

# Philosophy 363 — Syllabus

David Sanson

My office is Stevenson 341. My email is [desanso@ilstu.edu](mailto:desanso@ilstu.edu). My office hours for this term are M 11-12:00 and W 3:15-4:15, and by appointment. The course webpage is <http://www.davidsanson.com/363>.

## Course Description

The title of this course is “Topics in Metaphysics and Epistemology.” Each time I teach it, I choose a different topic to focus on. This term, our focus will be on truth and reality.

What is truth? What are truths? How is truth related to meaning? Is moral truth the same kind of thing as scientific truth? What is reality? What does it mean to be a realist or an anti-realist? Can something be true *for me* but not true *for you*? Can something be real *for me* but not real *for you*? Can truth outstrip reality? How is truth related to fiction? How is fiction related to reality? And what to say about sentences like, ‘this sentence is not true’?

## Readings

Readings will be made available online. I will also put some books on reserve at Milner Library.

## Requirements

This is an advanced seminar-style course. It is important that you come to class, and that you come to class prepared to participate, and it is important that, over the semester, you gain the skills needed to produce a substantive term paper.

There will be three main categories of assignment. All assignments are **required**. They will be weighted as follows:

Term paper (30% total)

Term paper (25%), due Finals Week.

Term paper proposal (2.5%), due Week 14, graded pass/fail

Peer feedback on term paper proposals (2.5%), due Week 15, graded pass/fail

Weekly preparation and participation (30% total)

Reading response papers (10% total), graded pass/fail

Independent reading assignments (10% total), pass/fail

Discussion participation (10% total), pass/fail

Levels assignments (40% total)

## Term Paper

Your term paper will be a 10-15 page paper on a topic of you choose in consultation with me, related to the topics we cover in this class.

You will be required to write up a 2 to 3 page proposal/synopsis of your term paper, and share it with your peers. You will also be required to provide written and oral feedback on three of your peers’ proposals.

## Participation

This will be a small discussion based class. It is essential that everyone participates. This means that you must come to each class, and you need to make at least one substantive contribution to class discussion each week.

## Reading Response Papers

A Reading Response Paper is a short (250 words or less) informal paper. You pick one of the assigned readings for the week, and

- state as clearly as possible what you take to be the central thesis of the reading.
- state as clearly as possible one objection or concern you have about that thesis or about how the author defends it.

Reading Response Papers must be turned in to our shared Dropbox folder, and are due every week, by midnight the day before class. You are all encouraged to find time before class to quickly read through each other's reading response papers, in preparation for class discussion.

## Independent Reading Assignment

To complete an independent reading assignment, you must find and read an article that is related to our assigned readings, either on [philpapers.org](http://philpapers.org) or the Philosophers Index. You then must post a PDF copy of the paper to our shared Dropbox folder, along with a short paragraph explaining how it relates to the assigned readings. These are due at the same time as the reading response papers.

Independent Reading Assignments are due every week **except** those weeks when you choose to attempt a levels assignment.

## Levels Assignments

Every other week you will have the opportunity to complete a levels assignment.

"Levels assignments" are modeled after video game mechanics. There are four levels for you to progress through, and you are allowed to progress to the next level only after you have completed the previous level. Just as with levels in video games, the idea here is to insure that you are always working on a task that is challenging enough to be interesting, but not so challenging that it is frustrating. Each of the levels will help prepare you to write the final paper for the course (writing the final paper is kind of like the "boss battle" for this course).

Your "levels grade" is determined by how far you progress through the levels. You have a maximum of seven attempts at the levels, each due on a specific day (see schedule). After attempting a level, you will receive one of three evaluations: "confused", "needs work", or "complete".

Level 4

Complete = A

Needs Work = A-

Confused = B+

Level 3

Complete = B

Needs Work = B-

Confused = C+

Level 2

Complete = C

Needs Work = C-

Confused = D+

Level 1

Complete = D

Needs Work = D-

Confused = F

Although you will often attempt an assignment at the same level, you will not be rewriting or reworking previous attempts: each assignment will be new, and will be keyed to the reading for that week.

**Level 1.** Basic Toolkit Worksheet. I will provide you with a worksheet with exercises related to soundness and validity, counterexamples, and distinguishing arguments from explanations.

**Level 2.** Argument Reconstruction and Evaluation, between 150 and 300 words. Choose one interesting valid argument from the readings and (a) reconstruct it in premise-conclusion form, clearly enough so that it is obvious that it is valid; (b) state which premise you think is least plausible; (c) if you think that premise is nevertheless true, say why. If you think it is false, say why.

**Level 3.** Dialectic, between 400 and 600 words. Choose one interesting argument from the readings and one objection from the readings to that argument and (a) reconstruct the argument in premise-conclusion form; (b) present the objection to the argument, being sure to clearly indicate whether it is an objection to validity or an objection to the truth of one of the premises, and, if so, which one. Assess the force of the objection: do you agree with it, or do you think it misses the mark? Why?

**Level 4.** Extended Dialectic, between 700 and 1000 words. Choose two interestingly related arguments from the readings, that reflect some significant disagreement. Reconstruct and evaluate both arguments—be sure to discuss any plausible objections, and assess their force—and discuss how they are related.

## Getting in Touch

Email is the best way to reach me when I am not in my office. I am not always online and I cannot always respond immediately. If I have not responded in 24 hours please email me again, letting me know it is your second email (I won't take this as harassment). Include "363" in the subject line of your email and your full name somewhere in the body of your email, so I know who you are(!), and that the email is related to this class.

## Disabilities

Any student needing to arrange a reasonable accommodation for a documented disability should contact Disability Concerns at 350 Fell Hall, 309-438-5853, <http://www.disabilityconcerns.ilstu.edu>.

## Other Sources of Support

Life at college can get very complicated. Students sometimes feel overwhelmed, lost, experience anxiety or depression, struggle with relationship difficulties or diminished self-esteem. Many of these issues can be effec-

tively addressed with a little help. Student Counseling Services (SCS) helps students cope with difficult emotions and life stressors. Student Counseling Services is staffed by experienced, professional psychologists and counselors, who are attuned to the needs of college students. The services are free and completely confidential. Find out more at <http://counseling.illinoisstate.edu> or by calling 309-438-3655.

### **Academic Misconduct**

Academic integrity is expected and required. Students are expected to be honest in all academic work. A student's placement of his or her name on any academic exercise shall be regarded as assurance that the work is the result of the student's own thought, effort, and study.

If you have questions, refer to the Code of Student Conduct, B1 (Academic Integrity), which outlines unacceptable behaviors in academic matters, or talk to me. In certain circumstances (such as cheating or plagiarism) I may be required to refer a student to Community Rights & Responsibilities for a violation of Illinois State University's Code of Student Conduct.