

Death and the Meaning of Life

W101 – Fall 2022 Syllabus

Basic course information

Instructor: Dr. Justin Mooney
Email: mooneyj@denison.edu
Office: Knapp 205K
Office hours: 1:30 - 2:30 MWF

Course dates: Aug 29 - Dec 20
Date & time (sec. 10): 12:30p - 1:20p MWF
Date & time (sec. 11): 3:00p - 3:50p MWF
Room: Fellows Hall 302

The best way to communicate with me outside of class is via the email address listed above. I will do my best to answer emails within 48 hours.

Course description and objectives

Is death bad? If it is, what makes it bad? What happens after death? Is there a heaven or a hell? Are we reincarnated? And what implications do the answers to these questions have for the meaning of life? This course will focus on questions like these. We will explore what philosophers from diverse traditions, both religious and secular, have had to say about them.

This class is a W101 course, so as we explore these philosophical questions, we will also be working to develop academic writing skills that will serve you in a variety of your college courses. These skills include (but are not limited to) finding, citing, summarizing, and responding to academic articles.

Course objectives:

1. Learn the techniques of academic writing, including how to properly summarize, quote, cite, and respond to academic articles.
2. Gain experience writing academic papers and revising them in light of both peer and instructor feedback.
3. Pursue research on a topic relevant to the course theme, death and the meaning of life, and write a research paper which interacts with a variety of academic sources.

Assignments

Article summary: Your first writing assignment will be to write a three-page summary of one of the reading assignments that aims to accurately represent the views of that author. It is not a statement of your own views. You will submit both a first draft and a final version. More instructions will be provided in class.

Critical essay: After completing the article summary, you will be asked to write a six-page critical essay that first summarizes one of the reading assignments and then critically evaluates it. You will submit both a first draft and a final version. More instructions will be provided in class.

Research paper (and proposal): Your final assignment will be a research paper on an approved topic. You will first write a one-page proposal outlining the question you are aiming to answer and your plans for answering it. Then you will find and read some academic sources on your topic and draft an eight- to ten-page paper which engages with those sources and defends a clearly stated thesis. You will submit both a first draft and a final version. More instructions will be provided in class.

Critiques: There will be three in-class critiques where you will read and comment on another student's writing. Your comments will be submitted for credit. More instructions will be provided in class.

Participation: this class will include a discussion component and peer-review exercises, so participation will be important to your learning experience. In this class, participation has three main components:

- (i) Attending class regularly. Poor attendance may negatively impact your grade. (See below for my attendance policy.)
- (ii) Completing the assigned readings on time. In the course schedule below, each reading is listed next to the date that we will discuss it in class, and should be completed by the start of class on that date.
- (iii) Active involvement in class discussion and activities. Many class sessions will include one or more of the following: a small group discussion time, a full class discussion time, and group writing critiques. To ensure that you get full points for participation, you should always contribute to small-group discussions and critiques, and frequently contribute to full-class discussions.

Relevant resources

Accessibility: Students with a documented disability should complete a Semester Request for Accommodations through their Accommodate MyAccommodations app on MyDenison. It is the student's responsibility to contact me privately as soon as possible to discuss specific needs and make logistic arrangements well in advance of an evaluation. I rely on the Academic Resource Center (ARC) located in 020 Higley Hall, to verify the need for reasonable accommodations based on the documentation on file in that office. Reasonable accommodations cannot be applied retroactively and therefore ideally should be enacted early in the semester as they are not automatically carried forward from a previous term and must be requested every semester.

Writing center: Students are encouraged to seek assistance from the Writing Center while working on the assignments for this course. The writing center is located in the library. More information can be found here: <https://denison.edu/academics/support/the-writing-center>

Readings: All of the required readings for this course will be articles and extracts provided on Canvas. You do not need to purchase any textbooks.

Grades

Your final grade in this class breaks down as follows. The article summary will be worth 10% of your final grade; the critical essay will be worth 20% of your final grade; the research paper will be worth 30% of your final grade; the three drafts of these assignments will be worth 15% of your final grade (5% each); the three in-class critiques will be worth 15% of your final grade (5% each); the research paper proposal will be worth 5% of your final grade; and the remaining 5% of your final grade will be based on participation.

This class will use a standard grading scale:

A	93-100%	C	73-76%
A-	90-92%	C-	70-72%
B+	87-89%	D+	67-69%
B	83-86%	D	65-66%
B-	80-82	F	0-65%
C+	77-79%		

Policies¹

Attendance: Regular attendance is expected. However, students are permitted three unexcused absences with no penalty. More than three unexcused absences may result in a deduction of points from the student's final grade.

