

Critical Thinking About Social Issues **A Focused Alternative to Social Problems***

Department of Sociology
University of Southern Maine

This course developed out of a concern that students enrolled in advanced courses did not have sufficient reading, thinking, and writing skills. In addition, we felt the need for a “second course” in sociology, as a transition between Introduction to Sociology and advanced courses.

Critical thinking is an important component of sociology; the sociological imagination requires us to step back, to ask questions, to identify and examine unstated assumptions, and to evaluate evidence. The research literature suggests that the only effective way to develop these skills is as a conscious course objective, perhaps even the primary goal of the course. Thus, the focus of this course is critical thinking, not social problems or social issues—the issues are the *vehicle* for teaching critical thinking.

The development of the course was a department project. Course objectives were developed jointly as well as the basic approach the course would take. Overall, as the following sample syllabus notes, we conceive of developing critical reading, writing, and thinking skills as a coaching process—we don’t so much “profess” as we guide, suggest, structure practice, and provide both feedback and encouragement. This involves a lot of active learning and group work as well as a lot of interaction between faculty and students and among students.

Not only does the course required as a prerequisite for advanced courses in the department, it also fulfills a university requirement in “skills of analysis.” As a result, the department serves a broader community as well as attracting interested students.

The sample syllabus on the following pages illustrates the basic approach, including the extensive use of a journal or portfolio approach to structuring practice and evaluation.

The issues addressed in the sample are a cluster of first amendment speech issues, particularly hate speech and pornography. Other topics that have been addressed in the course include abortion, gun control, death penalty, the drug war, the Communication Decency Act, gay marriage, smoking, and affirmative action.

The catalog description of the course reads:

Designed as the second course in Sociology, following Introduction to Sociology, this course further develops students’ mastery of critical and sociological thinking through the analysis of various current social issues. The course uses popular media as well as sociological materials. Examples of issues which may be examined are: poverty, health care, homelessness, aging, drugs, violence, bureaucracy, white collar crime, and changing gender roles. Prerequisite: successful completion of SOC 100J with a grade of C or better and successful completion of ENG 100, or permission of the instructor. Three credits.

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SOC 210
Critical Thinking About Social Issues

Course Objectives:

1. To learn when and how to ask the questions which form the core of critical thinking
2. To develop the ability to evaluate arguments—to answer the questions which form the core of critical thinking including the ability to evaluate evidence and the willingness and ability to search for missing information
3. To acquire a desire to apply critical thinking skills in listening, reading, and writing in a variety of contexts
4. To gain an appreciation of diverse perspectives on social issues and develop a more critical and open mind on issues
5. To develop the ability to write and to apply critical thinking skills to your own writing in creating a persuasive extended argument for your own position on a social issue
6. To gain an increased understanding of and appreciation for sociological concepts, theories, and methods in understanding social life .of

A few years ago, the Sociology Department had the opportunity to rethink the intermediate (200-level) courses in its curriculum. We wanted them to act as a bridge between the introductory and the advanced courses. We finally agreed that the best way to prepare students for advanced courses in sociology was not simply to teach “facts and figures” or concepts and theories, but to help you learn to think critically and, ultimately, sociologically. This course was developed with the explicit aim of preparing you for advanced courses in sociology but also with the grander goal of preparing you to be an active thinker outside the discipline and outside the university.

Critical thinking doesn't mean "correct thinking"—your answers never need to be my answers. Nor does critical thinking mean simple thinking—more often it means recognizing the true complexity of the world, human beings, and social issues and, thus, tolerating ambiguity and rejecting simple answers. Critical thinking means to think clearly and carefully. Critical thinking means scrutinizing evidence and arguments, recognizing assumptions and fallacious reasoning, and holding yourself to the same standard of care in thinking which you come to require of others.

This is first and foremost a skill development course. Critical thinking is like riding a bicycle in at least two ways: First, I cannot "teach" you to ride, I can only coach. I can give you ideas, suggestions, and even hold the seat while you go on trial spins. But learning takes your active involvement.

