What is 'Cultural Criticism'?

According to the UH-Downtown Catalog, HUM 3310 is a survey of different ways of analyzing human culture. Students examine major schools of criticism and interpretation of society and its creative activity. This course is the gateway course to the Humanities program. May be repeated once for credit, with permission of Arts and Humanities Department Chair.

Who's Teaching 3310 This Summer, When and Where

The class meets in real time, from 5:30 pm to 7:15 pm, Monday through Thursday, in the WebCT chat space. The first half hour, from 5:30 pm to 6:00 pm, is for office hours only. Attendance is not required at that time.

You can get in touch with Dr. Hagen at 713-221-8116 or via his cell phone. All correspondence concerning this course should be sent via WebCT e-mail. The summer 2006 version of HUM 3310 is online.

Working Online

All the information you need for the class is right here on our web site (of course you can always use e-mail if you have questions). Students must take individual responsibility for reading and understanding the requirements. The professor will not necessarily remind you every time an assignment is due, and may not contact you if you have failed to turn in an assignment. Online classes demand extra diligence. Follow the reading schedule on your syllabus, check our blog regularly, read all notes posted on our web site, and make sure that you budget plenty of time in your schedule to read each of the works carefully.

In order to complete a successful term paper at the end of the semester, you will have to do independent research and read other works in addition to those on the reading list. Be sure to allow yourself adequate time for that as well. And remember that writing a successful paper of any sort means that multiple drafts and careful editing, revising and proofreading are absolutely essential.

The HUM 3310 Web Site

Here is how you can get to our web site. (1) Go to www.uhd.edu, (2) click ONLINE COURSES (on the menubar, far right), (3) click Log In to WebCT, (4) Enter your WebCT user name and your password, and (5) Click the entry on your course list to access HUM 3310.

Orwell's Problem is the problem of individuals who, in spite of being well-read, well-educated, and often well-meaning, assent to ideas that are easily debunked by facts readily available to anyone willing to expend the slightest intellectual effort.

What is 'Rational Inquiry'?

In one of his more accessible works on human cognition, the American linguist Noam Chomsky framed the study of knowledge in terms of two problems. The first, which he called "Plato's Problem," demands an explanation of how humans can know so much when evidence is so scarce. "Rational Inquiry" is the study of how people do that: how they come to have reliable knowledge about the world they live in.

The second, which Chomsky calls "Orwell's Problem," demands an explanation of how in other circumstances humans can apparently know so little when evidence is abundant. Plato's Problem touches not only on questions of knowledge and knowledge acquisition, but on questions of science and its methods as well.
Orwell's Problem, on the other hand, diverts us into the less exalted territories of egotism, ideological devotion, and the psychology of self-delusion. It is the problem of individuals who, in spite of being well-read, well-educated, and often well-meaning, assent to ideas that are easily debunked by facts readily available to anyone willing to expend the slightest intellectual effort. This course is about Plato's Problem and Orwell's Problem in contemporary Western culture.

Critical Thinking

The course is designed to nurture critical thinking, which is your ability to evaluate truth claims and cultural values objectively, meaningfully, and independently. To put it another way: things are not true just because someone says so, or just because a lot of people believe them. We will see that in fact our culture is chock-full of notions that are at once popular and absurd. Our objective is to analyze those notions in detail by reading the works of those who promote them as well as those who critique them.

We will examine narrative from both a tactical and a strategic vantage point; tactical when it deals with the tricks of argumentation that are most successful in developing and defending weird ideas, and strategic when it deals with the broader plan of devising weird ideas that have the right appeal to attract a following in the first place.

Reading Material

Here are the books and other material you will need for class:

× One other book on the topic you choose to analyze for class.
× Various articles from your professor and from your independent research.

Requirements

Your grade will be based on the following:

× Four short-answer quiz/tests on the concepts we study in class (10% each, for a total of 40%).
× One progress report on your term paper, due midterm (10%).

