

University of Central Oklahoma  
College of Liberal Arts  
Department of Humanities & Philosophy  
Fall 2019

PHIL 2000: Conspiracy Theories and Philosophy  
CRN: 15202  
T,TH 2:00-3:15 PM  
Liberal Arts South, Rm. 275

Instructor: Dr. Jerry Green

Email: [jgreen67@uco.edu](mailto:jgreen67@uco.edu)

Phone: 405.974.5612

Office: Liberal Arts North, 204A

Office Hours: M,W 2:00-4:00, T,Th 1:00-2:00 (and by appointment)

**Course Description:**

---

Credit will vary from 1 to 4 hours. Subject matter will vary within the department's field of study. Conspiracy theories are a constant feature of today's intellectual climate. Some seem harmless and even funny (like lizard people), while others cause serious harms (e.g. anti-vaxxers). In this course we will use conspiracy theories as a case study in bad reasoning to learn more about what good reasoning looks like. The first half of the course will focus on understanding the nature of conspiracy theories: What are they? What makes them different from other kinds of theorizing? What makes them bad? How do they spread? The second half of the course will focus on conspiracy theorists. We will examine concepts including cognitive bias, epistemic luck, social epistemology, Bayesian reasoning, and epistemic virtue, to see what conspiracy theorists do wrong, and therefore what we should do right instead. In other words, this is a course in applied normative epistemology, with a 'reason like this, not like that' approach. By the end of the course, you should have a much more informed and self-aware perspective on your own reasoning habits, and be better suited to engage with others about how to explain and justify one's views.

Given the topic, we cannot help but take an interdisciplinary approach to the study of conspiracy theories. So we will draw on resources from psychology, sociology, media studies, political science, and other fields to help us understand what conspiracy theories are and how they work. But this is first and foremost a philosophy class, which means we will focus on developing the following philosophical skills:

- Reading and understanding conceptually difficult texts
- Uncovering and identifying assumptions and presuppositions (yours and others')
- Communicating complex ideas clearly and efficiently
- Drawing subtle conceptual and definitional distinctions
- Constructing and critically evaluating logical arguments

**Student Learning Objectives:**

- 1) Students will begin the process of developing ethical and critical thinking skills necessary for interpreting the self in relation to culture and society.
- 2) Students will read, analyze, and synthesize philosophical texts and communicate about them in writing.
- 3) Students will analyze, appraise, and formally symbolize arguments.
- 4) Students will deliver informative public presentations to peers and faculty.

**Catalogue Description:** Credit will vary from 1 to 4 hours. Subject matter will vary within the department's field of study.

**Prerequisites:** None

**Transformational Learning Outcomes:** The University of Central Oklahoma is a learning-centered organization committed to Transformative education through active engagement in the teaching-learning interchange, scholarly and creative pursuits, leadership, global competency, healthy lifestyles, and service to others. Transformative learning goals (the “Central Six”) have been identified as: *Discipline Knowledge; Leadership; Research, Scholarly and Creative Activities; Service Learning and Civic Engagement; Global and Cultural Competencies; and Health and Wellness.*

This course addresses four of the University’s transformative learning goals:

