Students with Disabilities

This syllabus is available in alternative formats upon request. In addition, if you may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability, you should contact the instructor immediately. Students with special needs should contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS) at 292-3307 for certification if they have not already done so. Upon such certification, the ODS and the instructor will make every effort to accommodate special needs. However, to ensure that evaluation of student performance in the course is conducted in a manner that is fair to all students, special accommodations will not be granted in the absence of ODS certification.

Academic Misconduct

All students at the Ohio State University are bound by the Code of Student Conduct (see http://studentaffairs.osu.edu/resource_csc.asp) and are responsible for familiarizing themselves with the Code. In particular, Rule 3335-23-04 (Prohibited conduct), Section A, defines academic misconduct. Suspected violations of the code in this class will be dealt with according to the procedures detailed in that code. Any alleged cases of misconduct will be referred to the Committee on Academic Misconduct.

Specifically, the use of unauthorized materials during exams, the use of unauthorized assistance on a graded assignment, falsification of documents, serving as or enlisting the assistance of a substitute for an exam or graded assignment, or violation of course rules as contained in this syllabus, in addition to the other prohibited conducts described in Rule 3335-23-04 Section A, constitute academic misconduct. If you have a question about whether or not an activity is or could be perceived to be prohibited, for this or any other class, please ask the instructor or T.A.. All graded assignments in this course should be completed by you alone and not by or in collaboration with anyone else.
Overview of the Course

People commonly believe in many extraordinary things. For example, the Syfy Channel airs Paranormal Witness, which they claim is based on “true stories of people who have lived through explanation-defying paranormal experiences.” Many people believe that celebrity mediums such as John Edward and Theresa Caputo can speak to their dead loved ones, and psychologist Dr. Gary E. Schwartz claims to have evidence showing that Edward and other psychic mediums really can contact the dead. The United States Psychotronics Association frequently holds their national convention in Columbus, Ohio, where psychics, dowser, and free-energy aficionados come together to learn about remote viewing, healing energies, telekinesis, and so forth. John Lott says that scientific research shows that crime rates go down as the number of guns in society goes up. Dr. Andrew Weil argues that we can think ourselves well.

If correct, some of these ideas may have great value. But if they are wrong, some can do equally great harm. So how can a person discriminate between bunkum and fact, between valuable innovation and wacky waste of time? Moreover, why do so many people continue to believe in ideas that have no apparent basis in reality? How do people come to believe in extraordinary things? This course is intended to provide answers to such questions and more generally, to provide the skills and knowledge necessary to evaluate extraordinary claims and beliefs. You might find yourself having to question beliefs that you have held as factual for a long time. Some topics that we will cover include alternative medicine, psychic phenomena, hypnosis and the nature of the brain. Many of the topics and controversies that we'll consider reflect the influence of an uncritical perspective, fallacious reasoning, and flawed research methodology. These are the hallmarks of pseudoscience. In this course, you will learn to distinguish between science and pseudoscience, to evaluate arguments and sources of evidence.

Readings and Topic Questions

Readings are assigned for every lecture day. You are expected to have done the readings before class on the day they are assigned. In addition, there will be topic questions assigned for almost every day. The topic questions may be downloaded from the class schedule with reading assignments on Carmen. You are expected to have prepared answers to these questions, and you must print out these questions and answers and bring them with you to class. You will discuss your answers in groups with your classmates, and we will also discuss them as a class.

Examinations and Quizzes

There will be two midterm exams and one cumulative final exam in the course, and two shorter quizzes. Exams and quizzes will be closed-book/closed-notes and are designed to draw on material covered in lecture, readings, and videos. Extra credit will be made available throughout the quarter. Each midterm exam is worth 20% of the total points available in the course, each quiz is worth 15%, and the final exam is worth 30%.

I reserve the right to modify the weights on exams and quizzes, for individuals or for the class as a whole, as I see appropriate. I also reserve the right to give unannounced or “pop” quizzes, either for extra credit or otherwise.

