PSYC 394-03: Developing Healthy Skepticism in the Age of "Fake News"

Spring 2026
Tues & Thurs 9:40-11:10am
Olin-Rice Room 270

Your Instructor

Erika R. DeAngelis, Ph.D.
Pronouns: she/her/hers

📍 Olin-Rice 359C

✉ edeangel@macalester.edu

Student Hours

Mon 12:00 - 1:00pm, Thurs 11:30am – 12:30pm, or by appointment

Location: Olin-Rice 359C or Zoom (please email for link).

I am available on a first-come, first-served basis during student hours to meet for any reason. Not available at these times? Email me to set up an individual appointment, either in my office or on Zoom.

Course Overview

With the ever-rising popularity of new technology and social media, information is more readily available than ever before. However, not all information consumed through secondary sources is backed by valid evidence, and people can easily be led astray by deceptive or inaccurate information. How do we become vigilant consumers of information? What cognitive processes make us more or less vulnerable to misleading sources? In this course, we will investigate the cognitive skills required to properly assess, verify, and learn from different sources of information. We will explore how these skills develop across the lifespan, with a particular focus on early childhood and adolescence. Furthermore, we will integrate primary material from other disciplines, such as philosophy, behavioral economics, political science, and machine learning. This class will be primarily discussion-based and will require active student participation through discussions, hands-on activities, writing assignments, and an oral presentation.

Prerequisites: PSYC 100; PSYC 201 or STAT 155; and an intermediate Psychology course.

Course Goals

1. **Develop** critical thinking, communication, and media literacy skills.
2. **Apply** basic knowledge (e.g., philosophical theory, empirical methodology) to real world examples of "fake news".
3. **Explore** the broader ethical and societal implications of information sharing.

Course Format

This is a synchronous, in-person course that will primarily consist of discussions, in-class activities, and presentations. Active participation is expected of all students. *It is necessary to attend class, take notes, and engage in all activities to succeed in this course.*
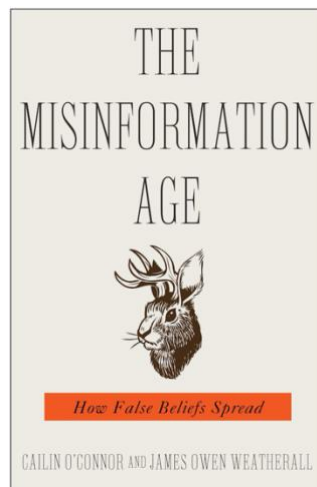
Due to the nature of this course, we will discuss controversial and potentially sensitive topics. I will do my best to provide a heads-up before especially sensitive topics, but I also encourage you to step out of the classroom or contact me privately if you have any concerns about the material in this class. I am here to support you!

Furthermore, all students are expected to be **open-minded** and **respectful** towards their classmates and the instructor. I welcome diverse viewpoints and opinions in our conversations, as long as they are respectful. Please talk to me if you have concerns about this.

Materials

Good news! **You are not required to purchase any materials for this course**. All assigned readings will be available on Moodle ahead of class. Readings provide important background knowledge for the topics discussed in class, so *all assigned readings should be completed **prior** to attending class*. PowerPoint slides used in class will be posted to Moodle after the class period (if I forget, please remind me!)

Optional: Throughout the semester, we will read a few chapters from *The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread,* a 2020 book by Cailin O'Connor and James Owen Weatherall. ISBN: 978-0274758531. I will provide pdf copies of the required chapters on Moodle. If you prefer to read with a physical copy of the book, you can purchase it here: https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300251852/the-misinformation-age/

THE MISINFORMATION AGE

How False Beliefs Spread

CAILIN O'CONNOR AND JAMES OWEN WEATHERALL

Participation

Active participation is a critical component of this course. All students are expected to regularly participate in class discussions and in-class activities. Your participation grade in class will be based on a **self-evaluation at the end of the semester** (with the instructor reserving the right to override your evaluation)! See the assignments section for more detail.