The second way critical thinking is like riding a bicycle is that becoming good at it requires three key things: practice, practice, and practice. A lot of this course will be practice.

I hope that this course will be like riding a bicycle in yet another way: it will be fun. Perhaps the objectives of the course make it sound daunting. It WILL be a lot of work. But there is no reason why it needs to be dull or boring. Let's enjoy ourselves.

REQUIRED MATERIALS: Available at the bookstore.

1. Neil Browne and Stuart Keeley, *Asking the Right Questions*;
2. Lehman, *Readings on Social Issues*
3. Opposing Viewpoints pamphlet, "Should freedom of expression be restricted?"
4. Laura Lederer and Richard Delagado, eds., 1995, *The Price We Pay*

I do not require, but strongly recommend, the purchase of a good dictionary, if you don't already own one. For a major purchase--a big hard cover dictionary—you can't do better than the *American Heritage* dictionary. The usage essays are an excellent resource for getting at the subtle distinctions in meaning of closely related words. You may also want to consider a smaller paperback dictionary --one that you can carry with you at all times and USE every time you sit down to read or write.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

NOTE: This is a three credit hour course. The usual expectation is that you spend 2-3 hours per week OUTSIDE of class for every hour in class. This means that you can expect to spend six to nine (6-9) hours per week, on the average, on course assignments outside of class. If at any time you find that you must spend more than this to complete assignments, please see me as soon as possible.

Your grade for the course will be based upon:

1. Class attendance, participation, and preparation, 10%;
2. Journal, 35% (see below);
3. Six of seven weekly quizzes, 15%;
4. Three graded essay assignments, 20%, and
5. One final graded paper 20% due December 18.

All submitted papers, including drafts, must be typed, double spaced with adequate margins, and have proper citations (this will be discussed in class). The **quizzes** will be relatively short exercises primarily focused on the readings and exercises assigned for that week. They will have various formats depending on the materials. All quizzes will be open book, open notes. These are designed as quick "diagnostics" for you and so that I can gauge how the class is grasping the material. I will drop your lowest quiz grade for the semester. This gives you allowance for a bad day or a missed quiz.

CLASS ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION is **required**. While not everyone will be a vocal participant in class discussions, everyone is expected to be an *active participant* both in class discussions and in group work. Put another way, one can be an active participant without talking a lot. *PREPARATION* means that I expect you to read and think about readings and assignments *prior* to class. It also includes written—but ungraded—work which I will periodically assign.

The **final paper** will be an **argument** paper related to the material we read and discuss during the semester and building on previous papers. The paper will be less than 15 pages long.

Late papers and missed quizzes: I expect that you will hand in the essays in class on the day they are due. Late papers will be accepted within a week of the due date but will be marked down for each DAY they are late (including weekends and non-class days). Missed quizzes may be made up only by PRIOR permission: you must notify me BEFORE the class period for which the quiz is scheduled. A late quiz must be made up before the next class

session. No incompletes are given unless *prior* explicit arrangements are made. No *ex post facto* excuses accepted.

Withdrawal and Drop:

Class attendance and participation is **required**. You are expected to be current in the readings and journal assignments and to be ready to discuss them in class. In addition, you are expected to participate in peer critiques of preliminary papers and to participate in a structured group debate. In the end, attendance, participation and these activities are evaluated along with your journal as 45% of your final grade for the course.

JOURNAL

You are required to keep a Journal throughout the semester. This Journal is a place to keep your notes and your responses to Journal Assignments made throughout the semester. I ask that you purchase a three ring binder for 8 1/2 by 11 inch paper. This Journal should be divided into three parts. These parts, and more about your required work, are explained below:

1. The first part of your Journal should contain your in-class notes, writings and materials.
2. The second part of your Journal should contain your responses to specific "Journal Assignments" given to you throughout the semester and noted on the course outline below. There will be Journal Assignments for most weeks of the semester.
3. The third part of the Journal should contain your consistent and conscientious **reflections** related to the course and its materials. You are required to make at least one (1) ten minute journal entry in this section each week of the course. The purpose of this section of the journal is to press you to take time to reflect on what you are doing in the course—to step back from the specific readings/topics and reflect on your responses. It also gives us excellent feedback.