× One in-depth, term paper (4,500 words, 3,000 words rock-bottom minimum) on a topic selected from the list of weird ideas below. You must select a topic by the end of the second week of class. No exceptions. (30%).
× One slide show outline of your research project, which you will share with the class. (10%).

× One subjective evaluation by your professor on the extent to which you contributed to the discussion board. Check the board regularly, read the insights from your fellow students, and share with us what you have discovered in the course of your research. (10%).

Responsibilities

The USA has the best university system in the world. We can only maintain that standard -- and you the student can only benefit from it -- if you make a concerted effort to do your part. That means, among other things, that you should keep the following in mind:

× Be respectful to points of view that differ from your own. Keep in mind that the readings and class discussions may challenge some of your long and deeply held beliefs. This is not a personal attack, but simply an effort to get at the truth.

× It is unlikely that students with poor study habits will succeed. Such students fall behind in their readings, they miss test reviews, and they don't benefit from the interaction with other students. This class is no exception, even though it is an online class.

× Students who enroll in classes with unrealistic expectations are often disappointed with their grades. If you believe that this university, or this department, or this class, or the online format (or this professor!), is "easier" than others, then you may be tempted to give less than your best effort. That means that you will probably get less than the best grade possible.

× Make up exams are possible only in extraordinary circumstances, and only when students have made a bona fide effort to notify the professor in advance.

Things are not true just because someone says so, or just because a lot of people believe them. We will see that in fact our culture is chock-full of notions that are at once popular and absurd.

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Tentative List of Activities

Week 1: May 30 – June 1

**Topics**
- Introduction
- Rational Inquiry and Skepticism
- The Paranormal
- UFO’s and Outer Space

**Read**
- This document, in its entirety.
- Shermer, Chapters 1-3, 6
- Park, Chapter 2, 4, 9
- Strange Fish

**Submit**
- E-mail me your term paper topic

Week 2: June 5 – 8

**Topics**
- Science and Religion
- Evolution and Creationism
- Science Goes Bad

**Read**
- Shermer, Chapters 5, 7, 9, 11 & 16
- Park Chapters 1, 5, 6
- The Texas Textbook Wars

**Submit**
- Test #1

Week 3 June 12 – 15

**Topics**
- Health, Physical and Mental

**Read**
- Park, Chapters 3, 7, 8
- Recovered Memory Syndrome

**Submit**
- Test #2
- Progress Report

Week 4: June 19 – 22

**Topics**
- Weird Academia
- History
- Philosophy
- Anthropology

**Read**
- Shermer, Chapter 8, 12-15
- Semiotics and Deconstruction.
- Transgressing the Boundaries.
- Letter to the AAA.
- Jungle Fever.

**Submit**
- Test #3

Week 5: June 26 – 28

**Topics**
- How Low Can it Go?

**Read**
- Facilitated Communication

**Submit**
- Test #4
- Term Paper
- Slide show

**Weird Ideas for Your Term Paper**

**Anthropology**
- The Tasaday Hoax
- The Chagnon/Yanomami Scandal
- The Noble Savage Myth
- Rigoberta Menchú
- Ancient Astronauts
- Castaneda’s Hoax
- Pseudo-archaeology

**Linguistics:**
- Suggestology/Accelerated Learning
- Origins of Language Research
- Talking Apes

**Psychology and Education:**
- Psychoanalysis
- Facilitated Communication
- Repressed Memory Syndrome
- Neuro-Linguistic Programming
- The Mozart Effect
- Multiple Personality Disorder
- Dianetics

