

Critical Thinking and Methods of Inquiry
LDST 250:01
Fall 2026

Course Syllabus

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Meeting Requests: Please speak with me in class or email me to set up an appointment. I may be slow to respond evenings and weekends.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

One characteristic feature of humans is our **liability to hold mistaken beliefs**. Unfortunately for us, it often turns out that we just have things wrong—sometimes badly wrong. We can think that we know things when in fact we do not. This problem is particularly acute for leaders. Leaders often face problems to which answers are not obvious. Accordingly, we might say that they can find themselves at the “epistemic margins” of social, political, and professional life. For example, they are frequently innovators and, so, must rely upon knowledge bases that are even more limited than are the knowledge bases upon which we rely in our everyday dealings in the world. This feature of leadership is important: leaders must sometimes take greater chances and face greater risks than do most individuals—both self-regarding and other-regarding chances and risks. In many ways, then, this is a course in **self-leadership**. How can we be expected to lead others in the right direction, we might ask, if we are misleading ourselves?

Humans face a myriad of familiar **defects of reasoning**. In this course, we will use a **humanities-based approach** to how our reasoning goes awry. Most of the major defects of reasoning identified by philosophers can be put under the headings of “questionable premises” or “invalidity.” We sometimes reason from unfounded beliefs, and our beliefs often fail to support the conclusions that we want to draw from them. The goal in the first part of the course is to learn to notice and, ultimately, avoid these defects in our own reasoning.

Some of these problems, especially those at the level of argumentative premises, raise questions about whether, and how, we know things more generally. Is there such a thing as **objective truth**, or is all “truth” **relative**? Is knowledge even possible—that is, should we settle for **skepticism**? What conditions do we have to meet for a claim to knowledge? What is the role of the **internal** and **external** perspective with respect to claims of knowledge? In the first part of the course, we will take about one day per week to consider these basic epistemological questions.

In the second part of the course, we will consider “10 arguments against free speech.” This exercise will allow you to apply what you’ve learned and engage in argumentative analysis. It will also prompt us to think critically about the connection between **free speech** and **knowledge**.

As both a leader and a student of leadership, you will be presented with arguments from a variety of sources and in areas in which you have little to no expertise. You therefore need skills for **quickly making your own judgments** about the arguments and the conclusions they aim to support. Because leadership turns on influencing others—on always being ready to justify oneself by means of an appeal to **rational persuasion**—you will also need to be able to give **cogent arguments** for your beliefs. You must be able to make a convincing argument that you are right and that others should accept (and, thus, act on) the beliefs that you have. In addition, if the social scientists are correct, you will need a sophisticated understanding of how people (including yourself) are inclined to think—often to the detriment of finding the truth. These leadership competencies fit with what you will need to be successful as a student of leadership: the ability to move among different **disciplines** and **methodologies** in the humanities and social sciences that are part and parcel of a multidisciplinary education.

This course aims to provide the necessary means for developing these fundamental leadership competencies. In the end, success will depend in large part on your willingness to engage yourself fully in readings, assignments, discussions, and class exercises. To facilitate this kind of engagement, I use assigned seating. I also regularly call on people and give **Periodic Quizzes**, which will (usually) be unannounced. Because arguments happen in real time, quick recall and near-automatic identification of fallacies are essential to critical thinking. We will work throughout the semester to build these skills so that you are prepared to deploy them in everyday life, where arguments wait for no one. **Attendance** affects your **Periodic Quizzes** grade (if there is a quiz when you are absent), and—in all likelihood—your **Tests** grades. You should email me in advance if you will be unable to attend class.

Please note that **we begin and end on time** and that students are expected to remain in class for the entire class period. If you are late to class, you may be asked to wait outside until we are finished with the quiz.

ELECTRONIC DEVICES

Computers, tablets, phones, and similar devices are not permitted in class. In my experience, their costs outweigh their benefits because they are distracting for all students and make it harder for them to stay engaged in class exercises and discussions. Any such devices brought into the classroom must be silenced and placed out of view during class. Students should minimize all other distractions and respect the rules of standard classroom etiquette.

Recording class sessions or meetings is also prohibited. There is no need to record class sessions (or to worry about getting complete notes) because I provide comprehensive class notes after each session. Learning in this class occurs primarily by doing and developing habits of mind through practice. My classroom is set up for students to make, and learn from, mistakes. Lots of mistakes. Knowing that there is a recording of one's efforts impedes the intellectual risk-taking I expect of students. Finally, I aim to create an environment in which students feel free to

express controversial and unpopular opinions, not least of all because this is a class in critical thinking! Recording class discussions has a chilling effect on this kind of expression and, therefore, is at odds with one of the primary goals of the course.

