

COMM 4520.001 Fall 2026

Theories of Persuasion

TR 2:20pm – 3:40pm, LANG 305

Professor: Dr. Joseph McGlynn

Email: Joseph.McGlynn@unt.edu

Office Hours: Mondays 2pm–5pm in GAB 320-C and by appointment

Required Texts:

Cialdini, R. B. (2021). *Influence: The psychology of persuasion*. New York: HarperCollins.

Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Optional texts:

Goldstein, N. J., Martin, S. J., & Cialdini, R. B. (2008). *Yes! 50 scientifically proven ways to be persuasive*. New York: Free Press.

Klosterman, C. (2016). *But what if we're wrong?* New York: Blue Rider.

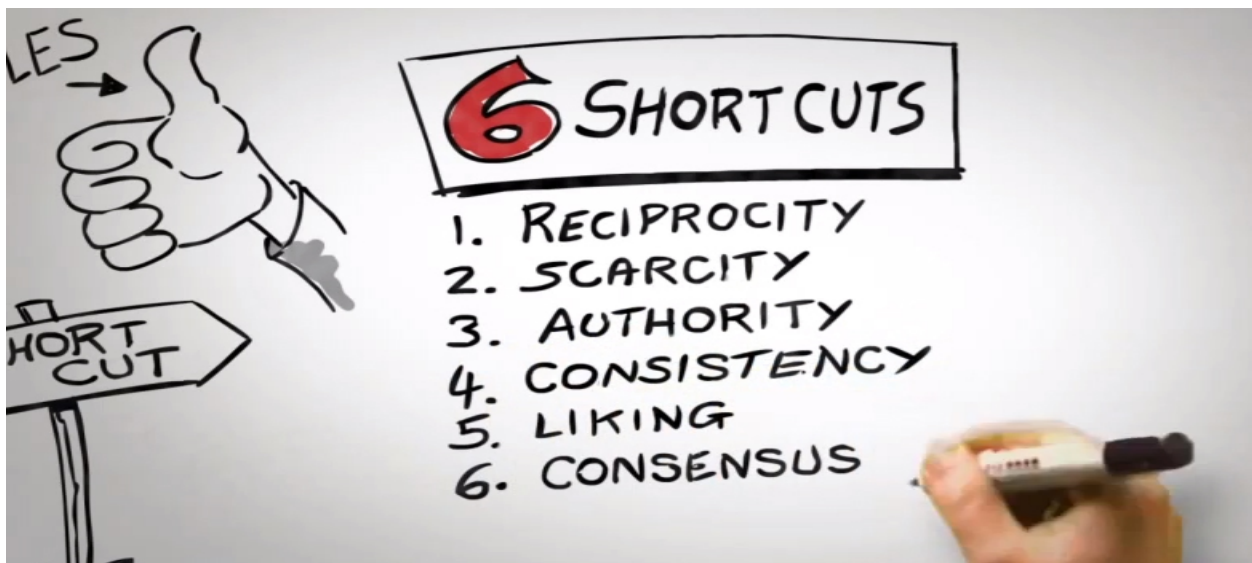
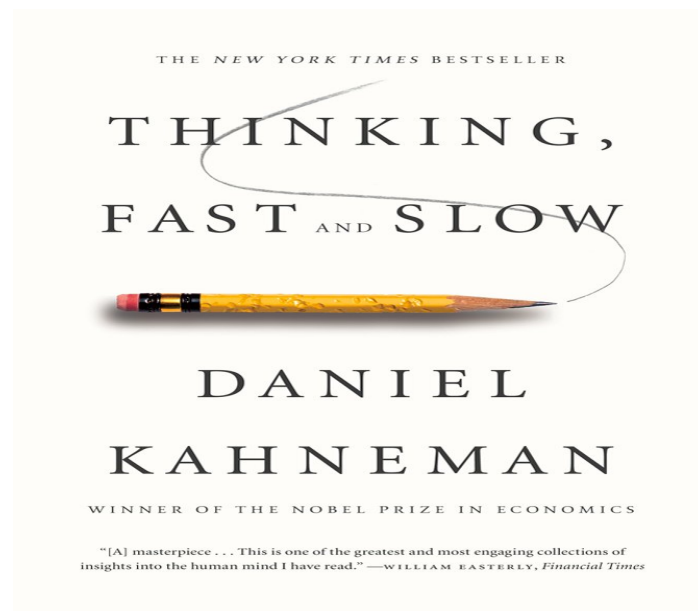
Cialdini, R. (2017). *Pre-suasion: A revolutionary way to influence and persuade*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Course Description

