

Making Powerful Arguments V S26



GENS 176-V: Making Powerful Arguments


Large Language Models and Society

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Office: Olin 222

Class Meetings: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10-11:20 AM

Quick Links:

- **In-person Office Hours:** T Th 2-3PM, Friday by appointment (send me an email and we can get it set up)
- Zoom office on MW at 10 AM: <https://whitman.zoom.us/j/9681919071> 
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Course Description:

Large language models are currently being used to replace human beings in many decision-making positions. But should we trust decisions that claim to be based on data? This class will explore the use and misuse of mathematics, statistics, and in particular large language models. We will explore how these models are built, what are their strengths and weaknesses, and how we can live and prosper with these algorithms. Finally, students will study how their own experience and preconceptions shape their arguments, and how to best address issues of difference and equity in algorithm-driven outcomes.

Semester Goals

As students progress into the second half of their first year they choose a seminar focused on an in-depth investigation of an important topic and work on developing and supporting arguments. Making Powerful Arguments seminars are offered on a wide range of topics but all share common writing assignment parameters. All Spring Seminars incorporate library research skills and develop students' proficiency with and understanding of citation practices.

Students will be able to:

- *read inquisitively and generously*
- *read with attention to detail and nuance*
- *practice respectful but rigorous debate*
- *learn collaboratively with classmates and professor*

- *use writing as a means to discover and reconsider ideas*
- *develop arguable and defensible thesis statements*
- *integrate appropriate evidence to support argumentative claims*

Readings

We will develop skills in critical reading and powerful argumentation through writing through exploration of these examples and experiences. We have two primary texts, Stephan Raaijmakers' **Large Language Models** (MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series, 2025), and Mark Coeckelbergh's **AI Ethics** (MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series, 2020). These two books are required for the course and should be available from the College Bookstore (as well as online sources such as Amazon).

We will take a deeper dive into aspects of LLMs and AI more generally and the papers and excerpts will be available on Canvas.

Discussions

We will spend time in class to reflect on the assigned readings. It is important that you come to class prepared to discuss the text in a small groups and with the class as a whole.

Writing

Writing is an iterative process and the primary tool by which we convey our arguments across disciplines. We will work towards our goals in writing with attention to evidence, audience, and thesis-driven arguments.

Assessment

Reading Responses (15%)

Individual class periods are designed with the assumption that you have read the day's material *in advance*. A typical class will have us going over some discussion problems and then perhaps some explanation of the more esoteric ideas in the readings. To support this activity most days will have a short pre-class "Readback" form for you to fill out. Your average score on Readbacks is worth 15% of the final grade.

No late Readbacks will be accepted.

Class Participation (15%).

- Arrived prepared and participated in class: **10 points**
- Attended but did not participate/contribute to the day's activities: **5 points**
- Unexcused absence: **0 points**

- **If you arrive late, 2 points will be deducted from the corresponding score.**

Your average score on Class Participation is worth 15% of the final grade.

Please let me know IN ADVANCE if you cannot attend one of our sessions (see the note about absences below).

Weekly Assignments (30%)

You will be given a short in-class assessment or a short writing prompt for most weeks (300-500 words). For the writing, rubrics will be distributed in advance based on assignment type. You are expected to complete all of these assignments. I will 'drop' your lowest-scored assignment.

Your average score on the Weekly Assignment is worth 30% of the final grade.

Late policy: a 5% deduction is applied for each day after the assignment's due date, but it will stop deducting points after 10 days; at that point, the highest possible grade a student can receive for the assignment is 50%

My main recommendation to avoid the late submission penalty is to **pay close attention to deadlines** and **start working on the assignments early** to avoid the stress of trying to complete them at the last minute.

Long Form Scaffolded Assignment (40%)

Beginning in March, you will embark on an individual long-form (~1750 -2250 words) writing project.

This will involve examining evidence, formulating a thesis, and writing a powerful argument supporting that thesis.

How the points will be divided up (out of 100 points total): 60 points will be on the process, 40 points on the final product.

The process will involve the following elements:

- an initial conference with me;
- brainstorming topics;
- library research and putting together reference material;
- peer review and peer editing;
- a preliminary draft, a full draft, final draft, final paper.

More details and a rubric will be given in class.

Late policy: a 5% deduction is applied for each day after the assignment's due date, but it will stop deducting points after 10 days; at that point, the highest possible grade a student can receive for the assignment is 50%.

Final Grading Scheme

99-100: A+	88-89: B+	78-79: C+	68-69: D+
93-98: A	83-87: B	73-77: C	60-67: D
90-92: A-	80-82: B+	70-72: C-	59 and below: F

Important Notes:

Classroom Community

Learning in general, and learning mathematics specifically, is a highly collaborative enterprise. We learn better when we learn together. In order to achieve our goals, we must foster mutual respect, regardless of background or beliefs. Racism, sexism, or other forms of discrimination have no place in the classroom or at the college. All students are capable of success, and it is imperative that we work under that ethos. More details on the College's commitment to non-discrimination practices can be found in our Grievance Policy (<https://www.whitman.edu/human-resources/grievance-policy> (<https://www.whitman.edu/human-resources/grievance-policy>)).

Religious Observances

In accordance with the College's Religious Accommodations Policy (<https://www.whitman.edu/campus-life/diversity/religious-and-spiritual-life/religious-accommodations> (<https://www.whitman.edu/campus-life/diversity/religious-and-spiritual-life/religious-accommodations>)), I will provide reasonable accommodations for all students who, because of religious observances, may have conflicts with scheduled exams, assignments, or required attendance in class. Please review the course schedule at the beginning of the semester to determine any such potential conflicts and let me know by the end of the second week of class about your need for religious accommodations. Please see me if you have any questions or concerns.

Attendance and Absences

- Being in class every day is crucial to achieving the course goals.
- An **authorized absence** is one that involves missing class for College-sanctioned reasons, e.g. athletic competitions or field trips. Or, for religious accommodations. The authorization of all other absences is to be negotiated with me in advance of the absence.
- **When you are ill**, the decision to attend class should be balanced against your own well-being and the well-being of others in the class. If you can safely attend, then you should attend. Otherwise, have a conversation with me about authorizing the absence.
- A separate but related issue is that of **missed classwork**. If your absence or illness causes you to miss a deadline, **negotiate** an extension with me.
- If you miss more than 5 class sessions (which is 20% of our sessions and really means that you've missed almost three weeks of class), you will receive a failing score for the course. Attendance is a key component of this class.

Accessibility

If you are a student with a disability who will need accommodations in this course, please contact Disability Support Services at DSS@whitman.edu, or visit Olin Hall 334, for assistance in developing a plan to address your academic needs. All information about disabilities is considered private. If I receive notification from Disability Support Services that you are eligible to receive an accommodation due to a verified disability, I will provide it in as discreet a manner as possible.

Academic Dishonesty

Academic dishonesty and plagiarism will result in a failing grade on the assignment. Using someone else's ideas or phrasing and representing those ideas or phrasing as our own, either on purpose or through carelessness, is a serious offense known as plagiarism. "Ideas or phrasing" includes written or spoken material, from whole papers and paragraphs to sentences, and, indeed, phrases but it also includes statistics, lab results, artwork, etc. Please see the student handbook for policies regarding plagiarism.

Using an AI to generate text may be permitted in some cases, but assume it's not allowed unless explicitly permitted in the assignment description. If AI text is permitted, you should provide an additional note about how you used it and what percentage of the submitted work came from you, and what percentage came from the AI. In general, you should strive to generate your own writing, but there are times when AI-generated text is useful to help you get started or to illustrate a certain point.