can take notes as you read and b) you can bring your readings and notes to class for reference in the discussion and for further note-taking. You can access each reading by its link that will be posted on the course's Blackboard website, under

- Course Documents (button)
 - Readings (folder)

Please note that the link for the readings will always be available at least 3 days before the reading is due in class. If the link is not available on the Blackboard website at least 3 days in advance, I will provide the reading in some other form.

Feedback

It is my goal to make this an excellent course and a stimulating and enjoyable experience for all of us. If at any time you feel that the course is not meeting your expectations or you want to provide feedback on how the course is progressing for you, please contact me. If you would like to provide anonymous comments, please submit your feedback online at the Blackboard course website. I will also be circulating an early course evaluation in class during the 3rd or 4th week. This course evaluation will give you an opportunity to provide for anonymous feedback on the course and I will use your constructive comments as a way to improve the course wherever possible.

Course Web Site

We will be using the University-supported system called Blackboard to distribute information about the course. You will be able to use Blackboard to access the syllabus and calendar, read announcements, check the grading criteria for each assignment, check your grades for those assignments, and post questions and answers in the on-line "Blackboard Discussions" (a necessary part of your grade described below). To get started, go to <http://www.cmu.edu/blackboard/help/help/index.html> and follow the instructions for logging in and accessing class information. Our class is found under "F02-85-119, Great Myths about Human Behavior." (The course title is actually "Popular Myths about Human Behavior" and I'm trying to have the Blackboard site updated to the correct title, but in the meantime, it will be listed at "Great Myths..." Not to fear, it's the same course.)

Please make a regular habit of checking the Blackboard site for this class because all course announcements will appear there! It is your responsibility to be informed of whatever is posted.

Assessment

Because there are several course objectives, I will assess your performance on several measures.

Exams. (40% total) You will have two exams in this course, one in the 6th week of classes and one during finals. On the exams, you will show how well you can identify suspicious beliefs about human behavior and hypothesize as to why these beliefs are treasured, believed, and propagated. The exams will also provide an opportunity for you to show what you've learned about the basic scientific evidence, and you'll be asked to argue whether certain beliefs are well-supported or challenged by the evidence. Exam 1 will cover all of the chapter readings, outside readings, and discussions from the first 5 weeks of class and the Final Exam will be cumulative, although the bulk of the exam will cover material from the last 10 weeks of class. I will provide more detailed information about the format and content of the exams as they approach. We will decide the format of the final exam as a class.

Exam 1	October 1	20%
Final Exam	Finals period	20%

Writing (30% total). You will have several writing assignments in this class. The goal of each assignment is to help you develop critical thinking skills and to improve your ability to write clearly and concisely as you compare popular opinions to scientific evidence. Your last writing assignment will involve proposing a brief research study, based on what you've learned about applying different scientific methods to test the validity of people's beliefs. Additional details for each homework and writing assignment will be provided in advance.

Homework Assignments	September 10	5%
	October 24	7%
Research Proposal		
Hypothesis	November 5	3%
Proposal & Rationale	November 21	15%

Discussion / Active Contributions (30% total). The ability to contribute thoughtful ideas and questions to a discussion in a way that is respectful to yourself and to the views of others is a skill that you will be developing throughout your years at Carnegie Mellon. We will begin developing that ability in this course, and throughout the semester, we will be discussing and evaluating different "discussion skills." You will make active contributions in two venues: on the Blackboard web site and in class during discussion.

1. Participating in Class Discussions	15%
2. Participation in Blackboard Discussions	15%

1. Participating in Class Discussions (15%). You will be expected to participate in the class discussion on a regular basis. We will be discussing different interaction and discussion-building skills throughout the semester and you will be expected to practice different skills as they are introduced. I know that some people are less comfortable than others participating in class, so I will work to make the environment as comfortable for everyone as possible. Your grade in the class discussion will be based on how much progress you make throughout the semester. In other words, you will be assessed according to your own improvement, not based on how much or what you say relative to other students in class. Each student will meet individually with the instructor *at least* twice during office hours over the course of the semester to discuss his / her progress in developing discussion skills.

2. Participation in Blackboard Discussions (15%). Students will discuss the readings on the course's online Blackboard website before coming to class. By answering questions about the readings before class, you will be better prepared for the day's discussion. I will read all of the answers posted on the discussion board before class each morning and I will incorporate some of the issues raised online into class that day.

