

HCOL 085A
The Pursuit of Knowledge
Fall 2017

Class meetings:	Professor:
Plenary lectures: Wednesdays, 5:05-6:20, Billings Lecture Hall (unless otherwise noted)	Office hours:
Email:	Phone:

The world is a complex and confusing place. How do we try to understand it without oversimplifying the complexity? In HCOL 085, we explore what it means to “know,” through classic and contemporary texts that present a wide range of perspectives on what we can know about the world and how we know it.

At the core of the course, we explore three foundational Western approaches to knowledge. First is René Descartes, whom many consider to be the founder of a distinctly modern approach to knowledge as springing from the mind (rationalism). Descartes is followed by David Hume, an important thinker in a tradition that opposes Descartes’ rationalism by claiming that we come to know the world first and foremost through our senses (empiricism). A third approach argues that we construct our knowledge of the world by creating narratives – that is, we build stories, assign specific patterns to our experiences, in order to give them coherence and meaning. We’ll examine the relative merits of these three approaches by reading primary texts and a range of accompanying material.

In the latter section of the course, we’ll delve into a fascinating stream of contemporary research, much of it conducted in the disciplines of psychology and economics, aiming to describe how humans actually perceive the world and make decisions. We conclude with an examination of some of the ethical considerations involved in the pursuit of knowledge with works by Hannah Arendt, Mary Shelley, and Martha Nussbaum.

We will, ourselves, be constructing some knowledge as we go, and you will contribute by expressing and supporting your ideas and your interpretations of our readings. HCOL 085 is not a lecture course: it relies on your active and informed participation in every single class session. To deepen this informed participation and build your confidence about the ideas you bring to the table, HCOL 085 is designed as a writing course as well. In addition to long-form expository essays, we’ll be doing a good deal of shorter, more informal writing, designed with a few core purposes in mind:

- To bring your thoughts and questions from course readings and plenaries to seminar discussions;
- To build a habit of reading actively, critically, and with curiosity;
- To turn a collection of observations about a text into a concise summary;
- To develop your (appropriately) tentative initial thoughts and opinions from seminar discussions into a confident voice on the page, and into focused, well-supported arguments;
- To use feedback and new perspectives in revising an initial draft.

This practice will lead to a multi-draft writing assignment that asks you to engage critically (and creatively!) with course texts (and, if you like, with additional material), in a longer essay. That assignment will start as a draft, undergo a substantial revision after feedback from me and your seminar colleagues, and eventually take the form of a final term paper for the course.

The Plenaries

All first-year Honors College students attend a seminar section of HCOL 085. Meanwhile, the entire first-year group frequently comes together on Wednesday evenings for a plenary session, from 5:05-6:20, usually in Billings Lecture Hall. The one exception to this is the lecture by Matt Richtel, the author of *A Deadly Wandering*, which will take place on a Monday in the Ira Allen Chapel.

Plenary lectures will take place on a weekly basis for the first six weeks of the course and will then shift to a pattern of alternating weeks for the remainder of the semester. While the content of plenaries varies, most feature speakers explaining their research or other creative work, thinking for us about the nature of knowledge, and illustrating connections between the humanities, social sciences, and STEM disciplines. A few take advantage of having us all in a room together to provide you with useful information about making the transition to college and navigating the first year successfully.

Required texts

Matt Richtel, *A Deadly Wandering* (New York: Morrow, 2014) ISBN: 978-006228407-5

René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*
(Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998) ISBN: 978-0872204201

David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*
(Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993) ISBN: 978-0872202290

Aristotle, *Poetics* (New York: Penguin, 1996) ISBN: 978-0140446364

Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011)
ISBN: 978-0374533557

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: The 1818 Text* (New York: Oxford, 1994) ISBN: 978-0199537150

Course packet (in the UVM Bookstore, as are all the books on this list)

Assignments and grades

Students must attend **all** class meetings and plenary lectures having read assigned material, having completed any assigned homework, and being ready to discuss the material in class. Other requirements are:

- **Four short papers** (about 700 words, double spaced). Designed to improve your thinking and writing, these papers will ask you to engage with the course material in different ways. The first short paper, due on the first day of class and ungraded, deals with our summer reading, *A Deadly Wandering*. For the others, assignments are distributed at least one week before the due date.
- **Capstone paper** (six to eight pages, double spaced). This paper allows you to explore a course-related topic of your interest in more depth. The first draft (worth one-third of the paper grade) is due in mid-November, and the final draft (worth two-thirds of the paper grade) is due on the last day of class. Students will choose topics well in advance of these dates. Precise due dates are listed below.