Items on the exams and quizzes will be a mix of formats. Typically one third of the points on the exams will be based on short answer questions, and the rest will be multiple choice. Quizzes are short essay format. Essay questions on exams and quizzes will generally require you to show that you understand the scientific principles and critical thinking skills that will be discussed in the first half of the course and that you can apply them to understand and critique the various sides of the controversial issues discussed in the remaining portion of the course. This amounts to more than simply memorizing principles or facts. Instead, it requires flexible understanding of those principles and the ability to apply them.

Bring a picture ID to each exam. No electronic communication devices will be permitted in the classroom during an exam.
Important Dates

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<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>Quiz 1</td>
<td>Tuesday, February 2</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Midterm 1</td>
<td>Tuesday, February 16</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quiz 2</td>
<td>Thursday, March 3</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Midterm 2</td>
<td>Tuesday, April 5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final</td>
<td>Monday, May 2 8:00 a.m. – 9:45 a.m.</td>
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Discussion boards close Wednesday, April 20

Policy on Missing Exams and Quizzes

Please note carefully:

1. If, because of an emergency, you cannot take an exam or quiz at the scheduled time, you must contact me BEFORE the test.

2. There will be NO EXCEPTIONS to (1.) above.

3. I have voice mail (688-4081) so you can leave me a time-stamped message if I am not at my desk.

4. You must provide DOCUMENTATION that verifies the emergency that prevented you from taking an exam or quiz at the scheduled time. No documentation, no makeup.

Quizzes will take place at the beginning of class and will last about 15 minutes. If you are late, you will not be able to make up the quiz. Don’t be late.

Grading

For a variety of reasons, I do not grade on a curve. For example, when a curve is used, no matter how well everyone in the class does on an exam, only a small percentage of students can receive an A. Instead, I prefer to give everyone a chance to get an A. Therefore, I apply the following preset cutpoints (the “OSU Standard Scheme”):

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<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>93%</td>
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<td>A-</td>
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<tr>
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<td>D</td>
<td>60%</td>
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Exams are designed to reflect what I think is an appropriate level of mastery of the material covered. So if everyone gets an A, that’s great! I’ll assume such performance reflects your hard work and intelligence (and, of course, my excellent teaching). If everyone does poorly, I’ll assume it was my fault, and define an A by the top scores on the test: 100% will be given as the second highest test score. So, if the top two scores were 67% and 62%, and you scored 54%, your test grade would be 54 points out of 62, or 87%.

Extra Credit

You may earn up to 10 extra credit points by participating in online discussions. There are five topic areas listed in the Discussion area: “The Zoo,” “Extraordinary Beliefs in the Media,” “Your Personal Extraordinary Belief,” “Extraordinary Beliefs in Psychology,” and “Alternative Health Practices.” For every 5 thoughtful posts on these topics, I will give you 1 extra credit point. You may not accumulate more than one extra credit point per day. Extra credit may not be used to raise a failing grade (E) to a passing grade (D or better).
I will be the judge of what is or is not a thoughtful post. Short “I agree!” or “Sweet!” posts do not count as thoughtful.

Please note that the last day to participate in discussions and receive credit for them is Wednesday, April 20. You may continue to use the discussion boards after this time, but you will not get extra credit for doing so.

**Books (Required texts are marked with asterisks)**


This book is a collection of short papers by experts in neuroscience and cognitive psychology. It explodes many of the myths that are commonly held about how the brain works, including the popular “You only use 10% of your brain” idea, and the left brain/right brain distinction.


This book expands on some of the topics in Della Sala (1999), and includes more current topics in cognitive science and neuroscience.


I first saw Mark Edward give a mentalism demonstration for Michael Shermer’s Caltech Lecture Series when he was making the transition from professional psychic to professional skeptic. In this lecture, he was trying to demonstrate how people can be fooled, and yet convince the audience that there was something real about his psychic abilities. This book chronicles his journey.


Gilovich, an expert in human judgment and decision making, presents many examples of faulty reasoning in this book. He ties each one to the ways that human decision-making processes fail us in everyday life.


Written by psychologists, this book sets out a number of topics (many of which we will discuss in this class) under the umbrella of “psychomythology.” These are the misconceptions about psychology that are propagated on television and in the popular press. Real psychologists are often embarrassed by how their profession is portrayed, and this book tries to set the record straight.