The power of persuasion is all around us – but how does it work? Why are some people and messages more persuasive than others? This course explores the strategies of persuasion that people use to shape the attitudes and behaviors of others. The course explores persuasion across a variety of contexts and uses. We will discuss theories and findings that explain why, when, and how persuasive strategies have their effect. We will also investigate how strategies of persuasion in traditional interpersonal and mass media contexts are now being used in emerging digital and Internet technologies. This course is designed to sharpen your understanding of how and why persuasion occurs in interpersonal, rhetorical, organizational, and mass media contexts.

Learning Objectives

- Theoretical perspectives emphasizing the source, receiver, and message characteristics that play a role in persuasion
- Persuasion in both mass communication and interpersonal communication contexts
- Social influences of persuasion
- Cognitive influences of persuasion
- Importance and influence of cognitive heuristics
- Inoculation and resistance to persuasion attempts



Attendance and Participation

Learning is a social process. In order for this class to be successful, your attendance and participation are imperative. We will conduct this class as a seminar, performing the roles of teachers and learners simultaneously. This is possible only if everyone prepares in advance for class by giving thoughtful attention to the assigned readings, assuming a constructive role in class discussions, asking questions, thoughtfully attending to the ideas of others, and sharing your own insights.

If you are absent from class, it is your responsibility to learn about assignments or any class work missed, ideally from other members of the class. If that is impossible for some reason, you are certainly free to *then* contact your instructor.

Due to the time constraints of this course, you are allowed 3 unexcused absences this semester. With each additional absence, 5 points will be deducted off your final grade per absence. Any student absence from class is considered *unexcused* with the exception of: personal or family illness requiring physician assistance/hospitalization, UNT school-sponsored activity, religious holy day, or death of a family member. Documentation must be provided within 1 calendar week after the return to class. A verbal explanation is appreciated but will not suffice as sufficient documentation for consideration.

Attendance Policy (UNT)

Students are expected to attend class meetings regularly and to abide by the attendance policy established for the course. It is important that you communicate with the professor and the instructional team prior to being absent, so you, the professor, and the instructional team can discuss and mitigate the impact of the absence on your attainment of course learning goals. Please inform the professor and instructional team if you are unable to attend class meetings because you are ill, in mindfulness of the health and safety of everyone in our community.

Assignment Policies

You are responsible for turning work in on time. Late work will not be accepted without a *documented* “authorized absence” as defined by UNT. You cannot make up missed daily activities under any circumstances. If you are unable to attend class on the day an assignment is due, or if there is any remote chance your car might break down, you might get stuck in traffic, etc., you must email that assignment to me no later than the due date to avoid penalties for lateness. All assignments must be typed. Should you miss class due to an excused absence, you must complete the missed assignment and turn it in no later than the beginning of the next class period. You may also turn these in early. **Please note:** If any assignment is missed due to any reason other than documented death, extreme illness, religious observance, UNT activity (see absence policy above), you will be unable to make up the work. You must plan ahead for all assignments, both major and daily, as each constitute a significant part of your final grade and cannot easily be redone or resubmitted due to timing and spatial issues.