INTERIM HONOR PROCESS AND USE OF AI

As a student at the University of Richmond, you are prohibited from using unauthorized assistance in the completion of coursework. For this course, the use of text-generating artificial intelligence tools (such as, but not limited to, ChatGPT) will be considered a form of unauthorized assistance. I will follow the Interim Honor Process and work with the Director of Student Conduct to investigate and address any potential violations. This prohibition includes the use of generative AI for any stage of your work from conception to completion.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- Students should learn to identify—with great speed—formal and informal fallacies in the reasoning of others and how to avoid these fallacies in their own thought and in written and verbal communication.
- Students should have a sophisticated view of the nature and limits of claims to knowledge.
- Students should become aware of the challenges to critical thinking and arrive at considered conclusions about their implications for our understanding of leadership.
- Student should be able to apply their critical thinking skills in the study and exercise of leadership.

GENERAL EDUCATION LEARNING OBJECTIVES—WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

- Students will produce written work that reflects disciplinary conventions and attention to audience and situation.
- Students will produce written work with a clear perspective and, where appropriate, forward claims supported by evidence, and cite sources responsibly.
- Students will produce written work undergoing an iterative process, where content evolves (creation, drafting, and revision) and improves based on feedback from the faculty member.
- Students will compose written work with clarity, cohesion, concision, and minimal error.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Jennifer Nagel, *Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Greg Lukianoff and Nadine Strossen, *The War on Words: 10 Arguments Against Free Speech—And Why They Fail* (Cambridge, MA: Heresy Press, 2025).

REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

Your final grade will be determined as follows:

1. Periodic Quizzes—25%
2. Test 1—25%
3. Test 2—25%
4. Final Exam—25%

Grading legend:

A+	97-100
A	93-96
A-	90-92
B+	87-89
B	83-86
B-	80-82
C+	77-79
C	73-76
C-	70-72
D+	67-69
D	63-66
D-	60-62
F	50-59

HOW TO DO WELL IN THIS COURSE

Pretty much failsafe in my experience!

1. Attend all classes and stay engaged in class activities and discussions (rather than, for example, trying to write everything down).
2. Complete all practices problems and readings in advance of class meetings.
3. Be an informed participant in discussions by drawing directly on the texts.

4. Ask questions in class and schedule a meeting with me when you do not understand the material.
5. Learn from mistakes you and others make in class, on quizzes, and on tests.

DEADLINES AND SCHEDULED EXAMS

I take deadlines and scheduled exams very seriously. In fairness to your classmates, emergencies should be brought to my attention as soon as possible before the deadline or scheduled exam. **I do not accept late work, but I will accept and grade incomplete work.** I do not give “extra credit,” though I sometimes incorporate bonus points on quizzes or tests and through class-based group work after a test.

SCHEDULE (subject to change as course progresses)

T Aug 25	Introductions <i>University of Richmond Statement on Free Expression</i> Bret Stephens, “I’m Begging You: Never Write with A.I.” (<i>NYT</i> , August 4, 2026)
R Aug 27	Formal Logic
T Sept 1	Formal Logic
R Sept 3	Epistemology: Nagel, Chapter 1
T Sept 8	Informal Logic
R Sept 10	Epistemology: Nagel, Chapter 2
T Sept 15	Informal Logic
R Sept 17	Epistemology: Nagel, Chapter 4
T Sept 22	Informal Logic
R Sept 24	Epistemology: Nagel, Chapter 5
T Sept 29	Informal Logic
R Oct 1	Informal Logic
T Oct 6	Test 1
R Oct 8	TEST DEBRIEF

T Oct 13	FALL BREAK
R Oct 15	Lukianoff and Strossen, Foreword (by Jacob Mchangama); Arguments 1 & 2
T Oct 20	Lukianoff and Strossen, Arguments 3 & 4
R Oct 22	Writing Workshop
T Oct 27	Lukianoff and Strossen, Arguments 5 & 6
R Oct 29	Writing Workshop
T Nov 3	Lukianoff and Strossen, Arguments 7 & 8
R Nov 5	Writing Workshop
T Nov 10	Lukianoff and Strossen, Arguments 9 & 10
R Nov 12	Writing Workshop
T Nov 17	TBD
R Nov 19	Test 2
T Nov 24	THANKSGIVING
R Nov 26	THANKSGIVING
T Dec 1	TEST DEBRIEF
R Dec 3	Writing Workshop
T Dec 8	Course Wrap-up
W Dec 16	Final Exam—in class (2:00-5:00 p.m.)