

# Persuasion

## COMM 302

Summer 2013  
MWF 1:00-3:50pm, ASC 228

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*The power of discourse stands in the same relation to the soul's organization as the pharmacopoeia does to the physiology of bodies. For just as different drugs draw off different humors from the body, and some put an end to disease and others to life, so too of discourses: some give pain, others delight, others terrify, others rouse the hearers to courage, and yet others by a certain vile persuasion drug and trick the soul.* – Gorgias, 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE

*If learning how to persuade others and avoid being persuaded seems a bit manipulative, remember, we don't live in a society populated with unicorns and rainbows. The real world is brimming with persuaders... You can avoid learning about persuasion, perhaps, but you can't avoid persuasion itself.* – Robert Gass & John Seiter, 2013

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### **I. Rationale:**

Persuasion, or human communication designed to influence the judgments and actions of others, is pervasive in our society. Persuading (or attempting to persuade) and being persuaded are part of our everyday human experience. No aspect of human communication is more instrumental to your ability to achieve your life goals than persuasion – the difference between success and failure often hinges on whether you can successfully influence others to adopt a desired attitude, behavior, or belief. Likewise, your life trajectory depends in a large part on decisions you make after someone has attempted to persuade you. It is not a bad thing to be persuaded – even the most indecisive nihilist is inevitably persuaded on a daily basis. But many of the techniques of persuasion are so powerful that they can distort your faculty of rational judgment and cause you to make bad decisions. You want to be persuaded by smart people who have your interests in mind; you do not want to be persuaded to do something that ultimately will harm you. What factors lead someone to say yes? This course is designed to introduce you to the theories, concepts, and techniques of persuasion. Armed with this knowledge, you will have the upper hand in your attempts to persuade others, to recognize when others are using techniques that may potentially interfere with your decision-making process, and in general have a better understanding of the communicative practices that underlie social influence and compliance gaining.

### **II. Course Description:**

We will examine persuasion from a variety of perspectives, both humanistic and social scientific, and consider how the target, the techniques, the source, the message, and the channel of communication all interplay in persuasion.

*Target:* A successful persuasion attempt directed at one subgroup of the population may fail when applied to a different subgroup.

*Techniques:* There are a variety of techniques available for any persuasion attempt. Knowing when and how to use these techniques effectively is central to any persuasion attempt.

*Source:* Persuasion attempts can originate from a variety of sources (e.g. parents, friends, government and businesses). What characteristics of a source are typical within successful persuasion attempts?

*Message:* Although there are differences in the content conveyed in various persuasion attempts, there are features that can be utilized within a message to improve the effectiveness of persuasion attempts.

*Channel:* There are multiple methods with which to reach a persuasion target (e.g. print, word of mouth, the internet). We will examine the strengths and weaknesses of different channels.

We will engage with the theories and research in social influence, as well as the strategies and tactics of persuasive communication in such settings as advertising, business, politics, public relations, and science.

## II. Course Aims and Objectives:

Students should review these objectives on a regular basis as they will help inform the goals of each day's readings and discussion. They will also be central themes used in written work for the course.

1. Provide students with a basic background in the theories and concepts of social psychology that are relevant to the social influence.
2. Familiarize students with research on attitude structure and attitude formation, the attitude-behavior relationship, process models of persuasion, theories, motivational models, campaigns, and advertising approaches. Discussion of these topics will emphasize social-scientific approaches to the study of social influence and persuasion.
3. Provide students with the tools to critically evaluate various theories of attitudes and persuasion.
4. Provide students with the opportunity to apply these concepts and theories through engaging and practical activities.

## IV. Course Materials

### Required

Robert B. Cialdini. (2009). *Influence: Science and practice*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition. Boston, MA: Pearson.

Herbert W. Simons & Jean G. Jones. (2011). *Persuasion in Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York: Taylor & Francis.

### Recommended/Supplementary

Robert H. Gass & John S. Seiter. (2013). *Persuasion: Social influence and compliance gaining*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition. Boston, MA: Pearson.

Anthony Pratkanis & Elliot Aronson. (1992). *Age of propaganda: The everyday use and abuse of persuasion*. New York: Henry Holt & Co.

## V. Course Requirements:

**Exams:** We will have two exams that combine multiple choice, short answer and essay formats. The final exam will focus on the second half of the course material, but will require students to have developed a core competence from past materials.

**Paper:** You will write a 6-8 page paper in which they will describe a hypothetical scenario in which it will be very important for you to persuade someone of something, or in which you are facing a difficult decision that involves being subject to several persuasion attempts. This situation should be something you are likely to face in the future, based on your career plans or personal life goals. You will analyze the communication problem, and consider a variety of possible strategies based on the theories and concepts of social influence that we have examined. Finally, you will develop a course of action, and explain why you are choosing to use your chosen strategies instead of alternatives.

**Participation/Preparation:** On a daily basis, this is an intensive reading and discussion based course. The daily assignment is to read and be prepared for in-depth discussion of the readings.