Grading of Assignments

All presentations and assignments are based upon a point system. Students will receive a thorough description of requirements for all assignments before they are due, as well as a detailed explanation of all assignments and grading procedures. Your work will be assessed in terms of concept comprehension and skill mastery. In regard to the skill mastery assessments, it must be stressed that although objective standards exist that can be used to determine the quality of an oral communication skill, a certain amount of subjectivity is inherent in the determination of the degree to which such standards are met. It is your responsibility as the student to keep up with points accrued throughout the semester. Cumulative grade points will be available through the Canvas course site.

After a graded assignment has been returned to you, you must wait a minimum of 24 hours before contacting your instructor about a possible grade dispute. After a graded assignment has been returned to you, you have a maximum of 1 week to contact your instructor regarding a possible grade dispute.

Academic Integrity Policy

Academic Integrity Standards and Consequences. According to UNT Policy 06.003, Student Academic Integrity, academic dishonesty occurs when students engage in behaviors including, but not limited to cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, forgery, plagiarism, and sabotage. A finding of academic dishonesty may result in a range of academic penalties or sanctions ranging from admonition to expulsion from the University.

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Cheating. The willful giving or receiving of information in an unauthorized manner during an examination, illicitly obtaining examination questions in advance, using someone else's work or written assignments as if they were your own, or any other dishonest means of attempting to fulfill a requirement of this course.

Plagiarism. The use of an author's words or ideas as if they were your own without giving proper credit to the source, including but not limited to failure to acknowledge a direct quotation. Exact wording from a source must be identified by quotation marks and citation of the author. Concepts and ideas from sources should also be identified by citation of the author. Rules for citing quotes and ideas can be found in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 7th edition. *Intentionality is not a factor in determining plagiarism and its consequential penalties.* Students are responsible for making themselves aware of the parameters and provisions of plagiarism.

A.I. Usage. Plagiarism includes the use of A.I. software or apps (e.g., ChatGPT) to write, edit, or paraphrase text for your paper, as you did not author these words or ideas. The professor of this course will use automated methods to search student papers for A.I.-generated text. Students will be assumed to be the author of all submitted text and assignments. As such, students may be asked to explain portions of their papers or to defend arguments presented in their papers verbally. This verbal explanation can then factor into a student's paper grade, influencing the final grade for that paper up to and including the assignment of a 0% or grade of F for the assignment. The penalty for the first use of A.I.-generated text will be a zero for the assignment. The penalty for the second use of A.I.-generated text will be a grade of "F" for the course.

Ethical use of A.I. for academic papers. For this class, clearly state when you have used A.I. and describe how you employed it. What prompts did you use? What were the results of your query? If you do want to use A.I. for ethical purposes, such as the creation of ideas for a potential paper topic, you must declare that you used the A.I. tool and also provide a copy of the results generated by A.I. Keep a record of all original work, prompts entered, and text generated by A.I. for each assignment. **Remember that for this class, the expectation is that all actual writing will be done by you without the assistance of A.I.** Use of A.I. to create written portions of any assignment is strictly prohibited and considered plagiarism.

Collusion. Intentionally aiding or attempting to aid another in an act of scholastic dishonesty, including but not limited to, providing a paper or project to another student; providing an inappropriate level of assistance; communicating answers to a classmate during an examination; removing tests or answer sheets from a test site, and allowing a classmate to copy answers.

Punishments for cheating, plagiarism, or collusion range from a grade of ZERO on the assignment in question to failure of the course.

Policy on Incompletes

An "Incomplete" will be awarded only in cases where 75% of the coursework has been completed and the grade is warranted by an exigent reason (e.g., medical, military). Inability to complete coursework in a timely fashion does not constitute an acceptable reason for requesting or receiving an incomplete.