Excused Absences

Macalester College authorizes absences for college-sponsored activities (e.g., athletic or club events). If you anticipate missing class for a college-sponsored activity, *you are responsible to communicate with me in advance* to make the necessary arrangements. I also count emergency absences (e.g., illness/medical conditions, family emergencies, religious observances) as excused absences. Please contact me as soon as possible to make arrangements. In some cases, I may request verification of absences (e.g., multiple medical absences).

Health & Wellbeing

Your physical and mental health should *always* be a priority (in both this course and in general)! Please make sure you are taking care of yourself, both inside and outside of the classroom. I encourage you to eat and drink, use the restroom, or step outside and take a break whenever you need it.

Assignments

Grade Breakdown

Grant Proposal	200 points	44%
Discussion Leader	50 points	12%
Reflections (x4)	100 points	22%
Participation (self-evaluation)	100 points	22%
Total	450 points	100%

Grant Proposal

When discussing the topic of misinformation, one common question is "What can we do to prevent/reduce the spread of misinformation?". Throughout this semester, you will develop a grant proposal for a *hypothetical* project that aims to address misinformation. Towards the end of the semester, you will "pitch" your proposal to the class.

This project is designed to **foster your creativity**! Don't be afraid to "think outside the box" when coming up with a project idea. While your project should be generally realistic and feasible (hint: getting rid of the internet probably isn't very realistic), pretend that you have a plethora of funding and resources to execute your plan!

This writing assignment is broken up into 6 steps throughout the semester. Additional details and rubrics for each step is available on our Moodle page. In total, this project is worth 200 points (44% of your final grade). Please see our course schedule for all assignment deadlines.

Step 1: Brainstorming (15 points)
Step 2: Finding & Summarizing Articles (30 points)
Step 3: Outline (45 points)
Step 4: Peer Review (10 points)
Step 5: Final Proposal (70 points)
Step 6: Idea Pitch (30 points)

All assignments are due on Moodle by 11:59pm CST on the indicated date, unless otherwise specified.

Discussion Leaders

You will be assigned as a **"discussion leader"** for one of our discussions this semester (you will have the option to pick your date at the beginning of the semester). Your responsibility as discussion leader is as following:

1. Prepare a ~10-minute informal presentation to summarize the key points and takeaways of the assigned readings for that day.
2. Prepare at least 4 thought-provoking discussion questions to facilitate a discussion with your classmates.

This assignment will be graded based on the effort and quality of the presentation and your ability to engage your fellow classmates in a thoughtful discussion. See Moodle for additional information.

Reflections

Over the course of the semester, you will submit **four** reflections. These are short writing assignments that are designed to facilitate critical thinking and the integration of course material. **What you choose to reflect on is entirely up to you,** but should be based in the relevant readings, discussions, and/or activities. Reflections should be roughly 2 pages double-spaced.

Reflections are designed to be "low-stakes" writing assignments. **Thus, your grade will primarily be based on effort and thoughtfulness** (although I will deduct points for reflections that are clearly not relevant to the general topic).

Participation

Active engagement and participation are critical components of this course. To assess your participation, I will ask you to **self-evaluate your engagement** at the end of the semester. This self-evaluation approach is intended to encompass variability in individual strengths in participation (e.g., attendance, participation, preparation for discussions). However, missing a significant portion of any of these components will result in a grade decrease. I will provide you with feedback throughout the semester (especially in the first few weeks) to give you clarity on participation expectations.

You will self-evaluate your participation based on three categories. Note that as the instructor, **I reserve the right to override your final evaluation** if I believe that your performance differed from your evaluation.

1. **Attendance**: Being present in class is essential for learning. You are expected to arrive on time and stay until the end of class on a regular basis. If you cannot attend class, please reach out to me beforehand. More than two unexcused absences will negatively affect your participation grade.

