

SJSU Fall 2018
Linguistics 21: Language and Thinking
Section 7 (9:00), 43693; Section 11 (3:00), 47508

Instructor:	Scott Alkire
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Office Hours:	T/Th 10:30 to 11:30 a.m. Please make an appointment.
Class Days/Time/Classroom:	T/Th, 9:00 to 10:15 a.m., Engineering 232 T/Th, 3:00 to 4:15 p.m., Clark 306
Prerequisite or concurrent:	English 1A
Core General Education Category:	Critical Thinking (A3). 3 Units. Grading options: A - F.

Course Description

This course explores the use of language and logic in oral and written discourse, with a focus on the role of shared cultural assumptions, scientific thinking, pseudoscience, language style, and argumentation. This course fulfills the University's Core GE category A3 requirement (Basic Skills: Critical Thinking).

According to SJSU policy for A3 courses such as this one, each student is required to produce 6000 words of written work during the semester. Four thousand of these words must be in revised final-draft form.

Course Work

There is no make-up work for missed quizzes, essays, or exams except in the case of a documented medical crisis. Have your work done two days ahead of time just in case. If you miss a class, contact a classmate — not the instructor — to learn what you missed. You must be prepared for the next class.

Classmate

Phone number

Required Texts/Readings

Sagan, Carl. *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*. ISBN 978-0-345-40946-1
Additional texts/readers will be announced soon.

Summary of Course Requirements and Percentages of Final Grade

Table 1 Requirements and Percentages

Quizzes and assignments	50%
Essays	40%
Final exam	10%

Grading Policy

A – 90-100

B – 80-89

C – 70-79

D – 60-69

F – below 59

Goals and Student Learning Objectives

GE/SJSU Studies Learning Outcomes (LOs)

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to do the following:

1. Locate and evaluate sources, through library research, and integrate research through appropriate citation and quotation.
2. Present effective arguments that use a full range of legitimate rhetorical and logical strategies to articulate and explain their positions on complex issues in dialogue with other points of view.
3. Effectively locate, interpret, evaluate, and synthesize evidence in a comprehensive way in support of one's ideas.
4. Identify and critically evaluate the assumptions in and the context of an argument.
5. Effectively distinguish and convey inductive and deductive patterns as appropriate, sequencing arguments and evidence logically to draw valid conclusions and articulate related outcomes (implications and consequences).

(The alignment of Learning Outcomes with assignments is given in the “Assignments” section below.)

Course Content Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Insightfully analyze arguments as well as things that only pretend to be arguments.
- Demonstrate the ability to construct clear and meaningful discussions of their own involving their opinions on current events that are important to the people of the nation and the world.
- Begin to analyze the conceptual frames that underlie their experience of reality.

We will devote special attention to issues of diversity (such as gender, class, ethnicity).

University Policies

Per University Policy S16-9, university-wide policy information relevant to all courses, such as academic integrity, accommodations, etc. are available on Office of Graduate and Undergraduate Programs' [Syllabus Information web page](http://www.sjsu.edu/gup/syllabusinfo/) at <http://www.sjsu.edu/gup/syllabusinfo/>

SJSU Writing Center

The SJSU Writing Center is located in Clark Hall, Suite 126. All Writing Specialists have gone through a rigorous hiring process, and they are well trained to assist all students at all levels within all disciplines to become better writers. In addition to one-on-one tutoring services, the Writing Center also offers workshops every semester on a variety of writing topics. To make an appointment or to refer to the numerous online resources offered through the Writing Center, visit the [Writing Center website](http://www.sjsu.edu/writingcenter) at <http://www.sjsu.edu/writingcenter>.

Classroom Protocol

- Cellphone use is prohibited in class. Please do not let your phone ring.

Essays need to be submitted to www.turnitin.com to prevent plagiarism. A similarity rate of 10% or less is expected.

Class ID#: 18616927 Password: Fall2018

Assignments

(Subject to revision with a week's notice, given in class.)

Assignments must be turned in to me as hardcopy on the day they are due unless otherwise indicated.

(Please talk with me if you have any questions at all about how you are being evaluated.)

Quizzes and assignments. All of these combined will be worth 50% of the course grade.

The essays will be based on our readings and will be worth 40% of the course grade. Each essay will present a good argument on a controversial viewpoint related to the readings. The issue must be one on which people disagree, and you will have to consider both sides (*pro* and *con*). Each essay assignment includes a first draft and a final draft. The first draft of each essay will contain at least 750 words and the final draft at least 1500 words. A typed, double-spaced page with one-inch margins contains approximately 350 words, so 1500 words would be approximately four pages. Each draft must be typed, double-spaced or one-and-a-half spaced, with approximately one-inch margins. Please include the word count at the end.

More details on the essays: you will have to deal with the arguments that are currently being made on both sides of the issue presented. This may involve substantial library research. You will have to determine which factual claims are true and which arguments are good. In your paper you must make clear which argument comes from whom, and appropriately identify and mark anything that you may have copied. I will comment on your first draft and you will need to respond to my comments in your final draft.

For your second essay, you will have to explicitly state and discuss your opponent's arguments, in addition to your own. You can also do this on your first essay, if you want. (Contributes to the satisfaction of LOs 1 through 5.)

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Food for thought, pt. 1

"In theory there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice there is." --Yogi Berra

"Reality is what which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away." --Philip K. Dick

What do these two quotes have in common, in your opinion? What do they have to do with critical thinking? With your education? With how you live your life?

