

Knowing, Believing, and Being Fooled: Topics in the Theory of Knowledge

Instructor: Jenny Yi-Chen Wu

January 20, 2026

Course Description

This six-week course offers an applied introduction to central issues in traditional and social epistemology. We examine how knowledge, belief, and justification are shaped by social and pragmatic contexts. Topics include peer disagreement, testimony, persuasion and negotiation, epistemic wrongdoing (e.g., gaslighting), and rational self-doubt. For details see the Weekly Topics and Readings section below. We will also draw on resources from foundational epistemological debates—such as internalism versus externalism about justification—and employ Bayesian modeling to precisify our discussions. A distinctive feature of this course is its methodology: students will encounter both humanistic approaches (conceptual and normative analysis) and formal tools, namely Bayesian models of belief updates and self-doubt, for studying rationality.

Designed with depth and rigor, this course emphasizes careful argumentation and precise dialectical engagement. It is particularly well suited to students interested in law, policy, marketing, business and advertising, highlighting how epistemic concepts bear on everyday social life as well as legal, political and business practice.

Course Objectives

1. Familiarize students with central debates in social epistemology.
2. Develop skills in philosophical reading and discussion, focusing on extracting and analyzing arguments in a premise-conclusion format.
3. Practice identifying targeted objections and responses, encouraging critical engagement with arguments.
4. Apply epistemic concepts to real-life legal and professional practice, with particular focus on evidence evaluation, credibility of testimony, and understanding non-epistemic influences on belief.
5. Cultivate philosophical rigor through structured argumentation, learning how to assess and construct well-supported philosophical positions.

Class Schedule

Duration: June 22, 2026 – July 31, 2026 (6 weeks)

Meeting times: TBA

Office hours: TBA

Location: <https://ucla.zoom.us/j/4866940845>

Instructor Email: jennyichenwu@g.ucla.edu

Weekly Topics and Readings

Week 1: Epistemic Conflict, Peer Disagreement, and an Introduction to Social Epistemology

Overview: We'll start by examining why two equally informed and capable people (epistemic peers) might come to opposite conclusions based on the same set of evidence. This raises deep questions about the nature of evidence, belief, and rationality. We will also discuss the underlying role of truth in epistemology.

Reading:

- Thomas Kelly, "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement"

Week 2: Knowing from Testimony

Overview: Much of what we know comes from others. But when, if ever, is it justified to believe what someone else says? This week, we explore the epistemology of testimony. We'll examine traditional views that treat testimony as merely transmitting knowledge from speaker to hearer, and consider challenges to that model—especially cases where speakers can generate knowledge in others without having it themselves. We'll also investigate the debate between reductionism and non-reductionism: must hearers have positive reasons for accepting testimony, or is the absence of defeaters enough?

Reading:

- Jennifer Lackey, "Knowing from Testimony"
- A. P. Martinich, "Appendix A: 'It's Sunday Night and I Have an Essay Due Monday Morning'"

Week 3: The Epistemology of Persuasion and Being Persuaded

Overview: This week we examine a ubiquitous behavior in both private and public life – persuasion. Persuasion is not only a practical social and legal tool but also an epistemic-speech act: broadly construed, it aims to change what others believe. We'll consider when and how persuasion can be epistemically responsible or irresponsible and what distinguishes rational influence from manipulation. We will also ask whether it's always good to be open to persuasion, or whether a degree of resistance to influence is epistemically and ethically appropriate.

Readings:

- Robin McKenna, "The Ethics and Epistemology of Persuasion"
- Neil Levy, "Nudge, Nudge, Wink, Wink: Nudging is Giving Reasons"

Week 4: Gaslighting, Manipulation, and Epistemic Wrongdoing

Overview: This week focuses on epistemic vices, such as gaslighting, and how they impact individuals' capacity for autonomous belief formation. We'll discuss how manipulation and epistemic injustice affect self-trust and the ethical implications of such practices.

Reading:

- Kate Abramson, "Turning Up the Lights on Gaslighting"
- Thi Nguyen, "Hostile Epistemology"

Optional:

- Gaslight (1944 film), directed by George Cukor

Week 5: Rational Self-Doubt and Bayesian Modeling

Overview: This week we will focus on the phenomenon of self-doubt and second guessing in epistemology. How should we respond when we discover evidence of our own cognitive fallibility, or when higher-order evidence calls our judgment into question? We will explore the line between healthy intellectual humility and pathological

regress, and examine the implications for rationality, self-respect, and peer disagreement.