Robert Park has been following pseudoscience and its consequences in our society for many years, in his role as the director of the American Physical Society. This book chronicles his experiences as a “professional skeptic” and gives a unique perspective on how our society and our government often facilitates the proliferation of “voodoo science.”


This book is an excellent introduction to the tools of critical thinking and provides explanations of how extraordinary beliefs persist. The author does a very good job of explaining difficult and slippery concepts and there is no doubt that this book will hone your ability to think critically about psychology and about life in general.
Carl Sagan’s legacy may well be this book, of all his publications. As a popularizer of science, he did more to help nonscientists to understand the scientific method than perhaps any other person in the 20th century. This book describes not only how pseudoscience differs from science, using many common examples, but also captures the sheer joy of discovery that (true) scientists experience. Do we risk losing our technological advances to ignorance and superstition?

A more typical psychology textbook, devoted specifically to reasoning, logical fallacies, good and bad arguments, and the interpretation of probabilities and statistics. It is entirely atypical in that these concepts are introduced in the context of ESP, alien visitations, fairies, and so on. An excellent book.

In this book, Shermer not only presents several examples of bizarre belief, he discusses why such beliefs are held and provides point-by-point counter-arguments. Reading this book is a great way to gear up for an argument with your neighbor about her abduction by aliens.

This is also a more typical psychology textbook, written by a psychologist. It devotes many pages to critical thinking as applied to paranormal phenomena and then tackles a number of case studies such as psychic mediumship, complementary and alternative medicine, and intelligent design.

Much of what we observe in bizarre belief systems can be described as “magical thinking,” leading to superstitious behavior. As Vyse shows, superstitious behavior is entirely natural and normal. Vyse shows how superstitious beliefs are acquired and maintained, and discusses how critical thinking provides an alternative way of dealing with life’s uncertainties.

Additional Readings: Some readings come from sources other than these books. These are available at the class website at Carmen. I have also provided the references to them so that you can find them on your own if you wish.
# Class Schedule

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<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Weekday</th>
<th>Topics, Readings and Videos</th>
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| 1 (Jan 12) | Tuesday | *Introduction to the Course*  
Why do we need a course like this? What is the paranormal and what does it mean for a belief to be extraordinary?  
Explore some of the following web sites. While surfing, try and answer for yourself some of the following questions: What are these people selling? How do they benefit from maintaining their bizarre beliefs? What are their qualifications, e.g., are they doctors or Ph.D.s? Where is their data coming from? How could you test their ideas? Can you find other web sites that give an opposing or critical view?  
http://www.daniken.com: The site of Erich von Daniken, who claims that ancient archeological sites contain evidence of early human contact with extraterrestrial beings.  
http://www.cropcircleresearch.com/: A crop circle information site. Crop circles, sometimes elaborate circular patterns appearing in fields of grain crops, have been attributed to pranksters, landing extraterrestrial spacecraft, conjunctions of force field meridians, and secret laser technology from orbiting satellites.  
http://nostradamususa.com: Nostradamus was a 16th century physician who wrote a large number of prophetic “quatrains” that many believe have predicted some of the major events of the 20th (and 21st?) centuries.  
http://iufomrc.org: The International UFO Museum and Research Center site, which is devoted to investigating a famous crash of a UFO in Roswell, New Mexico. Many of our technological advances have been attributed to reverse engineering from the crash debris, which is purportedly held (along with the bodies of the alien pilots) at Area 51, a top-secret air base in Nevada.  
http://www.jasmuheen.com/: A Breatharian web site. Breatharians claim that the human body was designed to subsist on light alone, and that the need for food and drink is simply an addiction, similar to an addiction to cocaine or heroin. Jasmuheen is particularly well known; several people trying to follow her breatharian philosophy have died of dehydration and starvation. |

## Section I: The Scientific Toolbox

1 (Jan 14) Thursday *The Scientific Method*  
What makes a claim “scientific”? What is science and what does it do for us? What is reality and why does it matter? Today we will discuss how science works and how it is different from other ways of learning about the world.

