

Syllabus for PSYC 405: Mystery, Madness & Murder

Spring 2026: Section 001

Patrick E. McKnight

WHEN: Meeting Times

- (Section 001): **9:00 AM - 10:15 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	Shutter Island (2010) 8.2 69%	Quiz 2
3	Mystery	Shutter Island / North by Northwest (1959) 8.3 97%	Quiz 3
4	Mystery	North by Northwest	Quiz 4

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
5	Mystery	Sunset Boulevard (1950) 8.4 98%	Quiz 5
6	Madness	Black Swan (2010) 8.0 85%	Quiz 6
7	Madness	Black Swan / Good Will Hunting (1997) 8.3 97%	Quiz 7
8	SPRING BREAK	R-E-L-A-X (March 9-13)	NO QUIZ
9	Madness	Good Will Hunting	Quiz 8
10	Madness	What's Eating Gilbert Grape (1993) 7.7 90%	Quiz 9
11	Murder	Primal Fear (1996) 7.7 77%	Quiz 10
12	Murder	Primal Fear / The Hurricane (1999) 7.6 82%	Quiz 11
13	Murder	The Hurricane	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 001 Film Themes

Mystery Module (Weeks 2-5):

- **Shutter Island** - Trauma-induced delusion, reality testing, institutional psychiatry
- **North by Northwest** - Mistaken identity, paranoia, perception manipulation
- **Sunset Boulevard** - Delusion, obsession, the thin line between fantasy and reality

Madness Module (Weeks 6-10):

- **Black Swan** - Perfectionism, psychosis, performance anxiety, identity dissolution
- **Good Will Hunting** - Trauma, therapeutic process, attachment, resistance to change
- **What's Eating Gilbert Grape** - Developmental disability, caregiving burden, family dynamics

Murder Module (Weeks 11-14):

- **Primal Fear** - Forensic psychology, malingering, courtroom psychology, deception
- **The Hurricane** - Wrongful conviction, systemic bias, justice and injustice

Film Resources & Discussion Questions

External Resources

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

Mystery Module Films

Shutter Island (2010)

Links: [IMDB](#) (8.2/10) | [Rotten Tomatoes](#) (69%) | [Wikipedia](#)

Discussion Questions

1. **BELIEF:** How does the film manipulate our perception of reality? At what point did you question what was “real” in the story?
2. **UNCERTAINTY:** How does Teddy’s uncertainty about his own identity parallel the uncertainty we experience as viewers? What cues did you use to distinguish truth from delusion?
3. **DISCOMFORT:** The film presents two possible realities. Which ending is more psychologically comforting - and why might we prefer one interpretation over another?

4. **EMOTION:** How do Teddy's unprocessed grief and guilt manifest in his delusions? What does this tell us about the relationship between trauma and perception?

North by Northwest (1959)

Links: [IMDB](#) (8.3/10) | [Rotten Tomatoes](#) (97%) | [Wikipedia](#)

Discussion Questions

1. **BELIEF:** Roger Thornhill is mistaken for someone who doesn't exist. How quickly do others accept false identities, and what makes identity "believable"?
2. **PURPOSE:** What motivates Thornhill to pursue the truth rather than simply prove his innocence and walk away?
3. **MOTIVATION:** How does Hitchcock use ordinary settings (crop fields, Mount Rushmore) to create extraordinary tension? What does this suggest about danger in everyday life?
4. **UNCERTAINTY:** How does the film explore the theme of "the wrong man"? What psychological toll does being falsely accused take on a person?

Sunset Boulevard (1950)

Links: [IMDB](#) (8.4/10) | [Rotten Tomatoes](#) (98%) | [Wikipedia](#)

Discussion Questions

1. **BELIEF:** Norma Desmond believes she is still a great star. What psychological mechanisms allow her to maintain this delusion despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary?
2. **DISCOMFORT:** Joe Gillis compromises his integrity for comfort and security. What does his trajectory say about the psychological costs of such compromises?
3. **EMOTION:** How does the film portray the relationship between fame, identity, and mental health? Is Norma's condition caused by Hollywood, or was she always vulnerable?
4. **PURPOSE:** What does Max's devotion to Norma reveal about enabling behavior and the psychology of caretaking?

