

HNRS 475 – Interdisciplinary Seminar - Time
Spring 2013 - Syllabus

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Schedule/Location: Tuesdays 6:00-9:00, Sage 4212

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Office hours: MWF 3:00-4:00, Clow Faculty Offices 416

Texts: (1) Le Poidevin, Robin, *Travels In Four Dimensions: The Enigmas of Space and Time*.
(2) Selected readings, available on our D2L site and elsewhere online.

About the course

This interdisciplinary seminar, which fulfills the University Honors Program capstone requirement, focuses on the topic of Time. Much of the class will be devoted to discussing student work in progress. But to provide ourselves with a common background, we will also talk about certain conceptual issues related to Time covered in Robin Le Poidevin's book, *Travels in Four Dimensions*, as well as in articles on the topic written by notable philosophers, and a few chapters from two other books: Bradley Dowden's *The metaphysics of time* (a dialogue), and Russell Stannard's *Relativity: A Very Short Introduction*. The relevant articles and chapters will be available on our D2L site and elsewhere online, but students can optionally purchase the books. We will also watch at least two feature films in class: "Looper", which relates to time travel, and "Minority Report", which relates to determinism, fatalism, and free will.

Seminar Projects

While we develop a general understanding of "time itself", students will branch out into their own disciplines to produce seminar projects that relate to the topic in a wide variety of ways. (We have a wonderfully diverse group of students in this class, representing 15 different majors!) The final products of these disciplinary projects, due the last night of class, should be 10-15 pages long and written in a style that is appropriate to the discipline (e.g., MLA for English and Foreign Languages; APA for Social Sciences). The last three weeks of class will consist entirely of final oral presentations of student projects. In these presentations, edited versions of written work may be read aloud, but alternative forms of presentation (such as PowerPoint presentations, informal summaries, handouts, etc.) can also be used. When doing independent research, "time management" (a worthy topic in itself) is essential! As listed in the lesson plan below,

general topics are due by the 3rd week;
specific project proposals are due by the 6th week;
partly annotated initial bibliographies are due by the 7th week;¹
first drafts of project abstracts are due by the 10th week;
first drafts of research papers are due by the 11th week;
essays in response to one of our common readings are due by the 12th week;
oral presentations are due by the 12th, 13th, or 14th week (determined by lottery);
final research papers are due by the 14th week.

¹ For tips on how to write an annotated bibliography (and other valuable insights into the research process, see <http://olinuris.library.cornell.edu/ref/research/skill28.htm>).

Grading Basis

1) Attendance & Participation (30%). Since this is a seminar and not a lecture course, your engagement with the material will be crucial to its success. For this reason, fully 30% of your final grade will depend on your regular attendance and participation. “Participation” includes making cogent comments about the readings, student work in progress, and other matters under discussion, but it also includes asking incisive questions. Some of our common readings are quite challenging and not always perfectly clear; by asking relevant questions, students can help the whole class better understand them. Of course, not everyone will always have an equal opportunity to participate during each class meeting. For this reason, *half of your participation grade will depend on your submitting (in writing) at least one question or comment per assigned reading, via our D2L Dropbox.* These will be **due 24 hours in advance of each class meeting**, and graded on a pass/fail basis. Adequate (passing) questions or comments will provide a clear indication of your having read *and thought about* the readings. Superior questions or comments will receive two points, one of which will count as extra credit; they must demonstrate a deeper-than-necessary engagement with the material (e.g., questions that are set up by a close analysis of a sentence or passage; questions that suggest connections between different readings; etc.). Your final participation grade will be calculated as a function of both this *pre-class* and *in-class* participation. A paucity of in-class participation can be partly compensated for by the submission of superior pre-class work, and *vice versa*. Of course, the easiest way to receive an ‘A’ for participation is simply to be diligent in both areas.

2) Essay in Response to a Reading (20%). Prior to the 12th week of class, you are to submit a 3-5 page essay in response to one or more of the assigned readings.

3) Oral Presentation(s) of Your Research (20%). This portion of your grade requires that you come to designated classes prepared to discuss (1) your general topic, (2) your more specific project proposal; (3) your partly annotated bibliography, (4) your abstract (a one-paragraph summary of your topic, methodology, and conclusion), (5) material from the first draft of your research paper, and (6) your final project itself.

4) Research Paper (30%). An in-depth, 10-15 page research paper on your chosen topic, preferably within your major discipline.

Letter grades will be assigned to each of the four components. At the end of the course, these letter grades will be translated into grade points (on a 4-point scale). Your final grade will be calculated as the average – weighted according to the percentages above – of these component grade points.

Important Note: In most of your majors, I qualify merely as an educated bystander. Therefore, it is crucial that you write your research papers in a way that can readily be comprehended by someone with little experience in your field. A similar point applies, of course, to your in-class presentations, which you should address to an intelligent but “uninitiated” audience. (By the way, being able to present technical information *accessibly* is a mark of high quality academic writing; you should strive for this even when communicating with other specialists in your field).

