

COMS 448: The Rhetoric of Extraordinary Claim

Fall 2010

F 11:00-1:45

“I would rather have unanswered questions
than unquestioned answers”

— Valerie Tarico

Instructor: Peter Marston

Hours: Mondays: 12:00-12:30, 6:00-7:00

Wednesdays: 12:00-12:30, 3:30-4:00

Fridays: 2:00-2:30

Text: Schick & Vaughn, *How to Think About Weird Things*, 6th edition

COURSE OVERVIEW:

One of the characteristics of contemporary American popular discourse is a marked increase in irrationalism. Belief in the paranormal, pseudoscience, and millennialism is perhaps more prevalent than at any other time in the history of Western Civilization. This course seeks to test these beliefs through the application of rhetorical analysis and critical thinking to discourse advancing extraordinary claims. Upon completion of this course, students should be able to: [1] identify extraordinary claims in popular discourse; [2] identify the types of appeals, including forms of reasoning and evidence, used to advance extraordinary claims in popular discourse; [3] assess the strength of rhetoric advancing extraordinary claims; [4] prepare critical analyses and refutations of rhetoric advancing extraordinary claims.

READING:

All reading assignments are due on the date listed on the syllabus. The lecture material in this course is designed to build upon the assigned readings, and therefore, it is imperative that students complete their reading assignments *before* class.

In order to ensure compliance with the reading assignments, there will be a number of reading quizzes throughout the semester. These quizzes will be given only on days when a reading assignment is due and will cover only the material from that day's reading assignment. The general types of questions that might be asked include: "What are the authors main points?"; "Identify one or more concept(s) introduced in the reading?"; "What extraordinary topics are discussed in this reading?" and so on. Reading quizzes will consist of five questions. Three correct answers will constitute a passing grade. Semester grades for these quizzes will be assigned according to the following schedule:

No failing grades:	A
One failing grade:	B
Two failing grades:	C
Three or more failing grades:	F

There are no make-ups for the reading quizzes. If a student misses a reading quiz, he or she will receive a failing grade on that quiz. Reading quizzes are administered at the very beginning of class, so it is important that you come to class on time. Students who enter class after the reading quiz *has begun* will not be allowed to complete the quiz. If you arrive to class and the quiz has already begun, please wait quietly outside the classroom. Do not take a seat until all quizzes have been collected. [*reading quizzes: 20% of total class grade*]

PRACTICUM PRESENTATIONS:

On the syllabus, there are twelve practicum class meetings. On these days, students will make presentations and lead discussions dealing with actual rhetorical discourse advancing particular extraordinary claims. Students may work individually or in groups, but each student is responsible for 30 minutes on a given practicum day. Students are encouraged to use multimedia when appropriate. More detailed guidelines for the practicum presentations will be distributed separately. [*practicum presentation: 30% of total class grade*]

EXAMINATIONS:

There will be two examinations, a midterm and a final. Both exams will cover both lecture and reading materials and will consist entirely of short answer questions. The final exam will not be cumulative. [*midterm exam: 25% of total class grade; final exam: 25% of total class grade*]

In order to minimize disruptions and improve exam security, exams will *not* be given to students who arrive to class late on exam days. Students who miss an exam for any reason should discuss the matter with the instructor immediately.

WORKLOAD:

This course is designed according to the standard of the Carnegie unit (and in accordance with C.S.U.N. policy). This standard calls for two hours of outside study per week for each course unit. Thus, in this course, students are expected to devote six hours per week *outside* of class to reading, studying and preparing assignments. Evaluation standards for examinations and other assignments will reflect this expectation.

ACADEMIC HONESTY:

All students are responsible for understanding and following campus policies of academic honesty as described in the schedule of classes and C.S.U.N. catalog. Students violating standards of academic honesty will be penalized by a failing grade in the course and/or university disciplinary action.

GRADING:

Course grades will be assigned by summing weighted assignment and exam grades. Grades of record will be determined by the following scale:

<i>Class G.P.A.</i>	<i>Grade</i>	<i>Class G.P.A.</i>	<i>Grade</i>
3.75-4.00	A	2.25-2.49	C+
3.50-3.74	A-	1.90-2.24	C
3.25-3.49	B+	1.60-1.89	C-
2.75-3.24	B	0.90-1.59	D
2.50-2.74	B-	0.00-0.89	F

CITIZENSHIP AND PARTICIPATION:

Although the grading scale reflects the determination of grades under typical circumstances, the instructor reserves the right to adjust grades—*both up and down*—based upon the subjective assessment of elements such as citizenship, participation, diligence, and improvement in class performance, among others.

Students are expected to be *good citizens* and *active learners*. This entails: coming to class on time and prepared, asking for clarification when needed, answering questions asked by the instructor and other students, handing in all assignments, respecting the opinions of others, and doing your best work at all times.

CLASSROOM MANNERS

In order to foster a more productive learning environment, students are also expected to observe simple rules of classroom manners. If you arrive to class late, please enter through the door at the rear of the classroom as quietly as possible. At the beginning of class, please put away all technology, including cellphones, media players and laptops. If at any point, you need to leave the classroom, please ask to be excused. Please refrain from eating in class. Please do not do homework or prepare for exams in other courses during our class.

STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES:

The Department of Communication Studies has established the following student learning outcome for students in this course:

2. Students will demonstrate the ability to analyze and evaluate critically communication practices, structures, messages and outcomes.

Students should note that student learning outcomes reflect the ways in which the Department of Communication Studies has positioned this course in relation to the broader programmatic objectives of the Communication Studies major. Student learning outcomes do not establish the specific objectives for this course nor do they comprise or exhaust the instructor's standards of evaluation.

SYLLABUS

<u>Date:</u>	<u>Assignments:</u>	<u>Course Outline:</u>
8/26	1-13	I. Introduction to extraordinary belief.
8/31	14-34	A. What is belief?
9/2		B. What is an extraordinary claim? <i>Practicum:</i> Vitamin O.
9/9	35-50	II. The role of reasoning in justifying extraordinary claims.
9/14	50-61	A. The nature and forms of arguments.
9/16		B. Informal fallacies. <i>Practicum:</i> Telekinesis and levitation.
9/21	62-78	III. The role of evidence in justifying extraordinary claims.
9/23	78-87	A. Reliable sources of evidence.
9/28	88-100	B. Dubious sources of evidence. <i>Practicum:</i> Astrology.
9/30	101-120	IV. The role of perception in justifying extraordinary claims.
10/5	121-146	A. Perceptual biases.
10/7	147-163	B. Cognitive biases.
10/12		C. The limitations of anecdotal evidence. <i>Practicum:</i> Miracle cures.
10/14	Review	
10/19	Midterm	
10/21	164-179	V. The role of science in justifying extraordinary claims.
10/26	179-190	A. Principles of scientific method.
10/28	190-206	B. Criteria of scientific adequacy. <i>Practicum:</i> Creationism.
11/2	206-227	<i>Practicum:</i> ESP.
11/4	228-235	VI. Methods of detecting irrationalism.
11/9		A. Detecting irrationalism in the paranormal.
11/16	235-244	B. Detecting irrationalism in pseudoscience. <i>Practicum:</i> Homeopathy.
11/18	244-257	<i>Practicum:</i> UFO abductions.
11/23	257-265	<i>Practicum:</i> Communicating with the dead.
11/25	265-280	<i>Practicum:</i> Near-death experiences.
11/30	280-288	<i>Practicum:</i> Ghosts.
12/2	288-307	<i>Practicum:</i> Conspiracy theory.
12/7	308-333	VII. The problem of relativism.
12/9	Review	
12/14	Final Exam [3:00]	