Acceptable Student Behavior

Student behavior that interferes with an instructor's ability to conduct a class or other students' opportunity to learn is unacceptable and disruptive and will not be tolerated in any instructional forum at UNT. Students engaging in unacceptable behavior will be directed to leave the classroom and the instructor may refer the student to the Dean of Students to consider whether the student's conduct violated the Code of Student Conduct. The University's expectations for student conduct apply to all instructional forums, including University and electronic classroom, labs, discussion groups, field trips, etc. Visit UNT's [Code of Student Conduct](https://deanofstudents.unt.edu/conduct) (<https://deanofstudents.unt.edu/conduct>) to learn more.

Prohibition of Discrimination, Harassment, and Retaliation (Policy 16.004)

The University of North Texas (UNT) prohibits discrimination and harassment because of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, disability, genetic information, veteran status, or any other characteristic protected under applicable federal or state law in its application and admission processes; educational programs and activities; employment policies, procedures, and processes; and university facilities. The University takes active measures to prevent such conduct and investigates and takes remedial action when appropriate.

Survivor Advocacy

UNT is committed to providing a safe learning environment free of all forms of sexual misconduct. Federal laws and UNT policies prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex as well as sexual misconduct. If you or someone you know is experiencing sexual harassment, relationship violence, stalking and/or sexual assault, there are campus resources available to provide support and assistance. The Survivor Advocates can be reached at SurvivorAdvocate@unt.edu or by calling the Dean of Students Office at 940-565-2648.

Emergency Notification & Procedures

UNT uses a system called Eagle Alert to quickly notify students with critical information in the event of an emergency (i.e., severe weather, campus closing, and health and public safety emergencies like chemical spills, fires, or violence). In the event of a university closure, please refer to Canvas for contingency plans for covering course materials.

Access to Information – Eagle Connect

Students' access point for business and academic services at UNT is located at: my.unt.edu. All official communication from the University will be delivered to your Eagle Connect account. For more information, please visit the website that explains Eagle Connect and how to forward e-mail: eagleconnect.unt.edu/

Firearms Policy

As of August 1, 2016, a concealed handgun license holder may carry a concealed handgun while on the campus premises, except in locations and at activities prohibited by law or UNT policy. A license holder may not carry a partially or wholly visible handgun, or intentionally or knowingly display a handgun in plain view of another person.

Recording Class

This course will encourage open and robust discussions on issues and ideas without fear that any statements made will be used for inappropriate or retaliatory purposes. To ensure the comfort and protection of everyone in our classroom, recording of any kind is prohibited in this space (this includes audio recordings, live-streaming, photographs of course materials, etc.) unless a student has an approved accommodation from the Office of Disability Access (ODA). In such cases, all students in the course will be notified whenever recording will be taking place.

Retention of Student Records

Student records pertaining to this course are maintained in a secure location by the instructor of record. All records such as exams, answer sheets (with keys), and written papers submitted during the duration of the course are kept for at least one calendar year after course completion. Course work completed via the Canvas online system, including grading information and comments, is also stored in a safe electronic environment for one year. Students have the right to view their individual record; however, information about student's records will not be divulged to other individuals without proper written consent. Students are encouraged to review the Public Information Policy and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) laws and the University's policy. See UNT Policy 10.10, Records Management and Retention for additional information.

Basic Needs Security

Any student who faces challenges securing their food or housing and believes this may affect their academic performance is urged to contact the Dean of Students for support (940-565-2648). UNT has both a Food Pantry and a "Seeking Options & Solutions" (SOS) team who work to help students navigate diverse concerns, including identifying resources for personal, academic, financial, and social issues.

