

Syllabus for PSYC 405: Mystery, Madness & Murder

Spring 2026: Section 002

Patrick E. McKnight

WHEN: Meeting Times

- (Section 002): **10:30 AM - 11:45 AM** Mondays and Wednesdays (**Art and Design Building L008**) - IN PERSON
- **Semester Dates:** January 21 - May 4, 2026

Important Dates (Spring 2026)

Date	Event
Jan 21 (Wed)	First day of PSYC 405 classes
Jan 27 (Tue)	Last day to add classes
Feb 3 (Tue)	Last day to drop (100% refund)
Feb 10 (Tue)	Last day to drop (50% refund)
Feb 11-24	Unrestricted withdrawal period
Feb 25 - Mar 30	Selective withdrawal period
Mar 9-15	SPRING BREAK - No classes
May 4 (Mon)	Last day of PSYC 405 classes
May 6-13	Final examination period

WHO: Patrick E. McKnight



i Contact

pmcknigh (note the lack of a “t”) at gmu.edu OR via [canvas](#)

Office Hours: By appointment via Zoom or in person

NOTE: Please contact me via canvas for questions/concerns that might benefit everyone; via email for more personal and/or parochial matters.

WHAT: Course Description/Overview

PSYC 405 (Mystery, Madness, and Murder) fulfills requirements for **Mason Apex** in Mason Core. What that means can be better explained via their [website](#). For us, I want you to wonder. Ever wonder how psychology can be applied in every aspect of your life? Not pop psychology but real psychological science? Some stuff out there is real and real common. We will observe both factual and fictional depictions of human behavior, dissect the behavior according to science, and discuss the results of our collective inquiry. We will learn and apply psychological science together. My aim is to work with you to create a course you fondly recall for many years. Let's do it together. How? Well, you need to know what is expected...

DEMANDS: Course Learning Outcomes

! The Mason Apex course objectives are:

Integrate skills, abilities, theories, or methodologies gained across a Mason student's undergraduate education to explore complex issues in original ways. Communicate effectively the results of the student's work with awareness of audience, purpose, and context using an appropriate modality (for example: written, oral, visual, material, embodied, multimodal).

💡 Your Cognitive Arsenal

What that means to you is that the fifteen weeks of twice-weekly sessions ought to lead you to the following additions to your cognitive arsenal. You will be MORE able to...

- **Detect** human behavior
- **Appreciate** the limits of our detection Integrate your observations with theory
- **Understand** behavior in everyday life
- **Apply** your gained knowledge to evaluate both fictional and non-fictional stories

We will be on an unscripted odyssey of wonder and learning. Join me!

HOW: What are we going to do?

We are going to critically and psychologically analyze popular media portrayals of humans. Each week, we meet on Monday and Wednesday morning. Come prepared to listen and watch. Our goal is to capture observations, think critically, and discuss the material as it relates to several "governing" areas of inquiry.

Governing Areas of Inquiry

1. **BELIEF:** Why do people believe weird things? When are they more likely to believe in such oddities? Can we predict who believes odd stuff? Do I believe odd stuff?
2. **PURPOSE:** What will people do to protect their own beliefs, defend their own principles, or die for honor?
3. **MOTIVATION:** What drives people to do amazing, cruel, helpful, selfless, or selfish acts?
4. **UNCERTAINTY:** What would you be willing to do to change the most uncom-

fortable situation? Have you ever been so uncertain about something that you couldn't sleep?

5. **DISCOMFORT:** What would you be willing to do to make your (or another person's) life more comfortable?
6. **EMOTION:** To what extent do humans behave emotionally (vs. rationally)? Why would this matter?

These are the central themes that we will revisit each week. Some may be more relevant than others given the topic at hand. Be aware that you ought to search for the relevance in all. Each of these areas has a wealth of scientific evidence that keeps us still searching for more. In other words, the evidence is there but it is wanting. Along this path of enrichment, we will explore and apply good scientific discipline to understand the nature of human behavior. Each section of the course (Mystery, Madness & Murder) provides us with a unique look across the various sub-disciplines of psychological science.

Media & Schedule

During class, we shall all share in the viewing of a media snippet that depicts a person in context behaving either as a recreation of "real" behavior or as a fictional account of behavior. Our goal is to dissect the behavior, identify the validity of such acts, understand the author/director's intent, and appreciate the behavior in context.

Week	Module	Film	Assessment
1	Intro	Hello & Greetings	Quiz 1 ¹
2	Mystery	The Machinist (2004) 7.6 77%	Quiz 2
3	Mystery	The Machinist / Identity (2003) 7.3 63%	Quiz 3
4	Mystery	Identity	Quiz 4
5	Mystery	Fight Club (1999) 8.8 81%	Quiz 5
6	Madness	Rain Man (1988) 8.0 88%	Quiz 6

¹All quizzes are conducted on canvas. Please consult the canvas website for the course. You will have access to the quiz for the period that I announce every week (at random). Come to class. You won't have to wonder when I start the quiz. Just show up. Oh, and bring a computer or phone.