The reflective entries may be personal responses to particular readings or class discussions, thoughts about how you are doing/what you are doing in the course, expressions of frustration and/or excitement, reflections on articles/advertisements/TV segments/etc. in relation to the course materials. When in doubt, you might respond to the question "What does this stuff have to do with me and my life?" or "What was 'good' and 'bad' about that reading or class session?" We expect the reflections to be THOUGHTFUL.

Each of your Journal entries in this section should be written for a minimum of ten minutes, about one page long. This means that you should write continuously (without stopping your pen at all) for at least ten minutes. Each entry must have a number, a short descriptive title and a date. Longer entries are better than short entries, to more fully develop your thoughts. The more that you write, the more actively you will be engaged by the subject.

Your Journal will be collected several times during the semester so that we can read your entries, catch problem which I should be dealing with in class, and check to see that you are completing all of the entries. **Journal assignments** may occasionally be collected when due so that we can see how you are doing. I will evaluate your Journals at the end of the semester in a holistic way, based upon the completeness and quality of your entries. Most importantly, your Journal should show a serious, continuous, semester-long involvement with the course material.

Course Outline and Assignments

The course outline includes topic statements and reading assignments. Generally, assignments are listed under "week of ..." This means that we will be dealing with these

material during the two class sessions that week. As much as possible, you should complete the reading and journal assignments by Tuesday class then use the time between Tuesday and Thursday to review the material, correct mistakes, and to complete work about which you had questions during Tuesday's class.

You will also note in the Journal assignments that some of the exercises in Browne and Keeley are optional. We recommend them highly. You need to be the judge of whether the practice is useful for you. Try them.

Week 1 (9/3, 9/5) INTRODUCTION, ISSUES, CONCLUSIONS

- Browne & Keeley, Chapters 1-2
- Lederer & Delgado, "Introduction" (L&D)
- Journal Assignment 1 due
- **QUIZ** September 5

Week 2 (9/10, 9/12) REASONS AND ARGUMENTS

- Browne & Keeley, Chapter 3
- Zia, "Where Race and Gender Meet..." (L&D, p. 233)
- Campbell, "Homage to Heritage..." (L&D, p. 237)
- Otto, "Freedom of Expression Should Not be Restricted," (pamphlet, p. 79)
- Journal Assignment 2 due
- **QUIZ** September 12

Week 3 (9/17, 9/19) LANGUAGE and SEARCHING FOR INFORMATION

- Browne & Keeley, Chapter 4
- Dworkin, "Pornography Happens to Women" (L&D, p. 181)
- Strossen, "The Sex Panic and the Feminist Split" (Readings)
- Journal Assignment 3 due

Week 4 (9/24, 9/26) ADVERTISING AND EVIDENCE

- Browne & Keeley, Chapters 8-9
- Lederer, "The Case of the Cross-burning..." (L&D, p. 27)
- Young, "A Weapon to Weaken..." (L&D, p. 18)
- Elmer-Dewitt, "On a Screen Near You: Cyberporn"
(<http://pathfinder.com/@@YAvSDwcAgBFZVOW@/time/magazine/domestic/1995/950703/950703.cover.html>)
- Cohen and Solomon, "How Time Magazine Promoted a Cyberhoax"
(<http://www.fair.org/fair/media-beat/950719.html>)
- Journal Assignment 4 due
- **QUIZ** September 26

Week 5 (10/1, 10/3) EVIDENCE AND OMITTED INFORMATION

- Browne and Keeley, Chapter 12
- Simonton, "In the Belly of the Beast..." (L&D, p. 55)
- Giobbe, "The Bargain Basement in the Marketplace of Ideas" (L&D, p. 58)
- LaMarche, "Hate Speech Should not Be Outlawed" (pamphlet, p. 90)

- Journal Assignment 5 due
- * Draft of **first essay** due October 3. Revision due October 8.