Academic Support & Student Services

Mental Health

UNT provides mental health resources to students to help ensure there are numerous outlets to turn to that wholeheartedly care for and are there for students in need, regardless of the nature of an issue or its severity. Listed below are several resources on campus that can support your academic success and mental well-being:

- [Student Health and Wellness Center](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center) (https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center)
- [Counseling and Testing Services](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services) (https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services)
- [UNT Care Team](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/care) (https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/care)
- [UNT Psychiatric Services](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center/services/psychiatry) (https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center/services/psychiatry)

- [Individual Counseling](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services/services/individual-counseling) (https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services/services/individual-counseling)

Additional Student Support Services

- [Registrar](https://registrar.unt.edu/registration) (https://registrar.unt.edu/registration)
- [Financial Aid](https://financialaid.unt.edu/) (https://financialaid.unt.edu/)
- [Student Legal Services](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-legal-services) (https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-legal-services)
- [Career Center](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/career-center) (https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/career-center)
- [Multicultural Center](https://edo.unt.edu/multicultural-center) (https://edo.unt.edu/multicultural-center)
- [Counseling and Testing Services](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services) (https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services)
- [Pride Alliance](https://edo.unt.edu/pridealliance) (https://edo.unt.edu/pridealliance)
- [UNT Food Pantry](https://deanofstudents.unt.edu/resources/food-pantry) (https://deanofstudents.unt.edu/resources/food-pantry)

Academic Support Services

- [Academic Resource Center](https://clear.unt.edu/canvas/student-resources) (https://clear.unt.edu/canvas/student-resources)
- [Academic Success Center](https://success.unt.edu/asc) (https://success.unt.edu/asc)
- [UNT Libraries](https://library.unt.edu/) (https://library.unt.edu/)
- [Writing Lab](http://writingcenter.unt.edu/) (http://writingcenter.unt.edu/)

Course Accessibility

The University of North Texas makes reasonable accommodation for students with disabilities. Students needing reasonable academic accommodations must first register with the Office of Disability Access (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the student will request their letter of accommodation. ODA will provide faculty with a reasonable accommodation letter via email to begin a private discussion regarding a student's specific needs in a course. Students may request reasonable accommodations at any time, however, ODA notices of reasonable accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid any delay in implementation. Note that students must obtain a new letter of reasonable accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. Students are strongly encouraged to meet with faculty regarding their accommodations during office hours or by appointment. Faculty members have the authority to ask students to discuss such letters during their designated office hours to protect the privacy of the student. For additional information, refer to the Office of Disability Access website.

Student Evaluation Administration Dates

Student feedback is important and an essential part of participation in this course. The student evaluation of instruction is a requirement for all organized classes at UNT. The survey will be made available during weeks 13, 14 and 15 of the long semesters to provide students with an opportunity to evaluate how this course is taught. Students will receive an email from "UNT SPOT Course Evaluations via IASystem Notification" (no-reply@iasystem.org) with the survey link. Students should look for the email in their

UNT email inbox. Simply click on the link and complete the survey. Once students complete the survey they will receive a confirmation email that the survey has been submitted. For additional information, please visit the SPOT website (<http://spot.unt.edu/>) or email spot@unt.edu.

Distractions

Turn off all cell phones and place them out of sight during class.

Disclaimer

This syllabus is an agreement between the instructional faculty member teaching a course and the students enrolled in that course. The syllabus establishes the instructional faculty member's expectations, providing students with an overview of course content and explanations of course guidelines, procedures, and requirements. Consistent with UNT Policy 15.2.20, Academic Freedom and Academic Responsibility, instructional faculty have the academic freedom to design the course and present the syllabus as they wish, and instructional faculty have the academic responsibility to include specific items to fulfill state and institutional requirements.

This syllabus is intended to serve as a guideline for COMM 4520: Theories of Persuasion. Both UNT and your professor reserve the right to make modifications in content, schedule, and requirements as necessary to promote the optimal educational experiences within prevailing conditions affecting the course.

Assignments

Quizzes & In-class Activities

(25 points total)

Reading is a key component to maximizing learning. Unannounced quizzes over the reading assignments will provide opportunities to demonstrate your dedication to the reading and your understanding of the course material. Reading quizzes will cover the assigned reading material for that calendar day only, unless otherwise stated.

In addition to reading quizzes, we will also have in-class activities. These activities are unannounced opportunities to participate in the learning process during class periods. They will be extemporaneous in nature and completed during class.