Madness Module Films

Black Swan (2010)

Links: [IMDB](#) (8.0/10) | [Rotten Tomatoes](#) (85%) | [Wikipedia](#)

Discussion Questions

1. **MOTIVATION:** What drives Nina's obsessive pursuit of perfection? Is her behavior admirable dedication or pathological compulsion?
2. **BELIEF:** At what point do Nina's hallucinations begin? How does the film blur the line between artistic transformation and psychotic break?
3. **DISCOMFORT:** How does the mother-daughter relationship contribute to Nina's psychological fragmentation? What role does her mother's own unfulfilled ambitions play?
4. **EMOTION:** The film suggests Nina must "lose herself" to achieve artistic greatness. What does this say about the relationship between creativity and mental stability?

Good Will Hunting (1997)

Links: [IMDB](#) (8.3/10) | [Rotten Tomatoes](#) (97%) | [Wikipedia](#)

Discussion Questions

1. **BELIEF:** Why does Will believe he doesn't deserve success or love? How do early experiences shape our core beliefs about ourselves?
2. **PURPOSE:** Sean tells Will, "It's not your fault." Why is this simple statement so transformative? What makes therapeutic breakthroughs possible?
3. **UNCERTAINTY:** Will pushes away everyone who gets close. What function does this self-sabotage serve psychologically?
4. **MOTIVATION:** What finally motivates Will to change? Is it Sean's therapy, Skylar's love, or something internal?

What's Eating Gilbert Grape (1993)

Links: [IMDB](#) (7.7/10) | [Rotten Tomatoes](#) (90%) | [Wikipedia](#)

Discussion Questions

1. **DISCOMFORT:** Gilbert feels trapped by his family responsibilities. How do caregiver roles affect mental health and personal development?
2. **MOTIVATION:** What drives Gilbert's affair with Mrs. Carver? What psychological needs is he trying to meet?
3. **EMOTION:** How does the film portray Arnie's intellectual disability? Is the portrayal accurate and respectful by modern standards?
4. **PURPOSE:** The family's dysfunction centers on secrets and denial. What role

does the mother's condition play in the family's psychological dynamics?

Murder Module Films

Primal Fear (1996)

Links: [IMDB](#) (7.7/10) | [Rotten Tomatoes](#) (77%) | [Wikipedia](#)

Discussion Questions

1. **BELIEF:** The film hinges on believability. What made Aaron's alternate personality convincing to the jury, to Martin Vail, and to you?
2. **UNCERTAINTY:** How do forensic psychologists distinguish genuine dissociative identity disorder from malingering? What are the ethical challenges?
3. **MOTIVATION:** What motivates Martin Vail to take Aaron's case? How does his motivation evolve throughout the film?
4. **EMOTION:** The ending reveals a devastating deception. What emotional and ethical responsibilities do defense attorneys have when defending potentially guilty clients?

The Hurricane (1999)

Links: [IMDB](#) (7.6/10) | [Rotten Tomatoes](#) (82%) | [Wikipedia](#)

Discussion Questions

1. **PURPOSE:** Rubin Carter maintains his innocence for decades despite enormous pressure. What psychological resources allow someone to maintain their sense of self under such circumstances?
2. **BELIEF:** How did racial bias and confirmation bias contribute to Carter's wrongful conviction? What cognitive errors led investigators astray?
3. **DISCOMFORT:** Carter refuses to wear prison clothes or participate in prison programs. What psychological function does this defiance serve?
4. **MOTIVATION:** What motivated Lesra and the Canadians to fight for Carter's freedom? What does their commitment reveal about altruism and justice-seeking behavior?

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				
Percent of 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.	Not Applicable	

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.