**Science:**
- Remote Viewing
- Cryptozoology
- Ufology/Alien abduction
- Psychics

**Religion**
- Creationism
- Faith Healing
- Left Behind
- Scientology

**Philosophy:**
- Postmodernism
- Ayn Rand and Objectivism

**History:**
- Holocaust Denial
- Civil War Revisionism

**Criminology:**
- Polygraph Testing
- Hypnosis
- Psychic Detectives
Some Key Concepts in Rational and Skeptical Inquiry

ad hoc fallacy
argumentum ad hominem
argumentum ad ignorantium
argumentum ad populum
argumentum ad verecundiam
alien abductions
ancient astronauts
anecdotal evidence
appeal to authority
Area 51
argument from design
aromatherapy
astral projection
astrology
Atlantis
automatic writing
Backster Effect
Barnum Effect
begging the question
Bermuda triangle
Bible Code
Bigfoot
Carlos Hoax
cartomancy
Castaneda, Carlos
cattle mutilations
Cayce, Edgar
Chagnon, Napoleon
chain letters
chiropractic
Chopra, Deepak
clairvoyance
clustering illusion
coincidence
cold reading
collective hallucinations
communal reinforcement
confabulation
confirmation bias
conjuror
conspiracy theorists
control study
creationism
crop circles
cryptozoology
CSICOP
determinism
dianetics
double-blind test
dream interpretation
dualism
empiricism
equivocation
facilitated communication
faith healing
false dilemma
falsification
feng shui
Forer Effect
Freud, Sigmund
gambler's fallacy
garbage in a pretty pail
Geller, Uri
graphology
holocaust denial
homeopathy
independent motivation
intelligent design
IQ and race
JREF
Kirlian photography
law of truly large numbers
Loch Ness Monster
Lozonav, Georgi
magnet therapy
Martian face
materialism
mentalist
metaphysics
Mozart Effect
Multi-level Marketing
multiple personality disorder
Myers-Briggs Type Indicator
Nazca lines
neurolinguistic programming
Noah's Ark
non sequitur
Nostradamus
Occam's Razor
occult
origin of language
Ouija board
out-of-body experience
palmistry
paranormal
parapsychology
past life regression
phrenology
Piltdown Hoax
Pious Fraud
Placebo Effect
polygraph
Ponzi schemes
possible outcome bias
post hoc fallacy
postmodernism
pragmatic fallacy
Proto-World
pseudohistory
pseudoscience
psi
psychics
psychic detectives
publication bias
pyramid schemes
Raëlians
Ramtha
Randi, James
Randi Psychic Challenge
rationalism
reductio ad absurdum
relativism
remote viewing
repressed memory
retrospective falsification
Rorschach ink blot test
Roswell
satanic ritual abuse
scientology
selective thinking
self-deception
shotgunning
Shroud of Turin
slippery slope
skepticism
social construction
Sokal Hoax
special pleading
speed reading
statistical significance
straw man
subliminal advertising
suggestology
tarot cards
Tasaday
tautology
telekinesis
telepathy
testimonials
Texas sharpshooter fallacy
true-believer syndrome
Unidentified Flying Objects
Von Däniken, Eric
wishful thinking
All students are subject to UH-Downtown’s Academic Honesty Policy and to all other university-wide policies and procedures as they are set forth in the UH-Downtown University Catalog and Student Handbook.

The University of Houston-Downtown adheres to all applicable federal, state, and local laws, regulations, and guidelines with respect to providing reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities should register with Disabled Student Services and contact their instructors in a timely manner to arrange for appropriate accommodations.

Expected Learning Outcomes

By the time students have completed this course, they should:

- understand the basic principles of rational inquiry;
- be able to distinguish between rational and irrational ideas and theories;
- evaluate claims, theories, and so-called "schools of thought" in an objective and rational manner;
- be able to express their conclusions about rationalism and skepticism in clear and persuasive fashion.

Final Thoughts

Do your very best work in this class, and remember always the difference between excellence and the very least you can get away with. For example, some students misunderstand the "minimum requirements" for term papers. For this class, you are required to write a term paper that is a minimum of 3,000 words. "Minimum" in this sense means that if you fall below ten pages -- even by one word -- then I will not read your paper at all, and you will receive a grade of zero. By the same token, if you write a paper that is exactly 3,000 words long, that does not mean that you will get an A. There is a huge difference between doing the absolute least you can get away with and doing excellent work. A's are reserved for students who do the latter. If you do the absolute least you can get away with, you should expect the absolute lowest passing grade, which is a D-. 