

FIRST YEAR SEMINAR COURSE PROPOSAL

UNIVERSITY OF MARY WASHINGTON

Use this form to submit **FSEM 100 topics** courses for review **or** any **other existing course** that you wish to have designated to meet the first year seminar requirement.

COURSE NUMBER:			
COURSE TITLE:	Reading and Writing About Weird Things: Critical Thinking and the Internet		
SUBMITTED BY:	George Meadows	DATE:	1/20/10
<i>This course proposal has the department's approval. (Put a check in the box to the right.)</i>			X

NOTE: Please view the attached Call for Proposals or visit the First-Year Seminar blog at <http://firstyearsem.umwblogs.org/> to see the criteria used to evaluate courses proposed to meet the first year seminar requirement. See the report entitled "General Education Curriculum as Approved by the Faculty Senate" for additional details.

COURSE DESCRIPTION. In the space below, provide a **1-2 sentence** description of this class. The description will be entered in Banner, and will also be used in other publications about the first year seminar program (such as the "Eagle Essentials" booklet).

The purpose of this course is to provide students an understanding of the principles and strategies of critical thinking so that they may examine and evaluate many of the unusual or "weird" claims often associated with such topics as the paranormal, superstition, or conspiracy theory. The Internet provides a forum for both supporters and opponents of many of these claims and as such is a rich source for the application of critical thinking principles.

RATIONALE. Using only the space provided in the box below, **briefly** state why this course should be approved as a first year seminar course.

This course would provide a solid introduction to an important intellectual skill: critical thinking. (For this course I would define critical thinking as the ability to evaluate claims by recognizing such fallacies as equivocation, false dilemma, begging the question, *ad hominen* claims, faulty analogies, and several other premises.) The topics I have chosen for this application of critical thinking, the "weird" claims of the paranormal, pseudo-science, superstition, etc., are accessible to all in terms of the knowledge required to understand the basic concepts behind the claims, are interesting (and in some cases entertaining), and provide many opportunities for argument, discussion, and evaluation. The Internet provides an almost endless supply of primary sources dealing with these topics, and these sources provide opinions from a wide spectrum of both supporters and opponents of the various claims. It is important to note that this is not a "de-bunking" class. The purpose is not to identify and attack beliefs that do not pass a test of a critical evaluation. While students are expected to understand and apply critical thinking strategies, they will also be encouraged to examine the role of other concepts such as intuition and faith in constructing beliefs.

SYLLABUS. Attach a course syllabus.

SUBMIT this form and attached syllabus **electronically as one document** to Maya Mathur (mmathur@umw.edu). All submissions **must** be in electronic form.

FSEM
Reading and Writing About Weird Things: Critical Thinking and the Internet
Fall 2010

Instructor: George Meadows **Office Hours:**
Office: 215 Trinkle Hall **Phone:** 654-1350, **E-mail:** gmeadows@umw.edu

Texts

- I will keep, available for sign out, a shelf of relevant books and journals in my office. These texts will serve as both assigned reading materials and reference materials for chosen topics. *See partial list at end of syllabus.*
- Class web page – I will maintain a course web page which can be accessed via a Directory Search using my name on the UMW home page or by going directly to <http://www1.umw.edu/~gmeadows>

Purpose of the Course

The purpose of this course is to provide an understanding of the principles and strategies of critical thinking so that you may examine and critique unusual or “weird” claims often associated with such topics as the paranormal, superstition, or conspiracy theory. As you examine these claims, I hope that you will also develop a better understanding of the different ways we evaluate information and experiences and construct our own system of beliefs.

“On the list of qualities necessary to humans trying to make our way through life, truth scores fairly low. Why do people believe and do weird things? Because in the end, feeling alive is more important than telling the truth. We have evolved as living creatures to express ourselves, to be creative, to tell stories. We are instruments for feeling, faith, energy, emotion, significance, belief, but not really the truth.”

Louis Theroux, *The Call of the Weird*, p. 263.

Evaluation – Course Requirements and Grading

Requirement	Points	% of Grade
Writing Assignment 1 – topic selection rationale and discussion, not graded	NG	NG
Writing Assignment 2 – report of initial findings	10	10
Writing Assignments 3, 4, and 5 – application of critical thinking principles to findings	15 each	45
Writing Assignment 6 - Final report	30	30
Class discussion and blog	15	15
TOTAL	100	100

The grading scale will follow the College standard.

Attendance, Participation, and Homework

Students are expected to attend class regularly and are responsible for all material discussed in class. Students should prepare for class by doing all assigned readings and postings. Readings and postings serve as the basis for class discussion and group work. Failure to prepare or to attend class

will result in your inability to participate in the day's work and will damage your grade. If you are not in class (unexcused absences) you don't receive the points. In short – **Don't miss class.**

Additional Information

You will be expected to maintain a blog for this class, for discussion of your topic and any relevant links. You can make use of web space provided by the college if you wish. I will provide instruction as to how you can set up and revise a simple blog.

Tentative Class Schedule

This is a tentative class schedule and dates and topics may change throughout the semester. I will try to inform you of any changes as quickly as possible. Due dates for the different assignments will be fixed during the semester.

Class Week	Topic
1	Introduction – review syllabus, introduction to course, course materials, Blackboard, developing web pages, choosing a topic
2	Discussion of possible topics, Assignment 1 due at end of week
3	Critical thinking – Principles and case studies, discussion of individual topics
4	Discussion of individual topics, Assignment 2 due at end of week
5	Critical thinking – Principles and case studies Critical thinking – discussion of assignment 2 papers and assigned readings
6	Assignment 3 – postings and discussions
7	Small group and whole class discussion of topics and assigned readings
	Fall Break
8	Constructing knowledge – other ways to think about things
9	Assignment 4 – postings and discussions
10	Constructing knowledge – other ways to think about things
11	Small group and whole class discussion of topics and assigned readings
12	Assignment 5 – postings and discussions
13	Small group and whole class discussion of topics and assigned readings
14	Final report, Assignment 6, due

Disability Statement

The Office of Disability Services has been designated by the University as the primary office to guide, counsel, and assist students with disabilities. If you receive services through that office and require accommodations for this class, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible to discuss your approved accommodation needs. Bring your accommodation letter with you to the appointment. I will hold any information you share with me in the strictest confidence unless you give me permission to do otherwise.

If you need accommodations, (note taking assistance, extended time for tests, etc.), I would be happy to refer you to the Office of Disability Services. They will require appropriate documentation of a disability. Their phone number is 540-654-1266.

Reference Texts and Journals – a partial list

Brockman, John. *ed.* Intelligent Thought: Science Versus the Intelligent Design Movement. Vintage, 2006.

Kida, Thomas. Don't Believe Everything You Think. Prometheus Books, 2006.

Roach, Mary. Spook: Science Tackles the Afterlife. Norton Books, 2005.

Schick, Theodore. and Vaughn, Lewis. How to Think About Weird Things: Critical Thinking for a New Age. Mayfield Books, 1999.

Shermer, Michael. Why People Believe Weird Things. Freeman Books, 1997.

Theroux, Louis. The Call of the Weird: Travels in American Subcultures. Da Capo press, 2005.

Wicker, Christine. Not In Kansas Anymore: A Curious Tale of How Magic is Transforming America. Harper San Francisco, 2005.

Journals - Skeptical Inquirer, The Skeptic, Fortean Times.