

# Syllabus for Freshman Seminar - Topics in PPE

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Office hours: in KGH 3493. Feel free to stop by any time, otherwise just get in touch to arrange an appointment.

We will meet twice a week: Mondays & Wednesdays from 9.30-10.50am in Annenberg G29 (officially; we use G28 or move around a little).

## 1 Overview

### 1.1 The freshman seminar in general

First, what the freshman seminar is *not*: it's not a lecture course; it's not a general or introductory survey of a field (for example, this seminar is not an introduction to economics); it does not count toward Weinberg College's distribution requirements or toward most majors' requirements.

So what is it? It's worth lifting the following quote directly from the WCAS website:<sup>1</sup>

First-year seminars are the key component of your first-year experience as a Weinberg student. Seminars are small, writing- and discussion-oriented courses geared to the investigation of a specific theme or issue and intended to hone your abilities as a critical thinker and effective writer. Successful completion of the first-year seminars, in fact, is the primary way for Weinberg students to satisfy the College's writing requirement.<sup>2</sup> All first-year students are expected to take two first-year seminars, except in unusual circumstances.

First-year seminars do not count toward Weinberg College's distribution requirements, and most departments and programs exclude them from counting toward major and minor requirements. They do not have prerequisites and do not provide a general survey of a discipline; instead they focus on a narrow but exciting aspect of a field. At the same time, they foster a more personal relationship with faculty members than is possible in larger courses. Your fall seminar instructor will be your adviser for your first quarter.

To which I'll add the following: the central purpose of the seminar is not really to teach you about politics, philosophy or economics. It is instead to improve your ability to read critically, think logically, speak effectively and write clearly.<sup>3</sup> These skills will serve you very well in your subsequent career at Northwestern.

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.weinberg.northwestern.edu/undergraduate/degree/first-year-seminar/>

<sup>2</sup>For more on the WCAS writing requirement see <http://www.weinberg.northwestern.edu/undergraduate/degree/writing-proficiency/>

<sup>3</sup>I encourage use of the Writing Place, a peer-tutoring center located in the University Library; see <http://www.writing.northwestern.edu/>

Another goal of the seminar is to familiarise you with academic norms regarding citation and plagiarism.<sup>4</sup> Many students come to Northwestern ignorant of these norms; this can lead to serious problems, for example if a professor confuses such ignorance with wilful violation of accepted codes of conduct. We will talk about academic integrity in our first meeting.

## 1.2 This freshman seminar in particular

In this seminar we will survey disparate topics in politics, philosophy and economics. Exactly what we end up covering will depend a little on what most interests the group, but provisional topics include the median voter theorem, the Condorcet paradox, Arrow's impossibility theorem, the trolley problem, Rawls' theory of justice, Peter Singer and speciesism, the ethics of nationalism, the economic effects of immigration, the simulation hypothesis, how economists and regular people think about risk and uncertainty, prediction markets and the wisdom of crowds, the pros and cons of a basic income policy. The aim is to find interesting things to read, talk and write about.

This is a good time to note that **there are no prerequisites for this seminar, and no prior knowledge of anything will be assumed.**

## 1.3 Evaluation

Grades will be based on two shorter papers (20% each), a longer final paper (30%) and participation in class discussion (30%). There will also be occasional small tasks assigned, such as the writing of a haiku or limerick. We'll talk in more detail about these when we first meet. There is no final exam.

## 1.4 Class rules and procedures

Attendance is required at every class; if you have a legitimate excuse for missing a class, email me in advance. Laptops may not be opened in class - if you anticipate the need to refer to some document or other, print it out beforehand. Cellphones are to be turned off.

What determines the 30% of the grade that covers classroom participation? First and foremost, *participation!* I will be looking for comments, interruptions, arguments and questions from all students. The more you talk, the better, even if it's just to ask what someone else means by his or her statement. Second, the ability to interrupt and argue in a civil manner. It is possible that we will all agree with each other all the time, but unlikely and probably undesirable; the ability to argue without losing your cool or train of thought, along with that to recognise and accept when you're mistaken, are essential in academic life.

For some seminars there may be a few designated students who expected to lead the discussion. This does not mean that these students are expected to do all the talking; *everyone* is expected to contribute to class discussions, *every* time we meet.

**Important: your participation grade does not depend on what you say in class, but on how much you contribute and the manner in which you do so. In this seminar it is better to be voluble and nonsensical than to be silent. Your grade will be higher.**

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<sup>4</sup>Please find the time to read "How to Avoid Plagiarism" at <http://www.northwestern.edu/provost/students/integrity/plagiarism.html>

## **1.5 Papers**

Each of the two short papers is to be about 1000-1500 words. I'll let you know of topics closer to the due dates, which are: Wednesday October 16<sup>th</sup> (week 4) and Wednesday November 6<sup>th</sup> (week 7). For these short papers we'll use a technique known as peer editing, which will work as follows. Pairs of you will, by 5pm on the Sunday preceding the due date, email a first draft of the paper to each other and to me. In class the next day you'll spend some time discussing the writing in each others' papers. Following class you'll have the opportunity to do rewrites and edits before the paper is to be turned into me on the Wednesday. Note: I get to see both the draft and the final version of each paper.

The final paper should be between 3,000 and 4,000 words long. It is due on Monday December 9<sup>th</sup>, i.e. Monday of exam week.

Paper topics and requirements will be described at the end of the syllabus (eventually...).

## **2 Course materials**

There are no required books. We'll use sources such as newspaper & magazine articles, academic research papers and podcasts. These will be available on Canvas.

## **3 Schedule of seminars & readings**

Again, this will be on Canvas. The initial schedule will be provisional, as I might change some topics depending on how the first couple of weeks go.

## **4 Papers**

Topics for the three papers will be discussed in class and posted on Canvas.