- **Homework.** Frequently during the course you'll have short, informal assignments. The assignments will often deal with our readings, but they may also be related to class discussions, plenaries, and things that surface during the semester. They will consist of different types of assignments: low pressure responses to questions, participation in discussion groups, exercises that ask you to analyze or research an issue more deeply, etc. Not every assignment will be formally graded, but I'll comment on your homework frequently, and communicate with you about my evaluation of your homework writing.
- **Final Exam.** The schedule for final examinations will be determined by the Registrar, and the date and time for this section's final will be communicated to you as soon as the Registrar publishes the schedule. **Please note: it is not possible to reschedule the date or time of your final exam. Keep this in mind when making travel arrangements for the winter break.**

Final grades are derived using the following weights: short papers 30% (10% per graded paper), homework 15%, capstone paper 20%, final exam 20%, and class participation 15%. Please do talk to me at any time during the semester if you have questions about my evaluation of your work.

Learning Outcomes:

In this course, you will learn to:

- tailor your writing to a specific audience
- effectively identify and utilize sources as evidence
- substantially revise your writing
- annotate texts for understanding and critical thinking
- paraphrase and summarize the arguments of others
- draw connections between readings
- distinguish between the ways different fields of scholarly inquiry produce knowledge

In short, we hope by the end of the semester that you will have cultivated a set of academic “habits” crucial to success as a student and a career professional, particularly *active and critical reading, writing as a learning process, and engaged participation.*

Classroom Rules and Expectations

- **Screens.** No phones on the table, ever, unless you're looking something up at the class's specific request. No texting, ever.
- **Attendance** is mandatory: you must come to every class and every scheduled plenary. Any unexcused absence will affect your participation grade. Habitual tardiness will also affect your participation grade.
- **Listen** carefully and respectfully to others; **contribute** to class discussion regularly (but be careful not to dominate); learn everyone's name, and use those names in class.
- **Engage** with others in the class. All comments and questions in discussion should *not* be addressed to me.
- Always **come prepared for class**—that means not only that you've done your reading, but also that you've had enough sleep the night before and something to eat before class begins.

Introduction

Date	Reading	Writing Assignment
T Aug 29	Matt Richtel, <i>A Deadly Wandering</i> , 1–387	Paper #1 due
W Aug 30	PLENARY, 5:05-6:20: Introductory Plenary	
R Sep 31	<p>Richtel, ctd.</p> <p>Oliver Burkeman, ““Why Can’t the World’s Greatest Minds Solve the Mystery of Consciousness?” <i>The Guardian</i> (2015) [Course-packet]</p> <p>Recommended: Keith Hjortshoj, <i>The Transition to College Writing</i>, 107–30, 135–37 [course-pack]</p>	

Framework I: Rationalism

T Sept 5	René Descartes, <i>Discourse on Method</i> , parts 1, 2	
W Sep 6	PLENARY, 5:05 – 6:20: Dr. Jim Hudziak, “The Neuroscience of Brain Development during the College Years: How to Build a Healthier Brain”	
R Sep 7	Descartes, <i>Discourse on Method</i> , parts 4, 6	
T Sep 12	Descartes, <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> , Synopsis, Meditations 1, 2	
W Sep 13	PLENARY, 5:00 – 6:20: Emily Proctor, “The Shape of the Universe: A Question of Perspective”	
R Sep 14	<p>Descartes, <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i>, Meditations 3, 6</p> <p>Excerpts from <i>The Correspondence Between Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes</i> (Shapiro ed., 2007), pp. 61–69 [course-pack]</p>	

Framework II: Empiricism

T Sep 19	David Hume, <i>Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding</i> , sections 2, 3	Paper #2 due [rewrite of first essay]
W Sep 20	PLENARY, 5:05 – 6:20: Brandon Ogbunu, title TBA	
R Sep 21	Hume, <i>Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding</i> , sections 4, 5	