Week 6 (10/8, 10/10) EVIDENCE AND DECEPTIVE STATISTICS

- Browne & Keeley, Chapter 11
- Ehrlich, Larcom, and Purvis, "The Traumatic Impact of Ethnoviolence" (L&D, p. 62)
- Stock, "The Effects of Porn on Women" (L&D, p. 80)
- Ross, "Hate Groups, African Americans, and the First Amendment" (L&D, p. 151)
- Journal Assignment 6 due
- **QUIZ** October 10

Week 7 (10/17) DESCRIPTIVE AND VALUE ASSUMPTIONS

- Browne & Keeley, Chapter 5-6
- Lederer, "Pornography and Racist Speech as Hate Propaganda" (L&D, p. 131)
- Journal Assignment 7 due

Week 8 (10/22, 10/24) DESCRIPTIVE AND VALUE ASSUMPTIONS II

- Sunstein, "Words, Conduct, Caste" (L&D, p. 266)
- Wakeley, "The Delivery of Information..." (<http://netsoc.org.nz/aust/raap.html>)
- Barnes, "Everyday Racism..." (L&D, p. 157)
- Butlet, "Why the First Amendment..." (L&D, p. 160)
- Willis, "Feminism, Moralism, and Pornography" (readings)
- Journal Assignment 8 due
- **QUIZ** October 24

Week 9 (10/29, 10/31) DESCRIPTIVE AND VALUE ASSUMPTIONS III

- Crenshaw, "Comments of an Outsider ..." (L&D, p. 169)
- Nicola Beisel, "Morals versus Art: Censorship, the Politics of Interpretation, and the Victorian Nude." (readings)
- Journal Assignment 9 due
- * Draft of **second essay** due October 31. Revision due November 5.

Week 10 (11/5, 11/7) FALLACIES

- Browne & Keeley, Chapter 7
- Delgado and Yun, "Pressure Valves and Bloodied Chickens..." (L&D, p. 290)
- "Is this what they mean by 'Indecent'?" (<http://www.eff.org/BlueRibbon/sites.html>)
- Irwin Piscator, "The image-transmitted viral-pathology theory" (www.tcp.com/~prime8/orbit/exon/itvp.html, 1995?)
- While you are there, I suggest (not required): Wilson, "Obscenity: The Modern Form of 'Black Magic'" (www.tcp.com/~prime8/orbit/exon/obscene.html, 1995?) and Author unknown, "The Monsters from the Id" (www.tcp.com/~prime8/orbit/exon/right.html, 1995?)

- Journal Assignment 10 due
- **QUIZ** November 7

Week 11 (11/12, 11/14) RIVAL CAUSES

- Browne & Keeley, Chapter 10
- Anderson, "Silencing Women's Speech" (L&D, p. 122)
- Kagan, "Regulation of Hate Speech and Pornography after R.A.V." (L&D, p. 202)
- Journal Assignment 11 due
- **QUIZ** November 14

Week 12 (11/19, 11/21) ALTERNATIVE CONCLUSIONS

- Wesson, "Girls should bring lawsuits everywhere..." (L&D, p. 240)
- Delgado, "First Amendment Formalism..." (L&D, p. 327)
- Mendels, "Second Federal Panel Declares C.D.A. Unconstitutional" (NY Times, CyberTimes. <http://www.nytimes.com/library/cyber/week/0730cda-ny.html>)
- Journal Assignment 12 due
- * Draft of **third essay** due November 21. Revision due November 26.

No class 11/26 or 11/28: Happy Thanksgiving

Week 14 (12/3, 12/5) DEBATING FREE SPEECH AND CENSORSHIP

Weeks 15 (12/10, 12/12) PRACTICE AND WORK ON FINAL PAPERS

Draft of **final paper** due on December 12.

FINAL PAPER DUE Wednesday, December 17 by 3:30 p.m.

