

PHL 550: Knowledge, Truth and Belief (Epistemology)

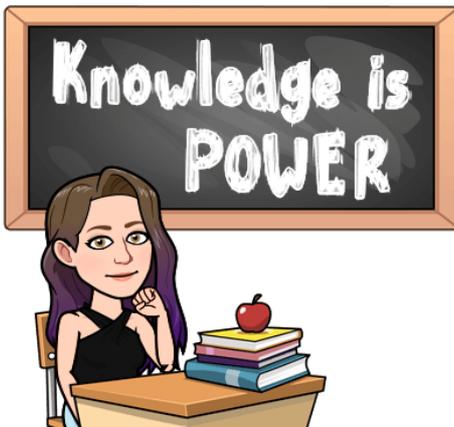
Semester: Fall 2020
Instructor: **Dr. Liz Jackson Withorn**
Email: lizjackson111@ryerson.ca
I respond to email M–F before 5pm EST
Official class meeting times:
Monday 11am–1pm; Tuesday 9am–10am



Course Description

Epistemology is **the study of knowledge**. *Belief* and *truth* are parts of knowledge. But what are the other components of knowledge? How much can we know? Could someone know that God exists? How do other people affect what we can (and can't) know?

This class will have four parts. Here are examples of the questions we will cover.



(Unit 1: Knowledge) What is knowledge? What is truth? When is a belief justified? Are there other components of knowledge? Should we even analyze knowledge at all?

(Unit 2: Skepticism) Can we know anything? If so, what can we know? Is our knowledge non-existent, very limited, or widespread?

(Unit 3: Social Epistemology) When should we believe someone else's testimony? How does social media affect what we can know? Is it ever okay to believe beyond—or even against—the evidence?

(Unit 4: Religious Epistemology) Could someone know God exists? Is it possible to know that God exists without having a good argument for God's existence? What is faith? Can faith be rational?

This course is introductory and does not have prerequisites.

Learning Outcomes

At the end of this course, students should be able to:

- Define *premises*, *conclusions*, *arguments*, *validity* and *soundness*. Identify when and why an argument is a good argument, and when and why an argument is a bad argument.
- Explain and illustrate the main components of *knowledge*: truth, belief, justification, etc.
- Understand and analyze arguments for and against skepticism.
- Understand debates in social and religious epistemology and apply them to today's issues.
- Demonstrate in-depth understanding of a particular argument or topic we discuss in class. Evaluate the argument and assess objections to it.
- Learn to discuss philosophy with others effectively and to ask good philosophical questions.

Contacting Me

Office hours: I don't have regular, official office hours, since our course is virtual and people are in different time zones. However, I'm available via Zoom by appointment on weekday afternoons (I'm in EST). Email me to set up an appointment.

Email: I'm also available to answer questions via email. Keep in mind:

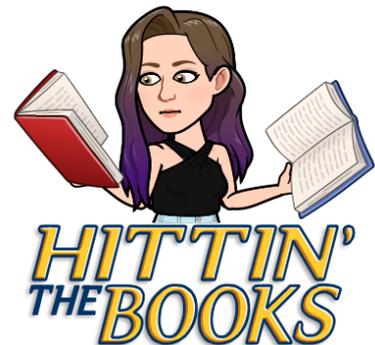
- I respond to email on weekdays before 5pm EST, and I'm almost never available via email on weekends. (Example: if you write me with a question on Friday evening, you likely won't hear back until Monday).
- Please check to see if your question is answered on the syllabus before emailing me.
- Please be professional in your emails to me. Start your email with something like:
 - Dear Dr. Jackson/Professor Jackson/Dr. Liz Jackson
- And then sign your email with something like:
 - Best/Sincerely, Your Name
- I won't respond to emails 24 hours before a large assignment is due. (Please don't wait until the last minute to start an assignment!)

Note: You can call me Dr. Jackson, Professor Jackson, or Dr. Liz Jackson.

Course Policies

Late work: Late work will be deducted one-third letter grade for each day late (A to A-, etc.). However, I am flexible and generous with extensions (especially during a pandemic). If something comes up or you need more time, let me know and we can work something out.

Plagiarism: Plagiarism is representing another's work as your own. To put it simply: **DO NOT PLAGIARIZE**. Just don't do it. I take plagiarism very seriously. To discourage plagiarism, I am generous with extensions for late work. If you need more time on an assignment, let me know. I promise things will work out better if you communicate with me, rather than plagiarizing.



If you consult a resource in your writing, **cite it**. If you paraphrase a resource in your writing, **cite it**. If you quote a resource in your writing, **cite it**. (I don't care how you cite it—you can describe or link it in a footnote, in parenthesis, or in a bibliography at the end.)

Texts: There is no textbook for this class. We will instead be working from a variety of material, including professional philosophy articles, opinion pieces, podcasts, and video. Each topic will have required material. Most topics will have further recommended material.