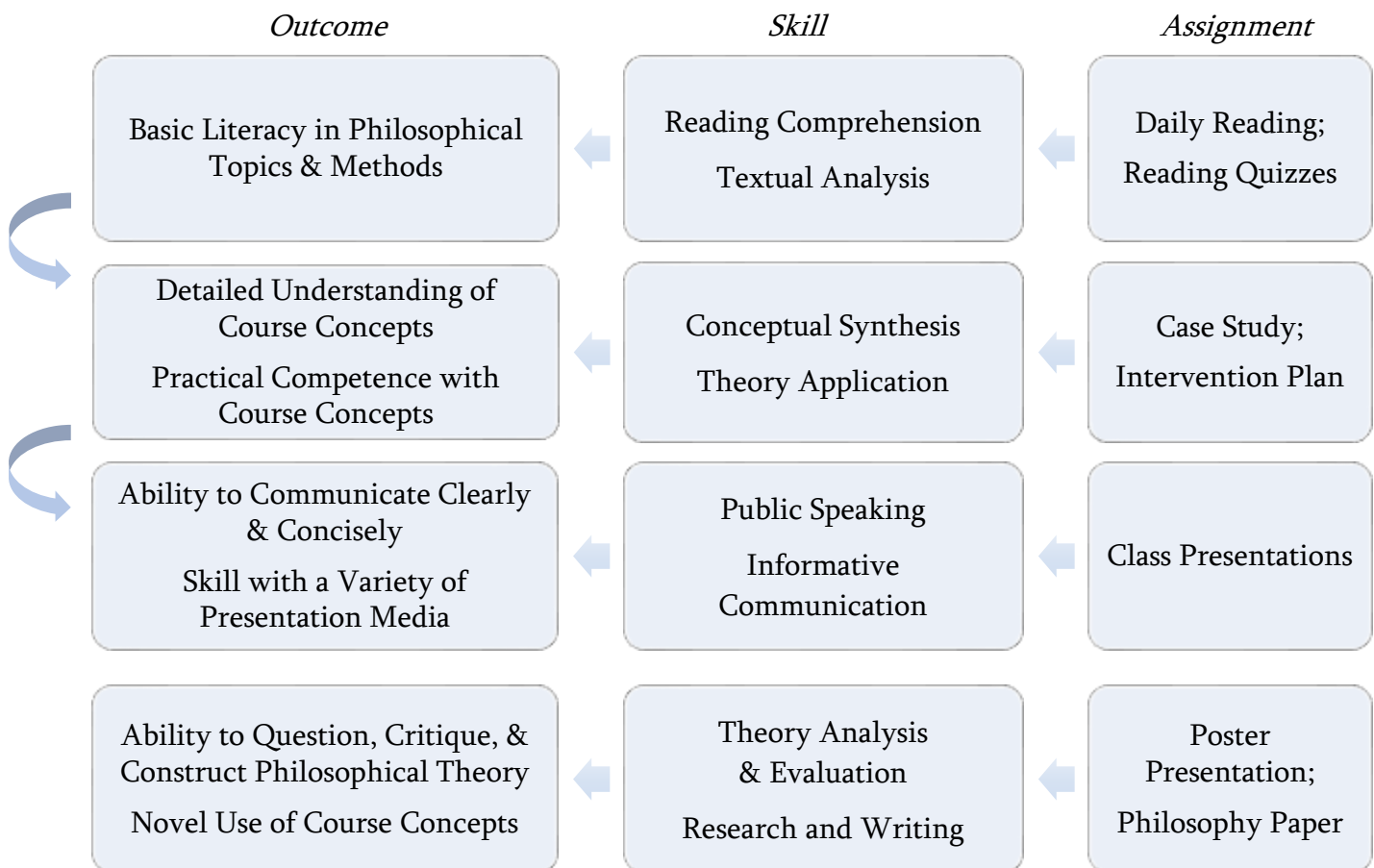
- Discipline Knowledge*, by investigating some core questions and subfields of philosophy
- Research, Scholarly and Creative Activities*, by applying course content to personal interests

**Course Materials**

We will not use a textbook for this course, because books are expensive. Instead, I have carefully (and laboriously!) selected a range of relevant free- and fair-use materials, from academic journal articles and book chapters to blog posts and interviews. These works are available in two settings:

1. A course pack, available at [APMOK](#) on 500 E. 2<sup>nd</sup> St (right across from campus). This is a **required text** for class: you must bring your hard copy of the reading to class *every* session (and I recommend you use it for studying as well). It will cost about \$30.
2. Online, on D2L. I have posted pdfs of each text, with the relevant date in the file name. These files are posted for your convenience and accessibility; they are not a substitute for the course pack!