2. **Engagement**: You are expected to actively engage in class activities and discussions. Engagement will primarily consist of thoughtful and relevant contributions to group discussions and activities.

3. **Discussion Prompts**: On discussion days when you are not assigned to be the discussion leader, you are expected to submit at least two thought-provoking questions or reactions to the assigned readings. Discussion Prompts are due on Moodle the day prior to the discussion (i.e., Wednesday at 11:59pm CST for a Thursday discussion). You may miss up to two discussion prompt submissions without any penalty towards your participation grade.

Grading Policies

Late Points & Late Penalty

We are all busy people with other academic and non-academic commitments! To provide some flexibility, all students will receive **six "late points"** at the beginning of the semester. Each late point corresponds to one 24-hour extension on the **Grant Proposal Project** or a **reflection**. You may choose how many late points you wish to use on each assignment (e.g., 2 late points = 48-hour extension). To redeem late points, **you must email me at least 24 hours before the original assignment deadline** (no explanation needed!).

If you choose not to use late points, I will apply the default late submission penalty of 5% per day (e.g., 3 days late = 15% penalty), with a maximum 50% penalty. **Note:** late points are *not* intended to replace disability accommodations or other needed extensions. In case of emergency (e.g., illness, family emergency), please contact me for an extension!

Late points **cannot be used** on the discussion leaders assignment or discussion prompts. As mentioned above, **you can miss up to two discussion prompt deadlines** without any impact on your participation grade.

Incompletes

Macalester College **strongly discourages** incomplete grades. Unless over 75% of assigned coursework has already been submitted, an incomplete will not be granted. In the case of an extenuating circumstance, I will direct you to the Dean of Students. I will consider the Dean's advice and department policy when making decisions about incompletes.

Grade Disputes

If you notice any errors in your grade on Moodle, please contact me immediately! If you believe that points were deducted incorrectly or unfairly, please email me to request a re-grade. In your email, please explain why you believe that the grade was incorrect, and any additional information or materials that supports your argument. You must email me with a re-grade request within <u>one week</u> of receiving your original grade. Disputing a grade does not guarantee that your grade will be changed. I will review your original assignment and your justification and determine whether to adjust your grade.

Grade Scale

Your final grade will be determined according to the scale below. There is no curve for this course – your grade will not be adjusted relative to your peers. I reserve the right to round up final grades in the case of exemplary participation and effort. After the class is over, I will not change the grade you have earned. Please see me before the end of the semester if you are concerned about your grade.

A	93 – 100%	C	73 – 76.9%
A-	90 – 92.9%	C-	70 – 72.9%
B+	87 – 89.9%	D+	67 – 69.9%
B	83 – 86.9%	D	63 – 66.9%
B-	80 – 82.9%	D-	60 – 92.9%
C+	77 – 79.9%	F	0 – 59.9%

Plagiarism and Academic Integrity

You are expected to do your own academic work in this class, and to cite your sources when appropriate. Presenting other people's thoughts, ideas, or words as your own constitutes plagiarism, which directly violates Macalester College's academic integrity expectation. **Plagiarizing, cheating, unauthorized use of artificial intelligence, or engaging in unauthorized collaborations is strictly prohibited in this class.** If you are unsure what constitutes plagiarism, please come talk to me! If I suspect that you have violated this academic integrity policy, I will ask you to meet with me to discuss the work. After we meet, I will determine next steps, which may include a 0 on the assignment or referral to the Director of Academic Programs. If you have additional questions, come see me or refer to the webpage below.

www.macalester.edu/academicprograms/academicpolicies/academicintegrity/

Technology

Please silence your phones and put them away when possible (unless you are requested to take your phone out for a class activity). If you must take a phone call, please quietly exit the classroom to avoid distracting the instructor and other students. Laptops and tablets are permitted for note taking or course activities. However, please avoid using personal devices for external activities (e.g., answering emails, social media). I reserve the right to restrict technology use in the classroom if it becomes too much of a learning distraction.

