TEXT:

Ways of Reasoning: Tools and Methods for Thinking Outside the Box, Jeff Buechner; University Publishing Solutions, 2009 edition.
Electronic rental ($29.95) available at: http://tinyurl.com/cxco955
Paperback ($69.95) available at: http://tinyurl.com/cgxdhlk

COURSE OBJECTIVE:

Most people are notoriously bad at reasoning. This is not so much a cultural fact of life as it is a biological one. We do not possess an innate ability to engage in effective critical thinking. Critical thinking skills must be learned and cognitive science has taught us that learning them is hard work and requires considerable practice. It easily follows that if you have never received explicit instruction in these skills, you will not be an effective critical thinker. Yet within and outside the university, it is expected that you are able to critically assess arguments effectively and construct well-designed arguments. When and where did you receive instruction in these skills?

Without good reasoning skills, putting together a set of reasons to back up your claims about the world is little more than a shot in the dark. Moreover, we have no reasonable defense against intimidation and propaganda if we can’t critically assess patterns of reasoning. Without critical thinking tools the best we can do is fight unreason with unreason. That is a losing proposition. Not knowing what distinguishes good reasons from bad reasons, we have no more reason to believe the propagandists’ position than we do our own. In which case, we lose both autonomy and effectiveness as thinkers and become nothing more than imitators of prescribed inferential patterns without knowing whether the patterns we imitate have real worth or not. In short, we become slaves of the machine.

Worse yet, very few graduates of Rutgers University will know how to determine when someone’s reasons for their claims are good or bad, even though Rutgers claims that a graduate will possess the requisite critical and analytical thinking skills. Since assessing goodness of reasons is the most fundamental critical and analytical thinking skill, very few Rutgers graduates will possess this most fundamental skill. (Source: A statistical generalization from a database of
14,000 responses over a fifteen year period at Rutgers.) Unless you learn how to determine goodness of reasons from someone who knows how to do it, you will not be able to do it. Being told that you should make sure your claims are supported by your reasons (or by your evidence) is true, but worthless, unless you are also given a tool that shows you exactly how premises support claims.

The tool for determining whether reasons for claims are good or bad is continuous with scientific method and with establishing the validity of scientific claims. But it is antecedent to scientific method in that scientific method is a corollary of this tool, and this tool is used in assessing claims in any arbitrary subject matter, whether it is a scientific claim about the world, an economic, one, a political one, a common sense claim—indeed, any claim about the world at all. It follows that this tool is essential for successfully navigating a university degree, as well as for successfully navigating a profession and a life. But unless you take this course, you will not know how to do it—you will not know how to tell whether reasons for claims are good or bad. More than likely, you—along with 99% of all Rutgers graduates—will hold a false view about how to do it. It is only upon completion of this course that you will know how to do it—you will have a tool that is easy to use, that engages the imagination in a powerful way, and that is effective in arbitrary disciplines.

Can a course in critical thinking help you in becoming an autonomous and effective thinker? Yes, it can help immensely. In this course you will acquire the necessary proficiency to critically assess arguments from a broad range of college disciplines, areas of employment (such as the law) and worldly concerns (such as politics and culture). You will learn the requisite vocabulary, principles, concepts and tools needed to become an effective critical thinker. In particular, you will learn the only reliable method for determining the goodness of one’s reasons for the claims one makes. You will also see how to use this method to conduct an intelligent literature search and why this method requires the active and creative use of the imagination. You will find that the more ethnically diverse the classroom in which you learn, the smarter you will become.

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS (Read carefully):**

You will be graded on the following:

(i) **EXAMS:** two quizzes

(ii) **CRITICAL ASSESSMENTS:** three critical assessments of various arguments (typically newspaper editorials)

(iii) **LOG:** a log (i.e., a notebook maintained as a Word file) consisting of solutions to homework problems, questions about material in the text, critical assessments of arguments, solutions to movie and newspaper (current events) problems, and answers to critical thinking, philosophical, and logical puzzles.

Each counts 1/3 of your final grade.

The text is available from the publisher. You can either purchase a hard copy (which you own) or rent an electronic version. Use the links above (under the heading: ‘TEXT’) to obtain the text.
The log. You will add entries to your log as you run through the units of the course sequentially. The units are in the boxes which appear on the far left of the course homepage. You are responsible for finding and doing the problems for your log which appear in the units. It is not difficult to find them—they are clearly marked as such. The only way to miss them is to not do a unit. At the end of the semester (or when you have finished the course—which might be well before the official end of the semester on Saturday, January 18th), submit your log to DROPBOX. Make sure that you have submitted all of the log entries—double-check by going through each unit and checking for log entries.