- **Required Readings:**
  - Ruscio, Preface
  - Ruscio, Chapter 2. Science: Evaluating Claims to Knowledge
  - Sagan, Chapters 1-2. The Most Precious Thing, Science and Hope
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<th>Week</th>
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| 2 (Jan 19) | Tuesday | **Pseudoscience**<br>What is pseudoscience and how is it different from science? Is pseudoscience harmful? Also, who is Uri Geller and what does he have to do with pseudoscience?  
- Required Readings:  
  - Schick and Vaughn, Chapter 7. Science and Its Pretenders  
  - Ruscio, Chapter 1. Introduction: Pseudoscience and the Need for Critical Thinking  
  - Shermer, Chapter 2. The Most Precious Thing We Have  
- Supplementary Readings:  
  - Sagan, Chapter 12. The Fine Art of Baloney Detection  
  - (Optional) Uri Geller's website is [http://uri-geller.com](http://uri-geller.com).  
- Video:  
  - Segment from NOVA (1993) “Secrets of the Psychics” (Uri Geller (0:00-8:42)).  
  - (Optional) James Randi’s “Solved Mysteries” Workshop (Uri Geller), 1998. |
| 2 (Jan 21) | Thursday | **Falsifiability**<br>Bad ideas, whether scientific or not, are often based on claims that are not falsifiable. What does it mean to be falsifiable and why are scientists so hung up on this idea?  
- Required Readings:  
  - Stanovich, Chapter 2. Falsifiability: How to Foil Little Green Men in the Head  
  - Sagan, Chapter 10. The Dragon in My Garage  
- Video:  
  - Segment from NOVA (1993) “Secrets of the Psychics” (Charged Water (0:00-7:25)).  
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<th>Week</th>
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<td>3 (Jan 26)</td>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td><strong>Plausibility</strong>&lt;br&gt;Many bizarre beliefs are, on their face, implausible. Other beliefs are often argued to be plausible (implying we should give them credence). What does “plausibility” really mean?</td>
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<td>- Required Readings:&lt;br&gt;  - Ruscio, Chapter 7. Plausibility: All Beliefs Are Not Created Equal.&lt;br&gt;  - Park, Chapter 3. Placebos Have Side Effects</td>
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<td>3 (Jan 28)</td>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td><strong>The Psychology of Persuasion: Evaluating Sources of Information</strong>&lt;br&gt;If it appears in print, it must be true, right? How do we know when a publication is reputable? How do we know whether someone is an expert? What does it mean for a study to have been “peer reviewed”? Is peer review important?</td>
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<td>Week</td>
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<td>Topics, Readings and Videos</td>
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| 4 (Feb 2) | Tuesday | **Case Study: Deepak Chopra**  
*Quiz 1: Science and the Scientific Method*  
Quantum healing proposes, quite simply, that you can think yourself well. Is this possible? If so, what are the implications of this philosophy for patient care?  
- **Required Readings:**  
- **Supplementary Readings:**  
- **Video:** Segment from Deepak Chopra’s “Quantum Healing” |
| 4 (Feb 4) | Thursday | **Self-deception I**  
Frequently we don’t just believe or not, but we invest a lot in a belief. How do we fool ourselves into believing things that aren’t true, and why can’t we let go when the evidence becomes overwhelming that we’re mistaken?  
- **Required Readings:**  
  - Ruscio, Chapter 10. Belief: Confirmation Bias, Post-Hockery, and Over-confidence  
  - Shermer, Chapter 3. How Thinking Goes Wrong.  
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<th>Week</th>
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<th>Topics, Readings and Videos</th>
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<tr>
<td>4 (Feb 4)</td>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td><strong>Self-deception I (Continued)</strong></td>
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<td>• Supplementary Readings:</td>
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<td>5 (Feb 9)</td>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td><strong>Self-deception II: Pathological Science</strong>&lt;br&gt;Even experts can fool themselves, sometimes with embarrassing or devastating consequences.</td>
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<td>• Required Readings:</td>
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<td>– Shermer, Chapter 18. Why Smart People Believe Weird Things.</td>
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<td>• Supplementary Readings:</td>
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<td>• Video: Segment from NOVA (1993) “Secrets of the Psychics” (Retrieved January 5, 2016.)</td>
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<td>– Post-hockery (45:49-52:08)</td>
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<td>5 (Feb 11)</td>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td><strong>Case Study: Gary Schwartz</strong></td>
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<td>• Required Readings:</td>
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<td>• Supplementary Readings:</td>
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<td>– Marks, D. &amp; Kamman, R.. (1980). Kreskin’s Riddle (Ch. 4) and Solving Kreskin’s Riddle (Ch. 5). In <em>The Psychology of the Psychic</em> (pp. 42-72). Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books.</td>
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<td>• Video: James Van Praagh on 20/20</td>
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6 (Feb 16) Tuesday  Midterm I (in class), material through Thursday, Week 5