- a. Posting a Question (5%). I will post questions to the Blackboard website for the first two days of class, but after that, students will be posting the discussion questions. Each student will post one question to the Blackboard website over the course of the semester. I will distribute a sign-up sheet in class so that you can pick the date and topic for which you will be responsible.

You will then be responsible for keeping track of when you are scheduled to post a question – I will not remind you.

Characteristics of good questions:

- **Your question must be posted by 9:00 am the day before class.** In other words, if your question is going to be discussed on Tuesday, September 10, you must post your question to Blackboard by Monday, September 9th at 9:00 am.
- Your question must incorporate or address the material in at least one of the assigned readings for that class (preferably all two or three readings if there are multiple readings). Your question should illustrate that you've done the reading and should require your fellow classmates to have done the reading.
- Your question should encourage your classmates to reflect upon and explain some of their own experiences, thoughts, and observations. The sample questions that I post for the first two classes will serve as models.
- **You need to answer your own question.** Ideally, your answer should be posted with your question by the 9:00 am deadline, but as long as you post the question at 9:00 am and post your own answer by 10:00 am, no points will be deducted.

Your question and answer will be worth 5% of your final grade and will be graded on a 10-point scale. I will provide your grade and feedback on your question personally via an email message. If you forget to post your question, you will receive a 0 on this assignment. If you post your question late, you will be penalized 10% for every hour that the question is late. Your classmates cannot complete their part of the assignment until you post your question, so it must be posted promptly.

- b. Answering Other People's Questions (10%). In addition to posting and answering your own question, you will participate in the on-line discussion by posting answers to 10 of the questions asked by the instructor or by other students.

Characteristics of good answers:

- **Your answer to someone else's question must be posted by 9:00 am the day of class.** In other words, you'll have 24 hours between the time a question is posted and when you can successfully answer it. I will print out the discussion contributions at 9:00 each class day and any contributions that are not in the pile will not be counted for a grade.
- You should do the reading before you answer the question, and your answer to someone else's question should illustrate that you've done the reading.
- Your answer should include some of your own experiences, thoughts, and observations. The sample answers that I post for the first two classes will serve as models. You are welcome to include things that you've seen on TV or in movies, something that you've read in books, or a conversation that you've heard that suggest that a belief is alive and well in popular culture.
- Your answer should be respectful of other people in the class and their experiences and beliefs.

Please note that there will not be a question posted every day. I will post 2 questions and your 14 classmates will each post a question so there will be a total of 16 questions posted (in addition to the question that you post yourself). You may answer whichever questions you wish, but you must answer 10 questions by the end of the semester. Start contributing early in the semester - if you assume that you'll answer 10 questions on the last 10 days of class, you'll be deeply disappointed because there may only be questions posted for 4 or 5 of those classes. You will not be able to "make-up" questions because the purpose of answering these questions is to contribute to the discussion in real-time.

Ratings / Grading of Blackboard Discussion Answers

- Answers will be rated and graded on a Satisfactory / Unsatisfactory basis.

Number Rating	Satisfactory / Unsatisfactory	Interpretation of Number Rating	Credit Towards Your Grade
3	Satisfactory	Exemplary answer! This rating will be reserved for truly outstanding responses to the questions posed. This rating does not earn more points than a rating of (2) but it gives me a way to let you know that your answer goes above and beyond what I expect.	Each satisfactory answer earns 1% toward your final grade. Ten satisfactory answers earn you 10% of your final grade.
2	Satisfactory	Good answer! You will receive this rating if you adequately meet all of the criteria for a good answer listed above. This will probably be the typical rating that you receive.	Same as above.
1	Unsatisfactory	Your answer is unsatisfactory because it fails to meet one of the criteria. The answer you provided probably has one of the following problems and I will indicate what the problem is in my email: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Too short Does not respond to the question Too superficial/vague, Needs more detail Needs to demonstrate that you've read the current reading assignment Disrespectful of another person or group of persons 	You will not receive credit for your unsatisfactory answer. You will not be penalized or lose points, but you must respond to an additional question on another day. It will be as though you did not answer that question. In other words, you need 10 "Satisfactory" answers to receive the full 10% of your grade.