I am not a fan of bogging students down with long, boring readings. I've done my best to keep all readings short and manageable, and I've assigned a lot of videos and podcasts to supplement the readings. In exchange, **I ask that you actually do the readings, watch the videos, and listen to the podcasts**. All readings/podcasts/videos assignments include an interactive component (message boards, reading responses, or group work).

Grading scale: Ryerson has a [standardized grading scale for undergraduate courses](#).



Ryerson Code of Conduct: Ryerson University’s [Student Code of Academic Conduct](#) defines academic misconduct, the processes the University will follow when academic misconduct is suspected, and the consequences that can be imposed if students are found guilty of misconduct. Further information is also available at www.ryerson.ca/academicintegrity. Ryerson University’s [Student Code of Non-Academic Conduct](#) covers, among other things, disruption of learning and teaching.

Accessibility: I am committed to providing all students with the resources needed for their success. Please inform me of any way I can assist you to enjoy and thrive in this course. Ryerson’s [Student Learning Support](#) cluster provides valuable programs and initiatives for [academic accommodation](#), [English language support](#), [math support](#), [study skills and transition support](#), and [writing support](#).

Final Exam: There’s no final exam for this class. Instead, students will write a final paper.

Pandemic: We are currently living in an extraordinarily difficult season in the history of human beings. I’m committed to helping you learn in an environment where you are supported, especially this semester. **If, at any point in the semester, you face COVID-19 related difficulties, please let me know how I can support you more effectively.**

Assignments and Grading

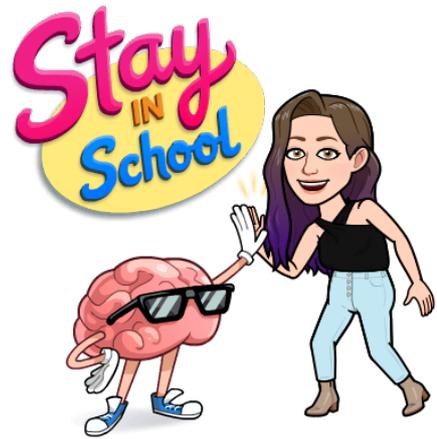
This chart summarizes the assignments in this course. Below is more information about each component.

Assignment	Value	Components	Grading
(1) Participation	30 %	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Message board posts 2. Reading reflections 3. Large group discussions 	Pass/fail (grade determined by what percent are successfully completed)
(2) Group work	20 %	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Small group discussions and reflections 2. Two podcasts 	Self- and Group-assessed
(3) Final paper	50 %	TBA	Traditional

Participation (30%)

Unfortunately, we won’t be meeting in person. Even though we can’t have in-person discussion, philosophy is best done by active reflection on ideas and interaction with others. There are three ways that students participate—prove that you are both doing the readings/watching the videos/listening to the podcasts and reflecting on them.

- **Message board posts** (graded pass/fail): in weekly message board posts (on Google docs) students will respond to, evaluate, or raise questions about a video/podcast/reading. Students are also required to respond to at least two other posts on the message board per week.
 - Your post: **Due Wednesday of each week by MIDNIGHT.**
 - Your two responses: **Due FRIDAY of each week by MIDNIGHT EST.**



- **Reading reflections** (graded pass/fail): 1-2 reading reflections will be required per unit (see schedule). Reading reflections have three parts:

- (1) summarizing the reading
- (2) evaluating the reading
- (3) communicating outstanding questions about the reading

Reading reflections are **due FRIDAY of each week by MIDNIGHT EST.**

- **Large group discussion / Q&A:** Once per unit, we will all meet as a large group via Zoom. This meeting will consist in discussions and answering questions submitted by students. **Attendance will be taken**, and those who attend the meeting are required to submit a question about the reading or unit beforehand. If a student can't attend the meeting, they will have an alternative writing assignment.
 - First large group discussion: **Monday Oct 5, 11am-1pm EST.**
 - Questions due Friday, Oct 9, midnight EST.
 - Second large group discussion: **Monday, Nov 2, 11am-1pm EST.**
 - Questions due Friday, Oct 30, midnight EST.
 - Third large group discussion: **Monday, Nov 23, 11am-1pm EST.**
 - Questions due Friday, Nov 20, midnight EST.
 - Final large group meeting/course wrap up: Monday, Dec 7, 11am-1pm EST.
 - Questions due Friday, Dec 4, midnight EST.

A note on pass/fail assignments: While these are graded pass/fail, **I will read both the message board posts and the reflections.** They are expected to demonstrate that the student both did the reading and reflected on it. If they do not sufficiently demonstrate this, they will not pass. This does **not** mean the student must have a perfect understanding of the reading, but instead these assignments should reflect an effort to understand the ideas presented and critically evaluate them. A student's grade is determined by what percentage of these are successfully completed.

Group work: 20% (self- and group-assessed)

Students will be in groups of ~5; these will be your groups throughout the semester. There are two components to group work.