(Complete journal, with all work for the semester, handed in with final paper)

Journal and Paper Assignments
(Sample assignments only)

September 5

1. Browne and Keeley practice exercises 1-4, pp. 18-20
2. Identify the issue and the conclusion in the following paragraphs:
 - a) At the present rate of consumption, the oil will be used up in 20-25 years. And we're sure not going to reduce consumption in the near future. So we'd better start developing solar power, windmills, and other "alternative energy sources" soon.
 - b) People who smoke cigarettes should be forced to pay for their own health insurance. They know smoking is bad for their health. They have no right to expect others to pay for their addiction.
 - c) "Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be paid to such a person...." (Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*).
 - d) "There could be no better example of your story 'Women aren't making Page 1 much, a survey finds' (June 1) than your decision to bury it on Page 20. Nice touch. The person who decided to place it there deserves an award." (letter from Alex Liazos to Boston Sunday Globe, June 4, 1995).
3. Review the essay we looked at on the first day of class. Identify the issue and the conclusion.
4. Find at least one essay, letter to the editor, or op-ed (opinion-editorial) piece. Include it in your journal (i.e. cut out neatly and tape or staple to the page). Identify the issue and the conclusion.
5. Read the Introduction by Lederer and Delgado to *The Price We Pay*. What issue(s) does this book address?
6. (Optional) For additional practice in identifying issues and conclusions, practice on short letters to the editor of any newspaper or magazine, or use material from the "gripe line" (back page) of the Portland Press Herald.

September 10

1. Browne and Keeley practice exercises 1-4, pp. 29-31.
2. Which of the following are arguments (i.e. have reasons)? For those passages with reasons, identify the issue, conclusion, and reason(s):
 - ◇ Portland should work to attract a professional basketball team.
 - ◇ TV shows like "Married with Children" and "Days of Our Lives" portray marriage in a most unflattering light. The partners are always quarreling and taking cheap shots at one another. And if not that, then they are lusting after someone they're not married to.
 - ◇ Four out of five dentists surveyed recommend Trident sugarless gum for their patients who chew gum.

- ◇ Vitamin C helps prevent colds. A Nobel laureate has said so.
 - ◇ "An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you do." (Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*)
3. Return to the 4 passages (2a-d) in Journal Assignment 1. Identify the reasons for each of the conclusions.
 4. Return to the essay we looked at the first day of class. Identify the stated reasons.
 5. Read the articles by Zia and Campbell (D&L, pp. 223-240). For each, identify the conclusion and the main reasons.
 6. After you read the Otto essay, identify the issue and the conclusion. What are the stated reasons for the conclusion? If you find it difficult to identify the issue and conclusion, you may be confusing some of the reasons with the overall conclusion. This can be tricky because the .us reasons may have supporting arguments or evidence. In other words, there may be .us arguments for the reasons. Ask yourself, "What is the OVERALL conclusion?"
 7. Select (at least) one op-ed piece or letter to the editor from the newspaper to include in your journal. Identify the issue, conclusion, and reasons.

September 17

1. Browne and Keeley practice exercises 1-4 pp. 44-46
2. Read the essay by Dworkin (D&L, p. 181). What is your first response to this essay? How does it make you feel?
 - a) Now look carefully at her use of language.
 - b) Identify the words she uses to discuss sex and pornography and to discuss people who disagree with her.
 - c) Identify IMPORTANT vague and/or ambiguous words.
 - d) For at least one, explain (give reasons) why the ambiguity matters.
 - e) Identify loaded words. Is her use of emotionally charged language relevant? Is it effective?
3. Read the article by Strossen, "The Sex Panic and the Feminist Split." Identify the OVERALL conclusion and reasons. Keep in mind that the reasons might serve as "mini conclusions" and might be themselves supported by other reasons.
4. What does Strossen think about Dworkin's use of language? Does Strossen herself use any vague or ambiguous language? Any loaded words?
5. Flip a coin. If it comes up heads, write a summary of the Dworkin essay; tails, write a summary of Strossen. In either case, your job is to write one paragraph which clearly communicates the major issue, conclusion(s), and reasons in the essay.
6. Select an op-ed piece or letter to the editor from the newspaper. Identify the issue, conclusion and reasons and any ambiguous, vague or loaded language. Why is this ambiguity, vagueness, or loadedness(?) important.

First essay (Draft due October 3. Revised version due October 8.)