Reading:

- Sherrilyn Roush, “*Second Guessing: A Self-Help Manual*”, *Episteme* (2009)

Optional Readings:

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “The Analysis of Knowledge” (selected sections)
- Edmund Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?”

Week 6: Strategic Negotiation, Tactical Empathy, and the Changed Mind

Overview: For the final week, we turn to real-world tactics and strategies in negotiation – both high-stakes and everyday. We will draw on themes from earlier in the course (testimony, persuasion, disagreement, gaslighting, self-doubt) to evaluate how minds are changed and how beliefs are maneuvered. We’ll read selections from *Never Split the Difference* by Chris Voss to examine techniques like tactical empathy, calibrated questioning, and controlled confrontation. In return, we’ll also ask what epistemology can teach us about negotiation – and whether some tactics challenge the norms of epistemic or ethical integrity.

Reading:

- Chris Voss, *Never Split the Difference* (selected chapters, to be posted)

Optional/Contextual Readings:

- Richard Feldman, *Epistemology*

Assessment and Grading

- **Class Participation:** 15% (Please note: you should turn on your camera in class)
- **Argument Extraction Assignment:** 10% (Due 7 pm, July 8)
- **Midterm Paper (5-7 pages):** 30% (Due 7 pm, July 15)
- **Final Research Paper (10-12 pages):** 45% (Due 7 pm, Aug 1)

Course Project

This course is designed to help students develop a single, focused project, learning how to build philosophical rigor through argumentation.

The **Argument Extraction Assignment** requires students to write two concise paragraphs. The first paragraph involves extracting and clearly presenting an argument from the assigned text, establishing a foundation for the position they will defend or critique in their mid-term paper. The second paragraph should briefly outline the student’s potential argument, indicating how they plan to engage with or challenge the extracted argument.

The **Midterm Paper** will form the foundation for the final paper, allowing students to refine and deepen their analysis over time. Throughout the course, students will work on honing their arguments, applying both course content and techniques of argumentation. In sections, students will practice presenting, defending, and polishing their ideas with feedback from peers and the instructor.

By the end of the course, students will have developed a well-supported and thorough exploration of a key topic in epistemology, demonstrating their proficiency in philosophical argumentation through the **Final Paper**. Students should incorporate the comments they received when writing their final papers.

Policies

Attendance: Attendance is mandatory, with penalties for unapproved absences. Being late for over 20 minutes counts as an absence.

Assignments: Midterm and final papers will be based on a continuous research project, with the final paper expanding on the midterm.

Late Penalty Policy: Papers submitted late will be penalized by the deduction of one-third of a grade per day (e.g., from A- to B+; B+ to B, etc.). Requests for extensions must be made to your TA no later than 48 hours before the due date, except in cases of unexpected emergencies.

Academic Integrity: Plagiarism is a serious offense that will be dealt with in accordance with university policy. For details, visit the UCLA Dean of Students' website on academic integrity: <https://deanofstudents.ucla.edu/academic-integrity>. If you are unsure about citation requirements or what constitutes plagiarism, consult me or the TA before submitting your work.

Resources

The Center for Accessible Education (CAE) <https://www.cae.ucla.edu> or (310) 825-1501

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) <https://www.caps.ucla.edu> or (310) 825-0768

CARE: Advocacy Office for Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and Misconduct
<https://careprogram.ucla.edu> or (310) 206-2465 24-Hour Crisis Counseling: (888) 200-6665

UCLA Writing Programs <http://www.wp.ucla.edu>

Professor Jim Pryor's Writing Tips for Philosophers <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities If you are registered with CAE, please request your Letter of Accommodation through the Student Portal. If you are seeking registration, submit your request for accommodations via the CAE website. Note that CAE does not automatically send accommodation letters to instructors—you must request that I and the TA view your letter in the online Faculty Portal.

Students requiring accommodations should submit their requests as soon as possible, as it may take up to two weeks to process. For more information, visit the CAE website, visit the CAE office at A255 Murphy Hall, or call (310) 825-1501.