Artificial intelligence can be a wonderful educational tool, but it can also interfere with the development of creativity and critical thinking skills. In specific circumstances, I will allow you to use AI to help you generate and brainstorm ideas. If you choose to use AI for this purpose, I expect you to **clearly indicate how you used AI in your submission**. However, the following uses of AI are **strictly prohibited**:

- Incorporating any component of an AI-generated response in **any** course assignment.
- Using AI to summarize and/or interpret course materials (including sources for the grant proposal).

Instances of unauthorized AI use will be considered a breach of academic honesty and will be addressed accordingly.

Diversity & Accessibility

Diversity & Inclusion

I strive to prioritize diversity and inclusion throughout this course. Throughout the semester, we will read materials from many backgrounds and fields. However, I acknowledge that many of the theories and studies we will discuss are based on the perspectives of people from White, Western, middle- to upper-class backgrounds. I encourage you to think critically about how diversity informs our understanding of misinformation and susceptibility to false beliefs. Additionally, please reach out to me if you have any suggestions for how to improve the diversity of the materials in this course.

Additionally, I aim for our classroom to be a safe space where students from diverse backgrounds can comfortably learn from and contribute to our learning environment. I believe that diversity of backgrounds and perspectives is an incredible strength for learning and growth. Thus, I welcome all viewpoints as long as they are expressed **appropriately** and **respectfully.** Please be considerate of your fellow classmates and the instructor during our discussions.

If you have any suggestions for how to improve our class culture, let me know! If anything in this course makes you upset or uncomfortable, please reach out to me or contact another member of the department for support.

Accessibility

I am committed to making this course as accessible as possible for all students. If there is anything I can do to maximize your participation and learning in this class, please reach out to me! I am happy to meet privately to discuss accessibility suggestions and/or concerns.

My commitments:
- Post all proposal assignments on Moodle at the beginning of the semester
- Share PowerPoints and other lecture materials after class (please remind me if I forget!)
- Meet with you individually to support your learning
- Facilitate your connection to external supports on campus
- Be flexible and understanding in the event of an emergency

Disability Services

If you have a disability that affects your learning, I highly encourage you to reach out to Macalester's Disability Services in order to receive accommodations (see link below). Disability Services will send me a confidential letter with your accommodations, and then we can meet to discuss a plan to address your needs.

Without a letter from Disability Services, I cannot offer flexible assignment deadlines or a flexible attendance policy. If you think you may need additional support, don't wait! **Be proactive** – I cannot retroactively apply any accommodations, so it is best to plan in advance!

Center for Disability Resources: https://www.macalester.edu/disability-resources/

Land Acknowledgement

From the Macalester College Office for Institutional Equity:

"Macalester College is located on the homeland of the Dakota people – Mni Sota Makoce [Mini SOta Ma-KOH-chay], which translates to Land Where the Waters Reflect the Clouds. Although they were forcibly exiled by aggressive and persistent settler colonialism, the Dakota people still flourish despite this painful history. We make this acknowledgment to honor the Dakota people, ancestors, and descendants, as well as the land itself. Macalester engages in ongoing work toward repair and partnership with the Dakota people and the land, as well as to support Indigenous members of our campus community."

Sexual Misconduct & Title IX

From the Serie Center for Scholarship and Teaching: "Macalester is committed to providing a safe and open learning and living environment for all students, staff, and faculty. Any community member experiencing sexual misconduct including sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexual exploitation, dating/domestic violence, or stalking, is encouraged to seek help and support.

Please be aware that as a faculty member, it is my responsibility to report disclosure about sexual misconduct, to the Title IX Office. The purpose of this report is to ensure that anyone who may be impacted receives the resources and support they need. I will keep this information *private* and I will not share beyond this required report.