Students should assume that they will be asked to discuss specific aspects of the readings each day. If there are difficulties with completing daily readings, the instructor may assign unannounced quizzes which will be factored into the overall grade.

**Minute papers:** On occasion you will be asked toward the end of the class session to write a short response to a question regarding that day's material. Other times you may be asked what the most important point made in class that day was and if you still have unanswered questions for that session or to name five significant points made during the class session. These short answer assignments generally take 3-5 minutes.

## VI. Grading Procedures:

Students will earn grades based on the following assignments. Specific instructions for each assignment will be provided in class. Final course grades are assigned on the following scale:

94-100 % = A	80-83 % = B-	67-69 % = D+
90-93 % = A-	77-79 % = C+	64-66 % = D
87-89 % = B+	74-76 % = C	60-63 % = D-
84-86 % = B	70-73 % = C-	59 % and below = F

Your final grade will be determined by the following components:

**Midterm:** 35%

**Final:** 35%

**Paper:** 20%

**Participation/Preparation:** 10%

**Attendance** – I take attendance regularly, and expect you to be in class or have a legitimate excuse (e.g., illness, approved extra-curricular/sports travelling, etc.). If you miss more than two sessions without a valid excuse, it will negatively affect your grade. Do not miss more than four sessions without an excuse.

## VII. Academic Integrity

The Annenberg School for Communication is committed to upholding the University's academic integrity code. It is the policy of the School of Communication to report all violations of the code. Any serious violation or pattern of violations of the academic integrity code will result in the student's expulsion from the Communication major or minor. The University presumes that you are familiar with its standards and policies; should you be found to have committed a violation, ignorance of these standards and policies will not be accepted as an excuse. You should be familiar with the following resources:

\* "Guide to Avoiding Plagiarism" addresses issues of paraphrasing, quotations and citations in written assignments, drawing heavily upon materials used in the university's Writing Program (by Student Judicial Affairs) <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/docs/tig.pdf>

\* "Understanding and Avoiding Academic Dishonesty" addresses more general issues of academic integrity, including guidelines for adhering to standards concerning examinations and unauthorized collaboration (by Student Judicial Affairs) <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/docs/tio.pdf>

\* The "2012-2013 SCampus" (the student handbook) contains the university's Student Conduct Code and other student-related policies. <http://www.usc.edu/scampus>

\* The Code of Ethics of the University of Southern California:  
[https://about.usc.edu/files/2011/07/USC\\_Code\\_of\\_Ethics\\_2004.pdf](https://about.usc.edu/files/2011/07/USC_Code_of_Ethics_2004.pdf)

### **VIII. Other University Notices and Policies**

**Use of E-mail for Official Correspondence to Students** – All students should become familiar with the University's official e-mail student notification policy. It is the student's responsibility to keep the University informed as to changes in his or her e-mail address. Students are expected to check e-mail on a frequent and regular basis in order to stay current with University-related communications, recognizing that certain communications may be time-critical. It is recommended that e-mail be checked daily, but at a minimum, twice per week.

**Late & Unfinished Work** – Students must complete all assignments in order to earn a grade in the course. Any material turned in late will be reduced one letter grade per calendar day late. Each speaking assignment must be given on the day assigned. No makeup sessions will be available.

**Final Exam** – The Final Exam is on July 1, from 1:00 – 3:50 PM. Do not plan to leave campus before this date. There will be no alternative exam times except in cases of extreme illness or acts of God.

**Grievance Procedure** - Occasionally, students are dissatisfied with some dimension of a course. In such cases, students should first provide a written argument in support of their position to the instructor and request a meeting with the instructor. All grade appeals on specific assignments must be made within one week of the return of the assignment.

**Special Assistance** - Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure that the letter is delivered as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m. - 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday and can be reached at (213) 740-0776.

**IX. Tentative Course Schedule:** *\*\*This syllabus represents my current plans and objectives. As we go through the semester, those plans may need to change to enhance the class learning opportunity. Such changes, communicated clearly, are not unusual and should be expected. The second half of the course will focus on the Simons & Jones text, and I will provide an updated schedule after hearing about your interests.*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Main Topic(s)</b>	<b>Work to do at home Readings – to be completed <u>before</u> class</b>	<b>Evaluation</b>
5/22	Introduction		
5/24	The Psychology of Everyday Persuasion	Pratkanis & Aronson, pp. 21-67 BB	
5/27	<b>Memorial Day Holiday – No Class</b>		
5/29	Weapons of Influence, Reciprocation	Cialdini, ch. 1-2	
5/31	Commitment & Consistency	Cialdini ch. 3	
6/3	Social Proof: Truths Are Us	Cialdini ch. 4	
6/5	Liking & Authority	Cialdini ch.5-6	
6/7	Scarcity & Instant Influence	Cialdini ch.7-8	
6/10	Midterm Exam		
6/12	Simon & Jones – reading schedule tbd based on student interest as we won't be able to cover the entire book.		
6/14			
6/17			
6/19			
6/21			
6/24			
6/26			
6/28			
7/1	Final Exam		