Summary of Assessments

Assessment	% of Final Grade	Due Dates and Scheduling
Exams		
• Exam 1	20%	October 1
• Final Exam	20%	TBA
Writing		
• Homework 1	5%	September 10
• Homework 2	7%	October 24
• Research Proposal		
o Hypothesis	3%	November 5
o Proposal & Rationale	15%	November 21
Discussion / Active Contribution		
• Class Discussion	15%	Throughout the semester, requires 2 meetings in office hours to discuss progress
• Blackboard Discussion		
o Post and answer your own question	5%	Once on scheduled date
o Answer 10 questions posted by others	10%	10 times during the semester (1% each), unscheduled
TOTAL	100%	

Percentage Points to Letter Grade Conversion

With the exception of the answers that you post to other people's Blackboard questions (which are graded as Satisfactory / Unsatisfactory as explained above), the following conversion scale will be used for assigning letter grades:

93.4 – 100%	A
90.0 – 93.3%	A-
86.7 – 89.9%	B+
83.3 – 86.7%	B
80.0 – 83.2%	B-
76.7 – 79.9%	C+
73.3 – 76.7%	C
70.0 – 73.2%	C-
66.7 – 69.9%	D+
63.3 – 66.7%	D
60.0 – 63.2%	D-
< 60%	R (Failing grade)

As you may have already learned, the +/- system is only used in determining midterm grades. Your final grade in the course will either be an A, B, C, D, or R as the pluses or minuses will be dropped in calculating the final grades. I'd be delighted if everyone in the course earned an A and I believe that's possible if you work hard, pay attention to the criteria for excellent work, and develop effective strategies for thinking, studying, discussing, and writing.

Important Policies

Attendance: Attending class is one of the best ways to gain the knowledge and develop the discussion and critical thinking skills that are important to your success and enjoyment of this course. I will also be explaining the standards for excellent work in class, so by attending class you will be able to ask me about these standards and potentially even influence them. For these reasons, it will be to your advantage to come to class on a regular basis.

From my perspective and the perspective of your fellow classmates, it is important that everyone attends class because the discussion will include a wider range of perspectives and ideas. However, I know that sometimes you may get sick or have other reasons that you cannot attend class on a given day. To strike a compromise, I will take attendance on a daily basis and you will be allowed to miss 3 classes without penalty. However, for each class that you miss after the 3rd class, 5% will be deducted from your final grade in the course. In other words, if you have a 94% in the class based on your exam scores, homework and writing assignments, but you missed 4 classes over the semester, 5% will be deducted and you will receive an 89% in the class which is a B.

Food: Because the class overlaps with lunchtime, I want to offer the opportunity for everyone to bring their lunches to class if they want to. So we'll try it for the first few classes and see if it works. However, eating in class can be distracting to your classmates and to the instructor. With that in mind, I'll have two policies about bringing food to class. You are welcome to bring your lunch to class as long as:

- You unwrap and eat your lunch quietly.
- You purchase your lunch early enough that you arrive on time to class.

If there is a problem with either of these issues, I will discuss it with you individually and if the problem does not resolve, you will be asked to eat prior to or after class.

Plagiarism: If you a) use someone else's phrases, paragraphs, or EVEN THEIR IDEAS WRITTEN IN YOUR OWN WORDS and b) fail to provide a reference, then you have plagiarized that person's work. There are two ways to ensure that you don't plagiarize:

- 1) present your own ideas, and
- 2) when you present someone else's ideas or phrases, give them credit by providing a reference.

Plagiarism is a serious problem across college campuses today and I will actively check your work to ensure that you have not taken credit for someone else's ideas and writing. If I discover that you've plagiarized, you will fail the assignment and I will report the incident to the Dean of H&SS, to your advisor, and to the Academic Affairs Office where it will go in your file, as specified by the procedures in the student handbook.

Cheating: Cheating is also a serious problem and encompasses such behaviors as copying another student's work, bringing materials into an exam that are not allowed (such as cheat or crib sheets, notes written on the brim of a baseball cap, etc.), fabricating the data that you collect when we conduct observational research, and a variety of other academically dishonest behaviors. As with plagiarism, if I discover that you have cheated, you will fail the assignment and I will report the incident to the Dean of H&SS, to your advisor, and to the Academic Affairs Office where it will go in your file, as specified by the procedures in the student handbook. If another student allows you to copy their work, the student who allows you to copy will fail that assignment as well.

Late Work: Each written assignment (such as homework or parts of your research project) is due at the noon on the day that the assignment is due. Assignments may be handed in late, but 10% of the grade for that assignment will be deducted for each 24 hour period that an assignment is late. In other words, if the assignment is due on Thursday, 10% of the points will be taken off if it is turned in between class on Thursday and Friday at noon. Likewise, 20% of the points will be deducted if it is turned in between Friday at noon and Saturday at noon, etc. **LATE WORK MUST BE SUBMITTED AS AN EMAIL ATTACHMENT.**