Critical assessment of arguments. You will use the critical thinking tools you learn to critically assess various arguments. Most of the arguments are in the text. Which arguments you will critically assess will appear in the units. You are responsible for finding those arguments, which are clearly marked as such in the individual units. Submit critical assessments of arguments to DROPBOX. Which arguments to critically assess you will submit to DROPBOX and which arguments to critically assess you will add to your log will be clearly marked as such.

IMPORTANT!!!!

Quiz 1: Quiz 1 is due January 2nd. You do not have to have any special knowledge to do it, and you will get 100 for completing it. But it must be finished by Thursday, January 2nd. If you hand in Quiz 1 late, you will not get 100 for it. You will be penalized 20 points for each day it is late.

COURSE OUTCOMES:

You will acquire proficiency in critically assessing reasons for claims made about the world. You will be able to successfully assess arguments, and to successfully construct your own arguments. You will acquire an appreciation of and skills in using language, as well as a sense of how language is used to convey information about the world. You will discover how to use the techniques of critical thinking to ask questions, find interesting and important things to say about texts (of any kind), how to find deficiencies in information, how to measure the quantity of information in a text using your imagination, how to conduct an intelligent literature search, how to find fallacies in reasoning, how to answer certain kinds of questions that appear on the LSAT exams, how to engage in a debate, and how to determine the argument structure of large texts.

COURSE ASSESSMENT

Assessment of student’s ability to critically analyze simple and complex arguments will be achieved by the employment of examinations, written analyzes of selected texts that will be done at home, in-class participation, solutions to various problems and puzzles posed in class and in the textbook, and a mid-term and final examination which will emphasize written critical argument analyzes over short answers. The percentage breakdown of these assessment requirements will be as follows:

Quizzes (2) 33% (16.5% each)
Written evaluations of arguments (3) 33% (11% each)

Log of written solutions to problems 33%

**QUIZ #1 (Due Thursday, January 2nd)**
Make sure you do this assignment BEFORE the first week of class. Submit it to Dropbox on the course webpage. Do not e-mail it to me. You will get 100 on this quiz by simply completing it and submitting it to me on time.

**Background information:** When we argue, we make claims about the world (these claims are called the conclusion of the argument) and provide reasons or evidence for those claims (these reasons are called the premises of the argument). Whenever one confronts an argument, the basic question is: are the reasons good? If they are good reasons, it is rational to believe the claim is true. If the reasons are bad, it is rational to withhold belief about the truth of the claim.

**The assignment:**
(i) Find a newspaper editorial. (The best place for that is The New York Times.) Write a two page critical evaluation of it.
(ii) Describe in one page the method you use to make a critical evaluation of an argument (such as a newspaper editorial).

**Plagiarism**

You should be aware that plagiarism is a serious offense that can jeopardize your academic career at Rutgers and your future career as well. For information, either consult the University Code of Student Conduct or visit the Student Judicial Affairs website [http://judicialaffairs.rutgers.edu](http://judicialaffairs.rutgers.edu)

**ALL REQUIRED WORK IS DUE**
Saturday, January 18th Noon
READ CAREFULLY!

Some facts of winterbreak life

Winterbreak courses are short—so short that you almost fail to notice that they are over, since they feel to you as if they have just started. The course begins officially on December 23rd, though our official beginning is Thursday, January 2nd. The official ending for everyone is Saturday, January 18th. During that time you will have to do all of the required work. Luckily, the course is on-line so that you can do it all at home, in the office, in the subway in NYC, at a studio while you are recording the first smash hit of your new singing career, and so on.

This course will be run through Rutgers ecollege. It will NOT be on Blackboard. To log in, go to http://ecollege.rutgers.edu

If you have any technical problems logging in or using the course website, call the on-line HELP desk, available 24/7: 877-778-8437
Or e-mail them: help@ecollege.rutgers.edu

When you log onto the course homepage, the first thing to do is to read the introductory information. Then go to the units—which are located on the left side of the homepage. Go through the units sequentially. All of the assigned work is located in the units.

You submit your work to DROPBOX. The due dates for the work are only suggestive. The course is flexible—you can hand in your work at any time. However, everything must be handed in (via DROPBOX) by Saturday, January 18th, Noon.