**Course Learning Outcomes**



## Assignments

---

### *Reading*

This will be a reading-intensive course, in both quality and quantity. You will have an average of 24 pp. of reading per class, with a range of 12-44 pp. This material can be very difficult, and you will usually have to read it more than once. We will read from a variety of genres, from academic journal articles in several disciplines to newspaper and magazine entries.

### *Daily Reading Quizzes*

We will have low-stakes reading comprehension quizzes in class almost every day. These quizzes will use a variety of short-answer questions (multiple choice, True/False, etc), and will test whether you're keeping up with the reading and paying attention in class. These should be easy points that you earn simply by doing the minimal required work. Conversely, if you're doing poorly on these quizzes, this shows that you need to change your study habits. If you find yourself in this position, come talk to me about study strategies.

### *Class Presentations<sup>1</sup>*

You will have two presentations in the class. The first will take place in the second week of the semester: each student will give a short (c. 5 minute) presentation on the details about a specific conspiracy theory of their choice. For the second presentation, each student will sign-up to lead class discussion on that day's material (these presentations will take place throughout the semester).

### *Case Study<sup>1</sup>*

You will have a short paper (c. 1500 words) writing about a specific conspiracy theory of your choice. The goal is to use this theory as a case study to test a view on how to define conspiracy theories, as discussed in the first half of the class. In other words, you will first summarize one of the views we read, then apply it to a particular case to test how successful the view is.

### *Research Paper*

You will also write a conference-length paper (c. 3000 words) taking a side on one of the philosophical debates we will focus on in the first half of the semester. Your job is to accurately represent this debate, show which side you think is most plausible, and give persuasive reason why to think this (or, conversely, to show that the side you think is not plausible as problems).

### *Poster Presentation*

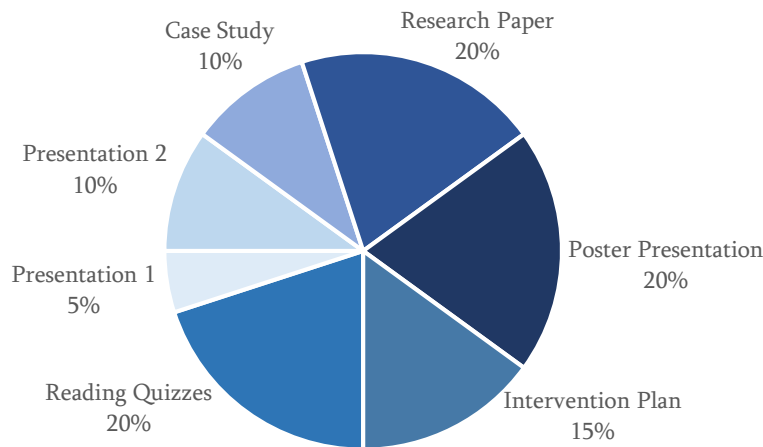
We will reserve the last week of classes (12.03 and 12.05) for an in-class poster presentation research mini-conference. Half the class will serve as presenters, the other half of the class as audience, and then we will switch roles. This will be a formal poster presentation, of the sort you might do at an academic or professional conference: you will have to create some sort of informative visual aide for your audience, and also discuss the material and answer questions.

### *Intervention Plan*

Your final assignment for the class will be to construct an Intervention Plan for dealing with someone in the grips of a conspiracy theory. Your job is to construction a plausible strategy for dealing with such a person, and ideally helping them break free of this way of thinking. You may choose to direct this plan toward a specific individual you know, or to aim at a broader, more general audience. This assignment is a take-home project, but will be due at the scheduled Final Exam time (11:00 - 12:50 p.m. Thursday, December 12)

---

<sup>1</sup> I'll give you more information about these assignments, including prompts and rubrics, in handouts later in the semester.