Week	Module	Film	Assessment
7	Madness	Rain Man / K-PAX (2001) 7.4 42%	Quiz 7
8	SPRING BREAK	R-E-L-A-X (March 9-13)	NO QUIZ
9	Madness	K-PAX	Quiz 8
10	Madness	Leaving Las Vegas (1995) 7.5 91%	Quiz 9
11	Murder	Nuremberg (2025) 7.4 71%	Quiz 10
12	Murder	Nuremberg / Wind River (2017) 7.7 87%	Quiz 11
13	Murder	Wind River	Quiz 12
14	Murder	Wrap-up & Review	Quiz 13
15	Epilogue (FINAL)	What did you think?	Quiz 14

! Quiz Questions & Study Materials

All quiz questions are available for study on our [Quiz Page](#). Yes, you can see the questions beforehand! The goal is for you to **learn** how questions are constructed and how psychological science connects to film content. The questions require integration of movie knowledge AND readings - simple memorization won't help.

Section 002 Film Themes

Mystery Module (Weeks 2-5):

- **The Machinist** - Guilt, chronic insomnia, reality distortion, psychological deterioration
- **Identity** - Dissociative identity disorder, unreliable narrative, perception vs. reality
- **Fight Club** - DID, consumerism critique, unreliable narrator, identity fragmentation

Madness Module (Weeks 6-10):

- **Rain Man** - Autism spectrum disorder, savant syndrome, relationship dynamics

- **K-PAX** - Delusion versus reality, therapeutic relationship, diagnostic uncertainty
- **Leaving Las Vegas** - Alcoholism, self-destruction, depression, unconventional relationships

Murder Module (Weeks 11-14):

- **Nuremberg** - War crimes, moral judgment, collective guilt, obedience to authority
- **Wind River** - Violence, trauma, justice in marginalized communities, grief

Film Resources & Discussion Questions

External Resources

Use these links to explore background information, reviews, and critical analyses of each film.

Mystery Module Films

The Machinist (2004)

Links: [IMDB](#) (7.6/10) | [Rotten Tomatoes](#) (77%) | [Wikipedia](#)

Discussion Questions

1. **BELIEF:** Trevor Reznik creates an elaborate reality to avoid confronting his guilt. How do our minds construct alternative narratives to protect us from unbearable truths?
2. **DISCOMFORT:** The film portrays extreme insomnia and physical deterioration. What is the relationship between guilt, sleep, and physical health?
3. **UNCERTAINTY:** When did you first suspect that Ivan might not be real? What visual or narrative cues did the film use to signal unreliability?
4. **EMOTION:** Why does Trevor's unconscious mind create Ivan as a separate entity rather than allowing him to remember directly? What psychological purpose does this splitting serve?

Identity (2003)

Links: [IMDB](#) (7.3/10) | [Rotten Tomatoes](#) (63%) | [Wikipedia](#)

Discussion Questions

1. **BELIEF:** The film presents multiple personalities as separate characters. How accurate is this portrayal of dissociative identity disorder? What does research actually tell us?
2. **MOTIVATION:** Each “personality” has distinct motivations and moral codes. What does this suggest about the multiplicity of drives within a single person?
3. **UNCERTAINTY:** The twist recontextualizes everything we’ve seen. How does narrative structure affect our willingness to accept psychological explanations?
4. **PURPOSE:** The psychiatrist believes integration therapy can eliminate the “murderous” personality. What ethical questions does this raise about treating DID?

Fight Club (1999)

Links: [IMDB](#) (8.8/10) | [Rotten Tomatoes](#) (81%) | [Wikipedia](#)

Discussion Questions

1. **BELIEF:** The narrator creates Tyler Durden to embody everything he wishes he could be. What does Tyler represent about suppressed aspects of identity?
2. **DISCOMFORT:** The film critiques consumerism and modern masculinity. What psychological needs does the narrator try to meet through material possessions, and why do they fail?
3. **MOTIVATION:** What drives the members of Fight Club and later Project Mayhem? Is their violence a symptom or an attempted cure?
4. **EMOTION:** The narrator’s dissociation is triggered by chronic insomnia and alienation. What does modern research tell us about the relationship between sleep deprivation and psychosis?

Madness Module Films

Rain Man (1988)

Links: [IMDB](#) (8.0/10) | [Rotten Tomatoes](#) (88%) | [Wikipedia](#)

Discussion Questions

1. **BELIEF:** The film depicts autism and savant syndrome. How has our understanding of the autism spectrum changed since 1988? What did the film get right or wrong?
2. **MOTIVATION:** Charlie’s initial motivation is purely financial. How and why

does his motivation transform over the course of the film?