- The first, weighed more heavily, is **two group podcasts.** These podcasts should do three things:
 - (1) explain a debate simply, using lots of examples
 - (2) respond to and evaluate the debate
 - (3) reflect on a unit more generally, and discuss how the debate fits into the unit

- The second is **small group discussions and reflections**. Groups will meet on their own two times throughout the semester (without a required podcast component). Groups will use this time to reflect on that week's reading together and work through a worksheet of discussion questions. Each group will turn in the worksheet based on what they discussed, and submit a screen shot of their meeting.



A note on self- and group-assessment: I realize that group work can be difficult when not everyone participates or contributes. For this reason, group work is only 20% of your grade. Further, both components of group work will be self- and group- assessed. This means you will give both yourself and your group members a grade (and explanation for that grade) based on participation and contribution in the group. **The final group-work grade is determined by the instructor**, but I will take self and group grades into account.

Final Paper (50%)

This paper will involve summarizing and evaluating an argument. While it is due during finals week, both a topic and later an outline are due earlier in the semester. This paper is half your grade, so I encourage you to plan ahead and begin working on it well before it is due.

A note on paper length: While there will be a word minimum for your papers, quality is much more important than quantity. I strongly prefer a tightly-argued paper to a long, rambling paper without much substance.



PHL 500 Schedule (Readings and Assignments)

Week of:	Topic:	Day 1: To consume	Day 1: Assignment	Day 2: To consume	Day 2: Assignment	Large assignments:	Extra resources on this topic:
Sept 7 (Week 1)	Intro to the course / logic and arguments	Read syllabus; Watch intro videos	Syllabus quiz ; introductory message board post	Watch logic video (7 min)	Logic Worksheet		https://youtu.be/rCnb7vap15o
UNIT 1: KNOWLEDGE							
Sept 14 (Week 2)	Intro to epistemology	Intro to the theory of Knowledge (6-min video)	Assignment: message board post	Nagel "Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction" Ch. 1	Reading reflection (google form)		1000 word Philosophy. "Epistemology"

Sept 21 (Week 3)	Gettier	The Gettier Problem (6-min video)	Assignment: message board post	Nagel "Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction" Ch. 4 (part 1)	Small group discussion and worksheet		Zagzebski, "The Inescapability of Gettier Problems"
Sept 28 (Week 4)	Williamson: Knowledge First	Knowledge-First Epistemology (10-min video)	Assignment: message board post	Nagel "Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction" Ch. 4 (part 2)	Submit question and attend large group discussion OR 2 page paper		Williamson, "Knowledge First Epistemology"

MONDAY, OCT 5: Large Group Meeting #1 on Knowledge

UNIT 2: SKEPTICISM

Oct 5 (Week 5)	Skepticism: Descartes	The Problem of Skepticism (10-min video)	Assignment: message board post	Descartes, Meditations 1 and 2 (excerpts)	Reading reflection (google form)		Nagel "Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction" Ch. 2
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Oct 12 (Week 6): Study week; no class

Oct 19 (Week 7)	Skepticism: Bostrom	The Simulation Argument, 15-min Philosophy Bites Podcast with Nick Bostrom	Assignment: message board post			Group Podcast 1 due	Are you living in a computer simulation? Bostrom
Oct 26 (Week 8)	Responses to Skepticism	Three Responses to Skepticism (9-min video)	Assignment: message board post	Rinard, Reasoning One's Way Out of Skepticism (excerpts)	Submit question and attend large group discussion OR 2 page paper		

MONDAY, NOV 2: Large Group Meeting #2 on Skepticism

UNIT 3: SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY

Nov 2 (Week 9)	Testimony	Video: Can you Trust Testimony (ONLY FIRST 5 MIN)	Assignment: message board post	Nagel "Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction" Ch. 6	Reading reflection (google form)	Final paper: topics chosen	
Nov 9 (Week 10)	Echo Chambers	Echo Chambers (2-min video)	Assignment: message board post	This article by Nguyen	Small group discussion and worksheet		Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles"
Nov 17	Morality and Evidence	The Will to Believe (6-min video)	Assignment: message board post	This article by Basu	Submit question and attend large group	Final paper: outline due	Video series, "Promisin

(Week 11)					discussion OR 2 page paper		g against the Evidence"
MONDAY, Nov 23: Large Group Meeting #3 on Social Epistemology							
UNIT 4: RELIGIOUS EPISTEMOLOGY							
Nov 23 (Week 12)	Rational religious belief without arguments ?	Reformed Epistemology (3-min video)	Assignment: message board post			Group Podcast 2 due	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXVT-D52ufDA
Nov 30 (Week 13)	Faith	Reason and Faith (8-min video)	Assignment: message board post	Jackson, "Belief, Credence, and Faith" (blog post)	Submit question and attend large group discussion OR 2 page paper		https://philpapers.org/archive/JACBCA.pdf
Dec 7	<i>Final large-group meeting; no assignments due</i>						
MONDAY, Dec 7: Large Group Meeting #5 on Religious Epistemology							
<i>Exams: Dec 9–19</i>					Final Paper Due		