Please note: Due to their spontaneous nature, in-class activities and quizzes that are missed cannot be made up. Similarly, if you are late to class and the activity or quiz is completed before you arrive, the same principle applies.

Persuasion Analysis Assignments

(3 assignments, 25 points each, 75 points total)

Throughout the semester, you will complete three (3) written analyses of persuasion in everyday life. These analyses are spaced throughout the semester. Topics of the analyses will reflect the current topics for that week in the semester. The topics of analysis include: Reciprocity, Social Proof, and The Lazy Controller.

For each assignment, complete a one-page single-spaced paper in which you 1) identify and describe the topic or context of interest 2) offer a pertinent and lively example of the topic to analyze, and 3) provide scholarly analysis of your example.

Each analysis should revolve around an example from your own life; be it something that you have read, seen, heard, watched, smelled, or otherwise experienced that relates to the specified persuasive topic. The analyses should demonstrate that you are observing carefully and thinking critically about how to apply the topics learned in class to outside examples in your own life. Grades for analyses will be based on the relevance of the example described and your ability to connect the example thoughtfully to course concepts and persuasion research.

The goal of these analyses is to apply your knowledge of the theories and concepts learned during class to better understand examples from the world at large.

Counter-Obvious Persuasive Appeal

(1 assignment, 40 points, 40 points total).

Every culture has broad, pervasive narratives that permeate the unknowing assumptions of its people. For this assignment, you will:

- 1) identify a cultural narrative that nearly everyone agrees with or assumes is true, and
- 2) persuade us to think otherwise.

To give you a few ideas, broad cultural narratives that permeate U.S. culture as assumptions include:

- Saving for retirement is a good idea
- Having a romantic partner is something to desire
- Buying a house is a smart investment for a young couple
- Teachers should be paid more
- Family is a priority
- Divorce is a negative outcome for relationships
- Being awake during the daytime is ideal
- Avoid getting into debt

For each of these broad cultural narratives, you can probably think of many stories that people use and point to in order to back up their beliefs with *evidence*.

For this assignment, you will choose a broad cultural narrative that people assume is true, a good idea, or perhaps an idea they even take it for granted (e.g., “*of course buying a house is a good idea...*”). Then, you will use principles of persuasion and argumentation to convince us that, “Hey, this idea that everyone mostly agrees is correct – is actually totally wrong. And here’s why...”

The assignment should be 2 single-spaced pages long. The assignment should cite or incorporate at least 4 principles or examples of persuasion research/knowledge during your analysis/argument.

The keys to this assignment include: picking an interesting topic for your persuasive appeal, incorporating multiple aspects of persuasion knowledge, research and strategies into your argument, and putting in the requisite time toward making this a quality assignment. Creativity and off-the-wall ideas are encouraged. This assignment is purposefully open-ended to allow students the freedom to create and apply their knowledge as best fits their specific interests.

Exams

(4 exams, 40 points each, 160 points total)

Tests and exams are one way to measure your understanding and comprehension of course materials. Exams in this course will consist primarily of multiple-choice questions, but may also include true/false, matching, or essay questions as called for by the situation. Each exam will have a total of 20 questions, with each question worth 2 points (40 points total).

For each exam, all assigned readings and all material covered in lecture should be considered of importance for the exam. Exams are scheduled at the completion of Weeks throughout the semester.

Grading scale:

A: (excellent, clearly outstanding)	270-300	(90-100%)
B: (very good, impressive)	240-269	(80-89%)
C: (average college-level)	210-239	(70-79%)
D: (below average, barely passing)	180-209	(60-69%)
F: (failing)	< 180	(0-59%)

Tracking Your Grade!