3. **EMOTION:** Raymond experiences emotions differently than neurotypical individuals. How does the film portray his emotional world, and is this portrayal respectful?
4. **PURPOSE:** What does the relationship between Charlie and Raymond reveal about how we define “normal” functioning and human connection?

K-PAX (2001)

Links: [IMDB](#) (7.4/10) | [Rotten Tomatoes](#) (42%) | [Wikipedia](#)

Discussion Questions

1. **BELIEF:** Is Prot an alien or a man with delusions? The film deliberately maintains ambiguity. What evidence supports each interpretation, and which do you find more compelling?
2. **UNCERTAINTY:** Dr. Powell struggles to diagnose Prot. What does this uncertainty reveal about the limits of psychiatric diagnosis?
3. **DISCOMFORT:** Prot’s presence transforms the other patients. What does this suggest about the role of hope and alternative perspectives in mental health treatment?
4. **PURPOSE:** Why might someone adopt an “alien” identity as a response to trauma? What psychological protection does this provide?

Leaving Las Vegas (1995)

Links: [IMDB](#) (7.5/10) | [Rotten Tomatoes](#) (91%) | [Wikipedia](#)

Discussion Questions

1. **MOTIVATION:** Ben has made a deliberate choice to drink himself to death. What psychological state leads someone to this decision? Is it depression, despair, or something else?
2. **BELIEF:** Sera agrees not to ask Ben to stop drinking. What does this unconditional acceptance represent psychologically? Is it love, codependency, or something more complex?
3. **DISCOMFORT:** The film refuses to offer hope for recovery. How does this unflinching portrayal challenge our expectations about addiction narratives?
4. **EMOTION:** What role does human connection play when recovery is not the goal? Can love exist meaningfully in the context of self-destruction?

Murder Module Films

Nuremberg (2025)

Links: [IMDB](#) (7.4/10) | [Rotten Tomatoes](#) (71%) | [Wikipedia](#)

Discussion Questions

1. **PURPOSE:** The Nuremberg trials established that “following orders” is not a defense for atrocities. What psychological mechanisms allow ordinary people to commit extraordinary evil?
2. **BELIEF:** How did Nazi ideology reshape individual moral beliefs? What does this tell us about the malleability of human conscience?
3. **MOTIVATION:** Hannah Arendt coined the phrase “the banality of evil” to describe Eichmann. What motivates bureaucratic participation in genocide?
4. **EMOTION:** How do perpetrators rationalize their actions? What emotional and cognitive processes allow people to compartmentalize their behavior?

Wind River (2017)

Links: [IMDB](#) (7.7/10) | [Rotten Tomatoes](#) (87%) | [Wikipedia](#)

Discussion Questions

1. **DISCOMFORT:** The film depicts violence against Indigenous women, a tragically underreported crisis. How does the isolation and lack of resources on reservations contribute to this problem?
2. **MOTIVATION:** Cory Lambert hunts predators both literally and figuratively. How does his own grief shape his pursuit of justice?
3. **BELIEF:** The film shows how crimes on reservations fall through jurisdictional cracks. What does this reveal about systemic failures and the value placed on marginalized lives?
4. **EMOTION:** The film’s ending focuses on grief and healing rather than cathartic revenge. What does this choice say about justice and closure?

GRADES: How do you get scored?

Grading Schema

I offer a simple A-F with the following breakdown...

Grade A

A: Attend **all** the classes, answer *most quiz questions correctly*, and *chime in*. Guaranteed A.

Grade B

B: Attend **all** the classes, answer some quiz questions correctly and chime in. Good enough for a B.

Grade C

C: Attend *most* of the classes, answer a few of the quiz questions correctly, and ALWAYS chime in. Yeah, you'll get a C.

Grade D

D: Show up but don't engage and perform poorly on the quizzes.

Grade F

F: Who are you?

Numerical Grade Scale

Grade	Percentage	Description
A	90-100%	Excellent
B	80-89%	Good
C	70-79%	Satisfactory
D	60-69%	Passing
F	Below 60%	Failing

Grade Weights

Those grades will be predicated on the follow complex formula:

 Your Keys to Success

Evaluation				
Criteria	Grade	Rationale	Expectation	Computation
Attendance	60%	“80% of success in life is just showing up.” – Woody Allen. For this class, showing up gives you 60%. Show up.	Show up every day. You’ll appreciate me, the course, learning, and your fellow students more if you do so.	28 classes (2x/wk for 14 weeks). I expect everyone to attend at least 24 classes. Every class missed after those 4 means you lose 60%/24 or 2.5 percentage points per class.
Quizzes	20%	Show up and pay attention. Weekly quizzes will be fun and easy but test your attendance (see above) and attention.	Show up every day and listen to the discussion. Go home and think. Talk to your classmates.	Weekly quizzes (N=14) but best 10. Thus, you get a break for a month on quizzes. Use the time wisely.
Engagement	20%	Talk to me. Show me that you are alive and engaged. Shy? Post questions or comments to me via canvas. Stay engaged. Extroverted? Speak up in class. Everyone has an opportunity and avenue to engage. Please do so.	Show up every day, listen to the discussion, and contribute to it. Your contributions make all the difference between an OK class and a great class. Let’s make it great together. I invite you in and you contribute. Are you game?	Do I know you via voice, email, canvas, or any other medium used by GMU that I have access to and use? Knowing you want a better grade is not knowing your thoughts or ideas. Please, make yourself and ideas known to me (and the rest of the class if you wish).
Extra Credit	0%	NONE. Don’t ask.	Do what is asked of you now and you won’t have to make up the work you didn’t do. Come to class, attend to what I say, and stay engaged. Expect nothing more or less.	<i>Not Applicable</i>

Grading-related Policies

Late work: None accepted

Missed exams: No exams but missed quizzes result in a zero for the quiz. No make ups.

Team project responsibilities: None

FERPA and Official Communications

FERPA Rights: The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) protects your education records. You have the right to inspect your records, request amendments, and control disclosure of personally identifiable information. For more information, visit the [Registrar's FERPA page](#).

GMU Email Requirement: Mason uses electronic mail to provide official information to students. Examples include communications from course instructors, notices from the library, notices about academic standing, financial aid information, class materials, assignments, questions, and instructor feedback. Students are responsible for the content of university communications sent to their Mason e-mail account and are required to activate that account and check it regularly.

Important: I will only respond to emails sent from your official **@gmu.edu** address for matters related to this course.

Disability Services

Disability Services at George Mason University provides reasonable accommodations ensuring equal access to university programs and activities. If you need accommodations:

1. **Register** with Disability Services at ds.gmu.edu
2. **Communicate** your approved accommodations to me **in advance** of relevant class meetings, assignments, or exams

Contact Disability Services:

- Location: SUB I, Suite 2500
- Email: ds@gmu.edu
- Phone: (703) 993-2474

Please arrange accommodations early in the semester—last-minute requests may not be possible to fulfill.

Academic Standards

George Mason University promotes authentic scholarship through three core principles:

1. **Honesty:** Providing accurate information in all academic endeavors
2. **Acknowledgement:** Giving proper credit for all contributions to your work
3. **Uniqueness of Work:** Ensuring submitted work is the result of your own effort

Violations—including plagiarism, fabrication, and cheating—are addressed through university procedures with consequences ranging from academic sanctions to disciplinary

action. You are responsible for understanding how these expectations apply to this course. When in doubt, ask me.
For complete policies, see [Academic Standards](#).

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools Policy

My perspective: AI is a remarkable tool that is widely misunderstood and, unfortunately, often abused. I encourage you to use AI wisely and openly.

Permitted Uses: You may use AI tools (such as ChatGPT, Claude, Grammarly, etc.) for:

- Brainstorming and generating initial ideas
- Checking grammar and spelling
- Understanding concepts discussed in class or readings
- Exploring psychological theories in greater depth

Prohibited Uses: You may NOT use AI tools to:

- Generate quiz answers or submit AI-written responses as your own work
- Summarize films you have not watched
- Replace your own critical analysis and engagement with course material

Why this matters: This course emphasizes YOUR observations, YOUR critical thinking, and YOUR integration of psychological science with film content. AI cannot watch films for you or develop your analytical skills. The learning happens in the doing—not in the outsourcing.

Disclosure requirement: If you use AI tools in any capacity for course work, disclose this use openly. There is no penalty for honest disclosure; there are consequences for deception.

Title IX and Sexual Misconduct

George Mason University is committed to providing a learning environment free from sex and gender-based discrimination. As a faculty member, I am a **non-confidential employee** required to report any information about sexual misconduct or relationship violence to the Title IX Coordinator.

Title IX Coordinator Contact:

- Email: TitleIX@gmu.edu
- Phone: (703) 993-8730
- Location: Aquia 373 (Fairfax campus)

Confidential Resources (not required to report):

- Student Support and Advocacy Center (SSAC): (703) 993-3686
- Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS): (703) 993-2380
- Student Health Services: (703) 993-2831

For more information, visit [Title IX at Mason](#).

! University Policies

All students are expected to review and comply with the [GMU Common Course Policies](#), which include required information about Academic Standards, Disability Services, FERPA, and Title IX.

🔥 TL;DR - The Bottom Line

Show up to your section, watch a (part of a) movie, complete the weekly quiz ***after paying attention***, and speak up during discussion in class or online (not during the movie). Do that, you earn an A. Anything short of that is negotiable.