### Grade Scale:

100.0-90.0 = A

89.9-80.0 = B

79.9-70.0 = C

69.9-60.0 = D

59.9 – 0.0 = F

**Quizzes:** There will be 30 total class meetings, 24 of which will have reading assignments. We will have quizzes for each of these reading assignments. Each quiz will be worth 1 point total, which equals 1% of your total grade, for a total of 20 points. Because there are more quizzes than points available, you can miss 4 quizzes worth of questions with no penalty (either by missing the quiz, or by getting questions wrong on a quiz you attempted). Conversely, you can only get a maximum 20 possible points out of the 24 quizzes. In other words, you will get more than 20 chances to earn 20 points, which is like a curve but better, because it rewards people who regularly attend class but don't always ace the quizzes.

**Attendance:** Attendance is not, strictly speaking, part of your grade, and I will not take attendance in class. But since we have quizzes every day, your quiz grade functions as a *de facto* attendance grade, because you will get 20-25% on each quiz just for showing up.

**Presentations:** You will have several assignments this semester that require being delivered in person. It is your responsibility to make sure you are present to perform these assignments. You will have some choice over when exactly you present.

**Extra Credit:** I do not typically offer extra credit assignments, though I will occasionally give extra quiz points for things like taking evaluation surveys. Don't bug me about this: focus instead on doing well on the work you already have.

**R&R Policy:** If you get less than an 80% on your Case Study or Research Paper, and you submitted it on time, you can revise and resubmit it to earn up to an 80%. To do this, you will have to both revise the paper to fix its shortcomings, and to write a cover letter detailing, for each point you lost on the paper, (i) what exactly you failed to do correctly, and why you did this, and (ii) what specifically you did to fix. (I will give you a handout about how to do this later).

**Rounding:** The letter grade cut-off for each grade is 90.0, 80.0, etc. I may choose to round up in exceptional cases, if (i) I feel you've done better than your score suggests, and (ii) your grade is not due to excessive incomplete or missing assignments. This is a courtesy, not an entitlement.

**Appeals:** I am more than happy to talk to you about low grades, and regrade your assignment if merited (but note the risk that the second grade could be lower). However, I consider asking for a grade increase for non-performance reasons (e.g. to keep a scholarship or prevent your parents from being mad) to be academic misconduct, because you are asking for me to give you a grade you did not earn. So don't ask.

## **Late Work & Make-Ups**

Daily Reading Quizzes will be administered in class, usually in the first few minutes (though I reserve the right to hold them at any point in class). If you arrive to class late and miss the quiz, you may not make it up. Likewise, if you skip class that day, you may not make up the quiz, because there is a built-in allowance of missed quizzes before you grade starts to be impacted.

The Case Study, Research Paper, and Intervention Plan will be submitted online, and instructions will be circulated well in advance, so there should be no need for make-ups. But if you find yourself in an emergency situation that prevents you from submitting your work on time, it is your responsibility to get in contact with me ASAP to work something out. Otherwise, a 1-point late penalty will be deducted once every 24 hours after the submission deadline. A 2-point late penalty will be deducted once every 24 hours after the submission deadline for the Intervention Plan.

For in-class presentations, there are no make-ups: you must be in class to present your material. However, you will be able to choose when to present, using an online sign-up sheet I will circulate to the class. If there is a last-minute emergency that prevents you from attending class to give your presentation, contact me ASAP to work something out; I reserve the right to refuse a date change or other accommodation in certain circumstances (e.g. 'sleeping through your alarm' is not a legitimate excuse).

## **Excused Absences**

The exception to the Late/Make-Up policy listed above is excused absences. The University considers absences for the following reasons excused:

- travel considered part of the instructional program of the university
- invited participation in activities directly and officially sponsored by the university
- jury duty or military obligations
- serious illness, medical condition, pregnant and parenting students' rights (as outlined in Title IX), accident, or injury
- death or serious illness in immediate family
- religious observances. *Note: a list of religious observances must be submitted to the instructor sometime in the first two weeks of the semester.*

## **Reasonable Accommodations Policy**

Any student who needs extra time or resources to do their best work due to a physical, cognitive or emotional condition may qualify for academic accommodations. You should consult Disability Support Services for further information: <http://sites.uco.edu/student-affairs/dss/>

The University of Central Oklahoma complies with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Students with disabilities who need special accommodations must make their requests by contacting Disability Support Services, at (405) 974-2516 (V/TTY). The DSS Office is located in the Nigh University Center, Room 305. Students should also notify the instructor of special accommodation needs as soon as possible.