Food for thought, pt. 2

Discuss the many ways we use and appreciate language in our lives. What are some of your favorite ways of using and appreciating language? Your least favorite ways? What uses of language do you find yourself attracted to in others?

Some short rules for writing

1. Put the point of your email (phrased as a question if you want something) in the Subject: line of your email.
2. Words are like clothes: they show the respect you have for *others*. Be mindful of this.
3. Write the way you expect a person with a good education would write.
4. Be direct: use short words, short sentences, and short paragraphs whenever possible.
5. Related to #4, avoid the passive voice. Use the **active voice** whenever possible. For example:

Passive (*wordy, less direct*)

Forty engineers were hired by Tesla.

Many new courses were offered by SJSU in 2018.

Active (*clearer, stronger*)

Tesla hired forty engineers.

SJSU offered many new courses in 2018.

Sometimes cautious writers use the passive:

Passive

Coffee is expensive in the Student Union.

Mistakes were made.

Active (*clearer, stronger*)

Starbucks charges \$3.00 for a small coffee in the S.U.

Human Resources made a mistake.

But sometimes we must use the passive because we don't know for sure who did the action:

Passive

The earth was created about 4.54 billion years ago.

President Kennedy was assassinated in 1963.

Active

?

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6. Avoid jargon words or expressions like *going forward*, *at the end of the day*, *reboot*, *it's all good*, *have a conversation*, *go Yankees!*, etc. They can reflect lazy and sometimes shallow thinking.
7. Never write more than two pages on any subject if possible.
8. Check your quotations.
9. Never send an important letter or email on the day you write it. Read it aloud the next morning — and then edit it.
10. Get a trusted friend to read it as well and to suggest improvements.
11. Before you send your email or letter, make sure it is crystal clear what you want the recipient *to do*.
12. If you want ACTION right way, don't write. Go and tell the guy what you want.

An insight: The verb “to be” may distort our perception of reality

Simple changes in your speech and writing can have transformative effects on the way you perceive the world and how others perceive you. This communication hack from an obscure, but influential Polish aristocrat should certainly get you thinking.

Alfred Korzybski

Alfred Korzybski, a Polish emigre to the US, was a polymath and independent scholar who developed a philosophy called General Semantics.

The map is not the territory

Korzybski's most memorable idea is that “the map is not the territory.” By “map” Korzybski means our opinions, experiences, background – all the things that influence how we perceive and understand the world. However, our “maps” are always selective and highly subjective. What I think about a politician is not who the politician is. Nevertheless, we constantly rely on our maps to help us make decisions about our lives. And when misperceptions conflict with reality, this causes misunderstanding and conflict.

According to Korzybski, understanding how we use language was key to avoid these conflicts. And one word in particular seems to get in the way.

Getting rid of the word “is”

Korzybski said that using phrases like “I am, he is, they are, we are” promote a kind of insanity because they reduce complex ideas into simple concepts such as “He is a bad person” and “She is ignorant.”

Korzybski proposed a radical solution for avoiding the kind of traps these types of thought/speech patterns can cause. He suggested that if we stop using the verb “to be” as a way of describe people and things, we can change the way we perceive the world. As Oliver Burkeman in the *Guardian* explains, “To think about and function in the world, Korzybski said, we rely on systems of abstract concepts, most obviously language. But those concepts don't reflect the world in a straightforward way; instead, they contain hidden traps that distort reality, causing confusion and angst. And the verb “to be,” he argued, contains the most traps of all.”

In 1965, David Bourand, a student of Korzybski, took this idea a step further by proposing a new dialect of English he called “E-prime.” E-prime focuses entirely on eliminating the “to be” verbs.

Getting rid of “is” forces you to stop thinking in terms of generalizations such as “my neighbor is lazy” and instead forces you to think in more accurate terms closer to reality. While this might seem trivial, we know that words can have powerful psychological effects and changing your speech and thought patterns can make a big difference. As Joshua Cartwright explains,

“Consider what happens when you say “I AM a failure.” You equate yourself fully and completely with the idea of failure. No wiggle room. This X = Y creates all kinds of mental anguish and it doesn’t need to because we never can reduce ourselves to single concepts.”

So in E-prime, you might say something like “I feel like a failure” or “I have failed at juggling” which creates less of a sense of permanence, and opens the possibility for addressing the problem.

It affects your writing too

It’s not just speech where the word “is” can trip us up. It can affect our writing too. Some of the negative outcomes of relying on “to be” include:

- Making your writing and speaking seem static rather than active
- Implying permanence when you don’t want it to
- Spinning your opinions as absolute facts

Using “to be” excessively can also make you

- Look simple
- Show that you only know vague descriptions of events, people, and topics

So how do you get rid of “to be”? In some cases you can just simply remove it. E.g.:

“Anyone who is willing to work hard will succeed in this program” becomes:

“Anyone **willing** to work hard will succeed in this program.”

Or you can replace it with an action verb, so:

“She is a slow thinker,” becomes “She **thinks** slowly.” And “We are in agreement” becomes “We **agree**.”

When you stop relying on “is” in your writing you’ll find the following things happen:

- You don’t make false claims
- You write and speak more clearly and accurately
- You write more powerfully
- You describe your world in more interesting, intelligent, and even exciting ways.
- You say more in fewer words
- You notice a difference between your own opinions and your reality

As you work to remove “is” from your language, you’ll start to become more aware of the reality outside of your own internal maps and perceptions.

And when you move away from these biases and generalizations, you can start accepting others based on what they actually do, say, and think rather than on what you think they “are.”