Extensions: Extensions may be granted in special circumstances. Requests for extensions should be made prior to the due date of the assignment. Otherwise, assignments will be deducted by 1/3 letter grade for each day they are late (e.g. a B+ paper drops to a B paper if it is one day late; it drops to a B- if it is two days late; etc.). Assignments more than one week late will not be accepted.

¹ The statements on academic honesty and accessibility below are the standard ones provided for use on syllabi by Denison University.

Class Discussion: There will be many opportunities for in-class discussion during this course. Students are expected to be respectful of others. To help ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to contribute during class discussions, we will use “the finger system”, which I will explain on the first day of class.

Academic Honesty: Academic honesty, the cornerstone of teaching and learning, lays the foundation for lifelong integrity. Academic dishonesty is intellectual theft. It includes, but is not limited to, providing or receiving assistance in a manner not authorized by the instructor in the creation of work to be submitted for evaluation. This standard applies to all work ranging from daily homework assignments to major exams. Students must clearly cite any sources consulted—not only for quoted phrases but also for ideas and information that are not common knowledge. Neither ignorance nor carelessness is an acceptable defense in cases of plagiarism. It is the student’s responsibility to follow the appropriate format for citations. Students should ask their instructors for assistance in determining what sorts of materials and assistance are appropriate for assignments and for guidance in citing such materials clearly. For further information about the Code of Academic Integrity, see: <http://denison.edu/academics/curriculum/integrity>.

Class Schedule

*This schedule is subject to change.

Week 1

- Aug 29 Intro
- Aug 31 Activity: what is the meaning of life?
- Sept 2 McBrayer, “Facts and Opinions” (short video)

Week 2

- Sept 5 Wolf, “Meaningfulness” (sections 1-5)
- Sept 7 Wolf, “Meaningfulness” (section 6)
- Sept 9 Writing workshop: summarizing

Week 3

- Sept 12 Blumenfeld, “Living Life Over Again” (sections 1-3)
- Sept 14 Benatar, “Better Never to Come into Existence” (sections 1-2)

Sept 16 Writing workshop: quoting

Week 4

Sept 19 Williams, "The Makropulos Case"

Sept 21 Williams, "The Makropulos Case" (no new reading)

Sept 23 Writing workshop: citing

Week 5

Sept 26 Timmerman, "Death's Time-of-Harm Problem" (sections 1-2)

Sept 28 Timmerman, "Death's Time-of-Harm Problem" (sections 3-4)

Sept 30 **Draft of article summary due** / critique

Week 6

Oct 3 Bradley, "The Worst Time to Die" (up to p. 301)

Oct 5 Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion" (pp. 47-50)

Oct 7 **Article summary due** / Writing workshop: responding

Week 7

Oct 10 Blessing, "Atheism and the Meaningfulness of Life" (up to p. 113)

Oct 12 Blessing, "Atheism and the Meaningfulness of Life" (p. 113 - end)

Oct 14 Writing workshop: objecting

Week 8

Oct 17 No class (fall break)

Oct 19 Jackson, "Pascal's Wager"

Oct 21 Bostrom, "Pascal's Mugging"

Week 9

Oct 24 Lewis, "Divine Evil" (up to p. 238)

Oct 26 Lewis, "Divine Evil" (p. 238-end)

Oct 28 **Draft of critical essay due** / critique

Week 10

Oct 31 Pelsler, "Heavenly Sadness" (skip section 7.2)

Nov 2 Cyr, "A Puzzle About Death" (sections 3 & 4)

Nov 4 **Critical essay due** / Writing workshop: topic development

Week 11

Nov 7 Stoeber, "Personal Identity and Rebirth"

Nov 9 Stoeber, "Personal Identity and Rebirth"

Nov 11 Writing workshop: finding sources

Week 12

Nov 14 Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy*, pp. 18-22.

Nov 16 Betty, "Dvaita, Advaita, and Viśiṣṭādvaita" (up to p. 219)

Nov 18 **Research proposal due** / share research proposals

Week 13

No class (Thanksgiving break)

Week 14

Nov 28 The *Mozi*, "Simplicity in Funerals III"

Nov 30 The *Mozi*, "Understanding Ghosts III"

Dec 2 The *Mozi*, "Condemning Fatalism I"

Week 15

Dec 5 Fraser, "Xunzi Versus Zhuangzi" (sections 1-4)

Dec 7 Fraser, "Xunzi Versus Zhuangzi" (sections 5-7)

Dec 9 **Draft of research paper due / critique**

Week 16

Dec 12 Wrap-up (reflection)

Research paper due on... [TBD]

There is no final exam in this class