Some advice: *do not let shyness or embarrassment or pride stop you from getting the services you deserve.* I've seen too many students allow their grades to suffer because they didn't claim the accommodations they were owed. I will do everything I can to make sure that your accommodations stay anonymous.

## **Tech Policy**

Computers, tablets, e-readers, etc., will not be allowed during class time. I know it sounds paternalistic (it is) and lame (it isn't), but computers in class do [much more harm than good](#).

Four main reasons for this policy:

- 1) You might think you can multi-task well. You are incorrect. Even if you were miraculously among the 2% of good multi-taskers, you would still distract those around you.
- 2) Electronic texts are much less effective than paper for the kind of reading we'll be doing.
- 3) It is well-documented that taking notes by hand is much more effective than typing. If you want a digital version of your notes, scan them or, better, type them out after class.
- 4) It is distracting to other students, and lowers grades for everyone.

So, unless you have an accommodation from DSS (see below), no electronic devices in class. This won't be a big deal, because you'll be too busy thinking, writing, and discussing to need them anyway.

### **Academic Honesty**

---

Given that much of this course is devoted to intellectual and moral virtues, it should be no surprise that it also has high standards for academic conduct. You are expected to consult and understand the University's Academic Dishonesty Policy (<http://sites.uco.edu/academic-affairs/files/aa-forms/StudentInfoSheet.pdf>); participation in this class constitutes an agreement to follow this policy.

My own policy is this: it is always better to ask for help than to cheat. Always. Cheating takes more work, with worse results, than simply attempting the assignment, even if you phone it in. If you are confused at any point about whether something constitutes academic dishonesty, ask. I am here to help. However, if you are caught engaging in academic misconduct, I will pursue whatever maximum penalties the University may apply, from a 0 to an assignment to an F for the course to expulsion from the University. Don't try it.

Note that UCO subscribes to the Turnitin.com plagiarism prevention service. Students, by taking this course, agree that all required assignments may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to Turnitin.com for the detection of plagiarism. All submitted assignments will be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com restricted access reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of such assignments. Use of the Turnitin.com service is subject to Terms and Conditions of Use posted on the Turnitin.com website. Turnitin.com is just one of the various plagiarism prevention tools and methods that may be utilized by your instructor during the semester. The UCO Student Handbook describes the process for contesting allegations of plagiarism.

### **Title IX**

---

The University of Central Oklahoma complies with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Students with disabilities who need special accommodations must make their requests by contacting Disability Support Services, at (405) 974-2516. The DSS Office is located in the Nigh University Center, Room 305. Students should also notify the instructor of special accommodation needs as soon as possible. Per Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 ("Title IX"), pregnant and parenting students may request adjustments by contacting the Title IX Coordinator, at (405) 974-3377 or [TitleIX@uco.edu](mailto:TitleIX@uco.edu). The Title IX Office is located in the Lillard Administration Building, Room 114D. For more information about your options, including reporting and confidential resources, please visit: <http://www.uco.edu/central/title-ix/index.asp>.

### **Physical and Mental Health & Student Information Sheet**

---

College can be a very stressful time, emotionally, socially, and academically. You don't have to face these stresses alone. There are numerous resources on campus to help, including:

<http://sites.uco.edu/student-affairs/scc/>

<http://sites.uco.edu/wellness/shc/>

More important info here: <http://sites.uco.edu/academic-affairs/files/aa-forms/StudentInfoSheet.pdf>

