

# Living in a post-truth world: building your personal baloney detection kit

Syllabus and Course Outline  
Winter 2018

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**Instructors:** Easton R. White ([eawhite@ucdavis.edu](mailto:eawhite@ucdavis.edu))

Office hours: Wickson 3150, Wednesdays 10am-12pm or by appointment

Alan Hastings ([amhastings@ucdavis.edu](mailto:amhastings@ucdavis.edu))

**Class information:** Tuesdays 3:10 – 4:00pm. Wickson Hall 1017

Canvas Page: <https://canvas.ucdavis.edu/courses/190336>

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Oxford Dictionary's 2016 word of the year was "post-truth". They defined post-truth as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." Their thesis is that facts no longer matter in evaluating statements of politicians or even assessing information online. This idea is both old and new. We have always needed tools for evaluating the world around us. However, the world is growing increasingly complex and interconnected. Simultaneously, we have access to an incredible amount of information online. How can we possibly sort through all this information to make more informed decisions?

This is not a political class. This class will not assess specific social or moral issues. Instead, this course aims to equip students with tools to combat misinformation. Everyone needs to build their own baloney detection toolbox to defend themselves against those that wish to manipulate or influence them. Carl Sagan wrote in his 1995 book, *Demon-Haunted World*, on the importance of developing a baloney detection kit. In this course, we will work through his ideas and expand on them as they relate to today's world.

Learning will be achieved through discussions in class, in-class assignments, reading material, and two written assignments. Class time will typically consist of videos, or other media, played at the beginning of the class. Afterwards, in class discussions will illustrate key tools in a baloney detection kit and develop student's comfort with these tools.

**GOALS:** This course aims to equip students with tools to combat misinformation in the media, online, and in their everyday lives. By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- critically evaluate information presented to them
- recognize common tactics used by those wanting to manipulate others
- examine case studies where common manipulative tactics were used
- understand the scientific process
- understand different types of logical fallacies
- interpret graphs and data presented to them
- evaluate the source and reliability of a news or journal article
- write an in-depth assessment of a particular video or news article
- engage in discussions with other students and instructors on these topics

**GRADING:** Grades will be assigned as pass/no-pass, based on active participation, two group activities, quizzes, and two writing assignments. A score of 70% will designate pass or no-pass.

- Class participation: 20% of grade
- Two quizzes (take-home): 5% each, 10% total
- Two group assignments: 10% each, 20% total
- Two writing assignments: 20% each, 40% total
- Two short individual assignments: 5% each, 10% total:

**HOW TO SUCCEED IN THIS COURSE:** This course is a pass or no-pass course. A large portion of your grade is based on in-class activities and discussions. It is important to complete required assignments before each class. The material from these assignments (whether they be videos or short articles) will set the stage for in-class discussions. Office hours are a great place to talk about course material or to get help on assignments. In addition, the following course resources should also help you do well.

#### **COURSE RESOURCES:**

- *Canvas:* All material from the course (e.g. lecture slides, homework) will be posted online in a Canvas site. In addition, students will submit assignments on the Canvas site. Grades will also be posted to the Canvas site.
- *Your classmates:* Identifying classmates to serve as study-buddies will benefit you enormously. A study-buddy can be a go to person for clarifying class logistics as well.
- *Instructors:* The course instructors are here support you. This support will be during class and also outside of class through office hours and email. You can expect emails to receive a response within 24 hours.
- *Student Academic Success Center:* Tutors and academic staff are available to help on math and writing portions of this course. This is a great support system that can help improve the quality of your work.

**ABSENCES:** Attendance is required for this class. A large portion of your grade depends on in-class discussions and activities. If you need to miss a week of class, please discuss your situation with me as soon as possible. You will lose points every class session that you do not attend. Late assignments will not receive full points, with a 20% deduction for every day the assignment is late.

**ACADEMIC HONESTY:** Students in the boot camp are expected to complete their own work. It is encouraged that you work with other students outside of class, but your completed work must be from you and in your own words. I and UC Davis take academic honesty very seriously. You can read the academic code of conduct here: <http://sja.ucdavis.edu/files/cac.pdf>

**ACCOMADATIONS:** The Student Disability Center a campus unit designated to provide services for students who are eligible for accommodation in on campus. We will work with the Student Disability Center to provide accommodations for a documented disability.

**CODE OF CIVILITY:** All students are expected to adhere to the UC Davis Principles of Community. The entire text be found online (<http://occr.ucdavis.edu/poc/index.html>), but here is a brief summary. All members of the UC Davis community are expected to:

- Affirm the dignity inherit in each one of us and others around us
- Affirm the right of freedom of expression
- Treat each other with the highest standards of conduct and decency
- Confront and reject any and all manifestations of discrimination.

## Tentative outline

Week	Date	Topic	In-class activity	Homework
1	9-Jan	Introduction, code of conduct, class goals		Read Baloney Detection Kit and answer questions on Canvas
2	16-Jan	Discuss Sagan's kit. Logical fallacies	In-class: Logical fallacy detection	Assignment: Online video and questions
3	23-Jan	Scientific method	Group project: Black box activity	Finish group project
4	30-Jan	Quantitative thinking	Group project: Fermi problems	Finish group project
5	6-Feb	Common marketing strategies		Paper: Write about short video/news article
6	13-Feb	Prosecutors fallacy and the courtroom		Assignment: Breast cancer problem
7	20-Feb	Guest Lecture: Navigating the Web		
8	27-Feb	Guest Lecture: Media and Politics		
9	6-Mar	How to call out bullshit and teach others about detecting bullshit		Paper: Choose tool to add or expand on
10	13-Mar	TBD		