Write an essay that 1) summarizes the Elmer-DeWitt article, 2) explains its importance/effects, and 3) critically evaluates the quality of the article and its argument. The essay should be no more than five (5) pages, typed, double space, with adequate margins. Be sure to review the "checklist" handout and the yellow style sheet.

Note that this task requires you to use the Browne and Keeley questions as a starting point but to then decide what are the most important issues in evaluating the essay. The object is to produce an essay—a written piece of work with YOUR own argument, conclusion, or thesis about the essay you have read. I do NOT want a list of the answers to the "right questions." Bring TWO copies of the essay to class if you want comments from me as well as your peer group. Your goal should be to have a paper which is good enough to hand in for a grade. Then you will have an opportunity to make it even better.

October 8

1. Browne and Keeley practice exercises (optional), 1-4, pages 131-134.
2. "Play the lottery today. It's hard to lose. Just ask the 12,000 people who won yesterday." Identify the deceptive statistics and missing information in this advertisement.
3. Go back to the Elmer-DeWitt article from Time magazine. Identify issues of deceptive statistics in the article.
4. Read the Ehrlich, Larcom, and Purvis article. Identify the conclusion(s) and reasons. Is the title of the article appropriate? What type of evidence is used? Evaluate their evidence (page 106 in Browne and Keeley is a good example of how to do this). Identify omitted information and deceptive statistics in the article.
5. Read the Stock article. What is Stock's overall or MAIN conclusions? What are her research findings? What is the relation between her findings and conclusion? Identify omitted information and deceptive statistics in the article.
6. Read the Ross article. Identify the conclusion(s) and reasons. Is the title of the article appropriate? What type of evidence is used? Evaluate the evidence. Identify omitted information and deceptive statistics in the article.
7. Write a one or two paragraph summary of the Stock essay. We will be using these summaries in class so it would be helpful if it were written on a separate sheet of paper. Typed would be excellent.

Second Essay: (Draft of Review Essay due October 31, graded version due November 5)

Write an essay that 1) summarizes the Willis essay. and 2) critically evaluates the quality of the essay and its argument. I expect that this task will require that you actively use other materials in the course as well as additional information you have gathered.

The essay should be no more than five (5) pages, typed, double-space, with adequate margins. Be sure to review the checklist handout and the yellow style sheet.

Note that this task requires you to use the Browne and Keeley questions as a starting point but to then decide what are the most important issues in evaluating the essay. The object is to produce an essay -- a written piece of work with YOUR own argument, conclusion, or thesis about the essay you have read. I do NOT want a list of the answers to the "right questions."

Bring TWO copies of the essay to class if you want comments from me as well as your peer group. Your goal should be to have a paper which is good enough to hand in for a grade. Then you will have an opportunity to make it even better.

Review essay due November 26

Imagine yourself a reporter in the year 2096. You have been assigned to write an article (1000-1500 words) summarizing one of the debates about free speech in the 1990's and specifically about hate speech or pornography (as assigned). Suggested steps:

1. Review the readings and class notes on the issue. Lay out the reasons/arguments for one "side." Lay out the reasons/arguments for the other "side." Identify the most important/most fundamental arguments on both sides.
2. Lay out the responses/counter-arguments for each of the reasons/arguments you identified in question 1.
3. Identify missing information which seems important to the arguments and counter-arguments. *Go find the information.*
4. Write an **ESSAY** summarizing the arguments. This should be a written piece of work with YOUR own argument, conclusion, or thesis about what are the most important or crucial issues in the debate. The essay should have a focus and clear development of its thesis.

Final paper Draft due December 12, final version due by Wednesday December 17 by 3:30 p.m. (along with complete journal)

The final assignment is to write an argument paper taking a stand on one of the issues we have discussed in the course. The final paper should clearly state a position and provide good arguments, and evidence, when appropriate, for that position. You should be aware of counter-arguments and alternative conclusions and successfully address them. Maximum length is 15 pages.

I expect that you will find and use additional materials beyond those assigned in the course. Remember that I will evaluate your paper essentially the same way that you have evaluated essays you have read, so you may want to ask the eleven "good questions" about your own work.