Assignment	Point Value	Your Score
Exams	-----	-----
Exam #1	40	
Exam #2	40	
Exam #3	40	
Exam #4	40	
In-Class Activities	-----	-----
Quizzes & Activities	25	
Persuasion Analysis Assignments	-----	-----
Analysis #1: Reciprocity	25	
Analysis #2: Social Proof	25	
Analysis #3: The Lazy Controller	25	
Counter-Obvious Persuasive Appeal	40	
Total	300	

**Theories of Persuasion
Fall 2026 Schedule**

**Unit 1:
Principles of Persuasion**

Week	Dates	Topic	Tuesday	Thursday
1	August 18 th & 20 th	Course Introduction	Course Introduction; Syllabus Overview	Intros & Icebreakers <i>The Lady or the Tiger?</i>
2	August 25 th & 27 th	Persuasion & Reciprocity	<i>Cialdini</i> 1 – 35	Reciprocity
3	September 1 st & 3 rd	Reciprocity, Consistency & Commitment	<i>Cialdini</i> 36 – 72	<i>Analysis #1, Reciprocity, due September 7th</i>
4	September 8 th & 10 th	Consistency & Commitment	<i>Cialdini</i> 291 – 362	<i>Goldstein,</i> <i>Ch. 1, Ch. 19</i> Review for Exam 1

Take Exam #1 on Canvas.
The exam opens at 5pm on Thursday September 10th
and closes at 11pm on Monday September 14th.

Unit 2: Social Influences

Week	Dates	Topic	Tuesday	Thursday
5	September 15 th & 17 th	Social Proof & Validation	<i>Cialdini 127 – 159; Goldstein Ch. 2</i>	<i>Cialdini 160 – 198</i>
6	September 22 nd & 24 th	Liking, Attraction, & Similarity	<i>Cialdini 73 – 125</i>	<i>Analysis #2, Social Proof, due September 28th</i>
7	September 29 th & October 1 st	Authority & Scarcity	<i>Cialdini 199 – 240</i>	<i>Cialdini 241 – 290</i>

Take Exam #2 on Canvas.
The exam opens at 5pm on Thursday October 1st
and closes at 11pm on Monday October 5th.

Unit 3: Thinking, Fast & Slow

Week	Dates	Topic	Tuesday	Thursday
8	October 6 th & 8 th	System 1 & 2: Attention & Effort	<i>Kahneman 19 – 30</i>	<i>Kahneman 31 – 38</i>
9	October 13 th & 15 th	The Lazy Controller; Cognitive Ease	<i>Kahneman 39 – 49</i>	<i>Kahneman 59 – 70</i> <i>Analysis #3, The Lazy Controller, due October 20th</i>
10	October 20 th & 22 nd	Prospect Theory	<i>Kahneman 278 – 288</i>	<i>Kahneman 289 – 299</i>
11	October 27 th & 29 th	The Endowment Effect	Loss Aversion	Catch up on the assigned readings from this Unit

Take Exam #3 on Canvas.
The exam opens at 5pm on Thursday October 29th
and closes at 11pm on Monday November 2nd.

Unit 4: Applications				
Week	Dates	Topic	Tuesday	Thursday
12	November 3 rd & 5 th	Creative Thinking; Anchors	But What if We're Wrong? <i>Klosterman, Ch. 1</i>	Anchors; Anchoring Effect
13	November 10 th & 12 th	Bias & Persuasion	Anchoring Effect; Primacy & Recency; The Focusing Illusion; Opportunity Costs; Sunk Costs; Logical Fallacies	<i>Analysis #4, Counter-Obvious Persuasive Appeal, due November 16th</i>
14	November 17 th & 19 th	Pre-suasion	Pre-suasion Cialdini, Chapter 1	Timing of Requests; Design Aspects of Persuasion; Noise; Practical Applications
15	<i>Happy Thanksgiving!</i>			
16	December 1 st & 3 rd	Timing & Gut Feelings	Time & Persuasion; Gut Feelings	(Reading Day)
Take Exam #4 on Canvas. The exam opens at 5pm on Thursday December 3rd and closes at 11pm on Tuesday December 8th.				