Weekly Lesson Plan

Week 1 (1/29)- Introduction to the course.

Readings: None.

Discussion of course content and methodology.

“Brainstorming” session on possible research topics in various disciplines.

Film: Looper (first half)

Week 2 (2/5)- Presentism, Eternalism, and The Possibility of Time Travel

Reminder: questions/comments on readings are due by Monday, 2/4, at 8:00 pm.

Readings:

(1) Ned Markosian, SEP article on *Time*, Section 6, “Presentism, Eternalism, and The Growing Universe Theory”.

(2) Robin Le Poidevan, Chapter 10: “Interfering with History”.

(3) David Lewis, “The Paradoxes of Time Travel”, article available on D2L.

Film: Looper (second half).

Week 3 (2/12)- Time and Change

Reminder: questions/comments on readings are due by Monday, 2/11, at 8:00pm.

Also due at this time: research project topics.

Readings:

(1) Ned Markosian, SEP article on *Time*, Section 2, “Reductionism and Platonism with Respect to Time”.

(2) Sydney Shoemaker, “Time Without Change”, article available on D2L.

(3) Robin Le Poidevan, Chapter 2: “Change”.

Discussion of student research project topics.

Week 4 (2/19)- The Reality or Unreality of Time

Reminder: questions/comments on readings are due by Monday, 2/18, at 8:00pm.

Readings:

(1) Ned Markosian, SEP article on *Time*, Section 4, “McTaggart’s Argument”, and Section 5, “The A Theory and The B Theory”.

(2) Robin Le Poidevan, Chapter 8: “Does Time Pass?”

(3) J.M.E. McTaggart, “The Unreality of Time”, article available on D2L.

Film: “Minority Report” (first half).

Week 5 (2/26)- Fatalism, Determinism, Free Will, and Time

Reminder: questions/comments on readings are due by Monday, 2/25, at 8:00 pm.

Readings:

- 1) Bradley Dowden, "Fatalism, Free Will, and Foreknowledge" (a dialogue), available on D2L.
- 2) William James, "The Dilemma of Determinism", available on D2L.

Film: "Minority Report" (second half)

Week 6 (3/5)- Beginnings, Endings, and Instants of Time

Reminder: questions/comments on readings are due by Monday, 3/4, at 8:00 pm.

Also due at this time: student project proposals (more detailed than just topics).

Readings:

- (1) Robin Le Poidevan, Chapter 5: "The Beginning and End of Time".
- (2) Bradley Dowden, "Zeno's Paradoxes and Supertasks" (a dialogue), available on D2L.
- (3) Robin Le Poidevan, Chapter 9: "The Cinematic Universe".

Discussion of student project proposals.

Week 7 (3/12)- The Arrow of Time

Reminder: questions/comments on readings are due by Monday, 3/11, at 8:00 pm.

Also due at this time: initial, partly annotated bibliographies.

Readings:

- (1) Robin Le Poidevan, Chapter 12: "The Arrows of Time".
- (2) Bradley Dowden, "The Arrow of Time", (a dialogue), available on D2L.

Discussion of initial, partly annotated bibliographies.

SPRING BREAK

Week 8 (3/26)- Objectivity, Conventionality, and The Metric of Time

Reminder: questions/comments on readings are due by Monday, 3/25, at 8:00 pm.

Readings:

- (1) Robin Le Poidevan, Chapter 1: "The Measure of All Things"
- (2) Bradley Dowden, "Mind, the Metric, and Conventionality"

Status reports on student projects; discussion of any difficulties encountered so far.

Catch up with any previous readings/questions/comments not yet adequately discussed.

Week 9 (4/2)- Space, Time, and Spacetime

Reminder: questions on readings are due by Monday, 4/1, at 8:00 pm.

Readings:

- (1) Russell Stannard, “Relativity: a very short introduction”, Part I, available on D2L.
- (2) Wikipedia article on Spacetime: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spacetime> (up to the section entitled “Mathematics of spacetimes”).

Guest Speaker: Prof. Dennis Rioux, UWO Physics Department.

Week 10 (4/9)- Memory and Anticipation

Reminder: questions on readings are due by Monday, 4/8, at 8:00 pm.

Readings:

- (1) John Sutton, SEP article on *Memory*, Sections 1, “The Concept of Memory”, and Section 2, “Memory and Representation”.
- (2) Jon Elster and George Loewenstein, “Utility from Memory and Anticipation”, available on D2L.

Discussion of student project abstracts (first drafts).

Week 11 (4/16)- Discussion of Student Writing Samples

Reminder: first (presumably rough) draft of project papers are due (in the Dropbox) before class Tuesday, 4/16.

Readings: none.

Discussion of student writing samples (first drafts).

Tie up loose ends.

Week 12 (4/23)- Student Research Oral Presentations

Due: 3-5 page response to one of the previously assigned readings.

Week 13 (4/30)- Student Research Oral Presentations

Week 14 (5/6)- Student Research Oral Presentations

Due: Final Draft of Research Paper

*If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness,
then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present.*

-Ludwig Wittgenstein