M Sep 25	PLENARY: Matt Richtel, Ira Allen Chapel, time TBA Please note that plenary is on Monday this week.	
T Sep 26	Hume, <i>Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding</i> , section 12	
R Sep 28	Natalie Wolchover, “A Fight for the Soul of Science” <i>Quanta Magazine</i> (2015) [course-pack] Emile Durkheim, <i>The Elementary Forms of Religious Life</i> , 8–18 [course-pack]	

Framework III: Narrative

T Oct 3	Jerome Bruner, “The Narrative Construction of Reality,” <i>Critical Inquiry</i> (1991) [course-pack] In class: Heider and Simmel	Paper #3 Due
W Oct 4	PLENARY: 5:05 – 6:20: Paul Van de Graaf, US Attorney’s Office, “How Stories Work in the Courtroom”	
R Oct 5	Bruner, ctd. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story,” http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story	
T Oct 10	Aristotle, from <i>Poetics</i> , sections 1–8, 9.4, and 10 [course-pack], translated and edited by Malcolm Heath; Penguin (1997)	

W Oct 11	No Plenary	
R Oct 12	Hayden White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” from <i>Tropics of Discourse</i> (1978) [course-pack]	
T Oct 17	Oliver Sacks, “Preface,” “The Lost Mariner,” and “A Matter of Identity,” from <i>The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat</i> (1985) [course-pack].	Paper #4 due
W Oct 18	PLENARY: 5:05 – 6:20: Chris Danforth, “Measuring Happiness, Health, and Stories through Songs, Tweets, and Books”	
R Oct 19	Gavin Francis, “Storyhealing,” <i>Aeon</i> (2016) [course-pack] Philip Ball, “The Story Trap,” <i>Aeon</i> (2015) [course-pack].	

How Do We Think? The Contemporary Study of Rationality, Reasoning, and Error

T Oct 24	Daniel Kahneman, Chapters 1–4, and 7	
W Oct 25	No Plenary	
R Oct 26	Kahneman, Chapters 9, 11, 12, and 15	

T Nov 31	Kahneman, Chapters 35, 36, 38	
W Nov 1	PLENARY: 5:05 – 6:20: Lizzy Pope, “Explaining Our Rational Irrationality with Behavioral Economics and Beyoncé”	
R Nov 2	Steven Poole, “Not so Foolish,” <i>Aeon</i> (2014) [course-pack].	

T Nov 7	Barry Schwartz, “Self-Determination: The Tyranny of Freedom,” <i>American Psychologist</i> (2000) [course-pack].	
W Nov 8	No Plenary	
R Nov 9	Emily Singer, “The Neuroscience Behind Bad Decisions,” <i>Quanta Magazine</i> (2016) [course-pack] Elizabeth Kolbert, “Why Facts Don’t Change Our Minds,” <i>The New Yorker</i> (2017) [course-pack]	

Thinking and Moral Considerations

T Nov 14	Hannah Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” <i>Social Research</i> (1971) [course-pack].	
W Nov 15	No Plenary	
R Nov 16	Julie Beck, “The Running Conversation in Your Head,” <i>The Atlantic</i> (2016) [course-pack] Domenico Grasso and David Martinelli, “Holistic Engineering,” <i>The Chronicle Review</i> (2007) [course-pack]	
F Nov 17	Capstone draft due, 4:30 p.m.	
Nov 21 – 25	Thanksgiving Recess - No classes	
T Nov 28	Mary Shelley, <i>Frankenstein</i> , Preface and pp. 192–97 (Intro to 1831 edition), then read pp. 1–68	
W Nov 29	PLENARY: 5:05 – 6:20: <i>Frankenstein</i> in Context: A Faculty Discussion	
R Dec 30	Shelley, <i>Frankenstein</i> , pp. 69–123	
T Dec 5	Shelley, <i>Frankenstein</i> , pp. 124–191	
W Dec 6	No Plenary	
R Dec 7	Martha Nussbaum, “The Narrative Imagination” from <i>Cultivating Humanity</i> (1997) [course packet]	
F Dec 8	Capstone final draft due 4:30 p.m.	
Dec 12-16	Final Exams (dates TBA)	Note: dates and times of final exams are set by the Registrar and cannot be changed