You may also contact Laura Creech, Macalester's Title IX Coordinator, directly (phone: 651-696-6258; e-mail: titleixcordinator@macalester.edu); she will provide you with your rights and options as well as information about supportive measures, resources, and referrals. Additional information about how to file a report (including anonymously) is available on the Title IX website.

If you prefer to speak with someone confidentially, or need 24/7 support, there are resources available on- and off-campus to assist you:
- Counseling Services at the Hamre Center – on-campus counseling resource for students
  - **Free, Urgent, Phone Counseling (Press 2) is available to Macalester students anywhere in the world, 24/7/365.** Speak to a licensed mental health counselor 24 hours a day by calling Hamre Center at 651-696-6275, then press or say option 2 when prompted.

- Center for Religious and Spiritual Life – chaplains may be reached via 651-696-6298 or email religiouslife@macalester.edu

- SOS Sexual Violence Services of Ramsey County 651-266-1000 (24-Hour Crisis Hotline staffed by trained advocates) On-Campus Office Hours: Wednesdays from 1- 4 pm in the Hamre Wellness Lounge

- Saint Paul Intervention Project (SPIP): Domestic Abuse Intervention 651-645-2824 (24-Hour Crisis Hotline) On-Campus Office Hours: Tuesdays from 1:30 – 4:30 pm in the Hamre Wellness Lounge

- Rape, Assault, and Incest National Network (RAINN) 1-800-656-4673 (24-Hour Hotline and Live Chat)

- Additional local and national resources can be found at https://www.macalester.edu/title-ix/find-support/ "

Course Schedule

Date	Topic	Key Deadlines
Part I: Theory and Philosophy		
Thurs, 1/22	Welcome to PSYC 394!	Welcome Survey due on **Sunday, 1/26**
Tues, 1/27	**Topic 1:** Defining Trust	
Thurs, 1/29	Discussion (led by Erika) & Activity	
Tues, 2/3	**Topic 2:** Trust & Testimony	
Thurs, 2/5	Discussion	**Reflection 1** due Sunday, 2/8
Tues, 2/10	**Topic 3:** What is misinformation?	
Thurs, 2/12	Discussion	**Grant Proposal Step 1** due Sunday, 2/15
Part II: Cognitive Processes		
Tues, 2/17	**Topic 4:** Belief Formation	
Thurs, 2/19	Discussion	**Reflection 2** due Sunday, 2/22
Tues, 2/24	Discussion & Activity	
Thurs, 2/26	**Topic 5:** Deciding who to trust	
Tues, 3/3	Discussion	
Thurs, 3/5	Discussion	**Grant Proposal Step 2** due Sunday, 3/8
Tues, 3/10	**Topic 6:** Developing Trust & Skepticism	
Thurs, 3/12	Activity & Proposal Workshopping	
Tues, 3/17	**NO CLASS – SPRING BREAK**	
Thurs, 3/19	**NO CLASS – SPRING BREAK**	
Tues, 3/24	Discussion	
Part III: Application & Implications		
Thurs, 3/26	**Topic 7:** Measuring Misinformation	**Grant Proposal Step 3** due Sunday, 3/29
Tues, 3/31	Discussion	
Thurs, 4/2	Grant Proposal **Step 4: Peer Review**	
Tues, 4/7	Discussion	
Thurs, 4/9	**TBD – Erika at conference**	**Reflection 3** due Sunday, 4/12
Tues, 4/14	**Topic 8:** Ethical Implications	
Thurs, 4/16	Activity (Part 1)	**Grant Proposal Step 5** due Sunday, 4/19
Tues, 4/21	Activity (Part 2)	
Thurs, 4/23	Grant Proposal **Step 6: Idea Pitch** Day 1	
Tues, 4/28	Grant Proposal **Step 6: Idea Pitch** Day 2	
Thurs, 4/30	Course Wrap-Up	**Reflection 4** due Sunday, 5/3

All assigned readings (with access links) are listed in Moodle.

Note: This schedule is subject to change at my discretion. If a change is made, you will be notified via Moodle and in class.