## Reading Schedule

---

- 8.20 - Koerth-Baker, Maggie (2019) "Conspiracy Theories Can't Be Stopped"
- 8.22 - Enders & Smallpage (2019) "Polls, Plots, and Party Politics: Conspiracy Theories in Contemporary America";  
- Hoftstader (1964) "The Paranoid Style in American Politics"
- 8.27 - *In-class Presentations*
- 8.29 - *In-class Presentations*
- 9.03 - Brotherton (2015) *Suspicious Minds*, Ch. 3
- 9.05 - Sunstein (2014) *Conspiracy Theories and Other Dangerous Ideas*, Ch. 1
- 9.10 - Dentith (2014) *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*, Ch. 3-4
- 9.12 - Stokes (2018) "Conspiracy Theory and the Perils of Pure Particularism"
- 9.17 - Keeley (1999) "Of Conspiracy Theories"  
- Raikka & Basham (2019) "Conspiracy Theory Phobia"
- 9.19 - Basham (2003) "Malevolent Global Conspiracy"  
- Pigden (FC) "Conspiracy Theories and the Conventional Wisdom Revisited"
- 9.24 - Coady (2012) *What to Believe*, Ch. 6: "Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorists"
- 9.26 - Dentith, MRX (2017) "Conspiracy theories on the basis of evidence"
- 10.01 - Oreskes & Conway (2010) *Merchants of Doubt*, Ch. 1
- 10.03 - Becker (2019) "Facebook..."; Coaston (2018) "YouTube..."; Goggin (2019) "Amazon & Hulu..."  
- Lorenz (2019) "Instagram..."; Maranantz (2018) "Redditt..."
- 10.08 - Clarke (2007) "Conspiracy Theories and the Internet";  
- Stempel et al (2007) "Media Use, Social Structure, and Belief in 9/11 Conspiracy Theories"
- 10.10 - Vosoughi, Roy & Aral (2018) "The Spread of True and False News Online";  
- Craft, Ashley & Maksl (2017) "News media literacy and conspiracy theory endorsement"
- 10.15 - Robertson & Dyrendal (2019) "Conspiracy Theories and Religion";  
- Franks, Bangerter & Bauer (2013) Conspiracy theories as a quasi-religious mentality"
- 10.21 - van Prooijen & van Vugt (2018) "Conspiracy Theories: Evolved Functions and Psychological Mechanisms"
- 10.24 - Abalakina et al (1999) "Beliefs in Conspiracies"; Douglas et al (2017) "The Psychology of Conspiracy Theorists"  
Wood & Douglas (2019) "Conspiracy Theory Psychology";
- 10.29 - Levy (2007) "Radical Socialized Knowledge and Conspiracy Theories";  
- Pasek (2019) "Don't Trust the Scientists! Rejecting the Scientific Consensus 'Conspiracy'"
- 10.31 - Hawley, Katherine (2019) "Conspiracy Theories, Imposter Syndrome, and Distrust";  
- Motta et al (2018) "Knowing less but presuming more"
- 11.05 - Cassam, Quassim (2016) Vice Epistemology
- 11.07 - Shea (2019) Conspiracy Theories as Failures of Inductive Reasoning"; Wood et al (2012) "Dead and Alive..."  
- Brotherton & French (2014) "Belief in Conspiracy Theories and Susceptibility to the Conjunction Fallacy";
- 11.12 - Nyhan & Reifler (2010) "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions"
- 11.14 - Jolley & Douglas (2016) "Prevention is better than cure...";  
- Banas & Miller (2013) "Inducing Resistance to Conspiracy Theory Propaganda"
- 11.19 - Swami et al (2014) "Analytic thinking reduces belief in conspiracy theories";  
- van Prooijen (2017) Why Education Predicts Decreased Belief in Conspiracy Theories
- 11.21 - Orosz et al (2016) "Changing Conspiracy Beliefs through Rationality and Ridiculing";  
- Redlawsk et al (2010) "The Affective Tipping Point"
- 11.26 - West (2018) Escaping the Rabbit Hole, Chs. 5 & 15
- 12.03 - *Poster Presentations*
- 12.05 - *Poster Presentations*
- 12.12: Scheduled Final Exam (11:00 AM - 12:50 PM)