Section II: Facts and Misconceptions about the Brain and Behavior

6 (Feb 18) Thursday  Neural processes

How does the brain really work? What are the functions of the brain that produce hallucinations?

- Required Readings:

- Supplementary Readings:
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<th>Week</th>
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<th>Topics, Readings and Videos</th>
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| 7 (Feb 23) | Tuesday | Consciousness  
What does it mean to be conscious? Is consciousness separate from the body and the brain? Some people claim to be able to “astrally project” their consciousness long distances from their bodies. Can this kind of experience, as well as near-death experiences, be explained as a natural result of neural processing?  
- **Required Readings:**  
  - Shermer, Chapter 5. Through the Invisible: Near Death Experiences and the Quest for Immortality  
- **Supplementary Readings:**  
- **Video:** Segment from John Stossel’s The Power of Belief  
| 7 (Feb 25) | Thursday | Vision  
Seeing is believing. It is hard to be objective about the things we see. But our perceptual system can be easily fooled. Today we talk about visual perception and the way it works. These workings can lead to interesting visual illusions, some small and some large.  
- **Required Readings:**  
- **Supplementary Readings:**  

8 (Mar 1)  Tuesday  Sightings
Because our visual system depends so heavily on external cues, the things we think we see are frequently not what’s really there when those cues are removed. In the absence of cues, spaceships!

- Required Readings:

- Supplementary Readings:

8 (Mar 3)  Thursday  Quiz 2: Brain and Cognition
Memory
How does memory work? Is memory like a video recorder, storing all of our experiences in a wet, gray filing cabinet, or is it something else? Today we will discuss some of the most influential theories of memory and how they explain different memory phenomena.

- Required Readings:

- Supplementary Readings:
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| 9 (Mar 8) | Tuesday | **Memory Distortion**  
Why is it that some memories seem so strong, and others are so hard to reconstruct? How reliable are our memories, anyway? Today we will discuss how misunderstandings about memory have led to some terrible malpractice in psychology.  
- Required Readings:  
  - Sagan, Chapter 9: Therapy  
- Supplementary Readings:  
| 9 (Mar 10) | Thursday | **Judgment and Decision Making**  
Sometimes people make stupid choices, even very smart people. Why does this happen, and how can our decision-making mechanisms reinforce bizarre beliefs?  
- Required Readings:  
  - Ruscio, Chapter 13. Assessment: Classical Decision Theory  
  - Schick and Vaughn, Chapter 6: Evidence and Interference  
- Supplementary Readings:  
  - Gilovich, Chapter 2: Something out of Nothing: The Misperception and Misinterpretation of Random Data |
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<th>Week</th>
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<th>Topics, Readings and Videos</th>
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<tr>
<td>10 (Mar 14-18)</td>
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<td>No class - Spring Break</td>
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<td>11 (Mar 22)</td>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>Learning: Superstition</td>
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<td>What we have learned, past experiences, have strong effects on our decision-making processes. Often, superstitious behavior can result from past experiences. Today we discuss the development of superstition and how it relates to judgment.</td>
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<td>- Required Reading: Vyse, Chapter 3. Superstition and Coincidence</td>
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<td>- Supplementary Readings:</td>
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<td>Section III: Social Influence</td>
<td>11 (Mar 24)</td>
<td>Thursday Coercion</td>
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<td>Not every belief arises from desire or experience. Sometimes beliefs are forced on a subject by threats or intimidation.</td>
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<td>- Required Readings:</td>
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<td>- Video:</td>
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<td>– PBS Frontline’s <em>The Confessions</em>.</td>
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<td>Week</td>
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| 12 (Mar 29) | Tuesday | **Children and Adults**  
Do kids lie about the important stuff? Do kids know the difference between truth and make-believe? How do kids respond when an adult asks about the truth?  
- Required Readings:  
- Supplementary Readings:  
- Video:  
  - Segments from Frontline’s “Innocence Lost”  
  - Ceci’s Experimental Footage |
| 12 (Nov 31) | Thursday | **Hypnosis**  
Skilled hypnotists can put a person in a trance. In this trance-like state, a person will commit crimes, remember license plate numbers, revert to a past life, demonstrate superhuman strength or resistance to pain, or act like a chicken, all at the request of the hypnotist. Or maybe not.  
- Required Reading:  
- Supplementary Readings:  
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<th>Week</th>
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<td>13 (Apr 5)</td>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>Midterm II (in class), material from Tuesday, Week 6 through Thursday, Week 12</td>
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| 13 (Apr 7) | Thursday | **Case Study: Alien Abductions**  
Why do extraterrestrials need to kidnap certain people and subject them to humiliating physical examinations aboard their spacecraft? If these little gray folk are trying to be discrete, why kidnap prominent authors and artists, who seem to make lots of money writing books and selling alien portraits?  
  - **Required Readings:**  
    - Sagan, Chapter 6: Hallucinations  
    - Shermer, Chapter 6: Abducted!  
  - **Supplementary Readings:**  
  - **Video:** NOVA “Kidnapped by UFOs?” |
14 (Apr 12) Tuesday  Group Dynamics

Being part of a group can form an important part of a person’s identity. For example, some people define themselves as devout Catholics. Others belong to gangs, militias, or the Masonic Lodge. How does group membership foster bizarre beliefs?

- Required Readings:

- Supplementary Readings:
  - Heaven’s Representatives (1996). Do’s Intro: Our Purpose –

14 (Apr 14) Thursday  The Role of the Media

Larry King is a notable, respected television journalist. His program, “Larry King Live,” routinely hosted self-proclaimed psychic Sylvia Browne, during which she took calls from the television audience and provided personalized psychic readings. Does the fact that a major news network (CNN) “endorsed” these programs have any implications for the way people perceive Sylvia Browne? You betcha...

- Required Readings:
  - Park, Chapter 1. It’s Not News, It’s Entertainment: In Which the Media Cover Voodoo Science.

- Supplementary Readings:
### Week 15 (Apr 19) Tuesday

**Conspiracy Theories**

The CIA murdered John F. Kennedy. No Jews were murdered in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center because they were all warned to stay home. HIV was engineered to achieve the genocide of African people. Conspiracies are all around us, evident in the most mundane of everyday events. What is the appeal of such theories and how are they perpetuated? Do they actually serve a purpose?

- **Required Readings:**
  - Sagan, Chapter 5. Spoofing and Secrecy

- **Supplementary Readings:**

### Week 15 (Apr 21) Thursday

**Case Study: Satanic Ritual Abuse**

Some victims of sexual abuse claim that their abusers forced them to take part in grotesque rituals. They testify that they were forced to bear the children of their abusers, and then forced to murder and cannibalize their own babies. The Satanic Cult conspiracy is vast and sophisticated, involving law enforcement, day care, teachers, big business, and funeral directors (who dispose of the incriminating remains).

- **Required Readings:**

- **Supplementary Readings:**
  - Smith, M. (1981). In *Michelle Remembers*. Pocket Books. (*Warning: The material in this reading is sexually explicit and violent. Don't read it if you don’t want to.*)

- **Video:** Frontline’s “The Search for Satan”

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**Finals (May 2) Monday**

*Final Exam (8:00 a.m. – 9:45 a.m.): Cumulative, Weeks 1-16*