

Nature of Knowledge Langley High School

Welcome to Nature of Knowledge! I am looking forward to the opportunity to learn with you as we discuss, engage in, argue about, question, and consider what we know and how we know it. This class is designed to allow you to reflect upon what you have learned in the past and are currently learning here at Langley and in your individual pursuits of knowledge. The class emphasizes reflection, critical thinking, and forming well-constructed arguments rather than right or wrong answers. The central question of Nature of Knowledge is: How do I, or how do we, know that a given judgment is well-grounded?

Expectations:

Students should be prepared to participate in class discussions and activities in a respectful and meaningful way. Students should keep notebooks that record the main points of readings, class discussions, and class activities. Students are expected to be on time and fully focused on course content during class time.

Since so much of the course is discussion-based, successful students will keep class absences to a minimum. It is the student's responsibility to stay on top of any missed work or content due to absences.

Unless explicitly stated otherwise, all graded work is expected to reflect the individual student's own efforts. Any questionable work will be turned over to Langley's Honor Council for further review.

KEYS TO SUCCESS: (from Michael Woolman, *Ways of Knowing: An Introduction to Theory of Knowledge*)

1. ***Discussion is a key activity.*** Through discussion, knowledge, that is knowledge of language, of truth, of mathematics, of knowledge itself, becomes meaningful. Nature of Knowledge classes are times when students and teachers spend time talking and listening together and discussing the issues that are currently concerning them.
2. ***Students are the main focus of the class.*** Examples and illustrations of ideas are provided by the students based on each student's experiences. The course raises questions and the students must find the answers for themselves based on sound reasoning and substantive evidence.
3. ***Nature of Knowledge explores a wide variety of cultural perspectives.*** Students are charged with treating different points of view with respect and tolerance.
4. ***Nature of Knowledge requires students to involve themselves intellectually.*** Students engage in thinking about the bases of different kinds of knowledge and to question these bases, using their own experience and learning. Whether individual or group, written or oral, NoK requires the involvement of learners, who must actively relate the material to their own experiences and ways of knowing and question, question, question!

A few comments about class discussions:

As we discuss these questions it is imperative that you demonstrate a willingness to participate and discuss. Come to class with an open mind and please display a respect for the opinions and ideas of others. Always remember that **in this class we MAKE arguments, we do not HAVE arguments.**

Here are a few ground rules:

1. Participate often, actively, and thoughtfully.
2. Maintain focus; follow the train of thought.
3. Communicate with intellectual honesty.
4. Encourage and support one another.
5. Disagree without being disagreeable
6. Attack problems, not people (no *ad hominem* arguments in this class).

General Course Outline:

I. What is Philosophy?

Topics Include: How is philosophy distinct from other disciplines? Understand some basic terminology. What are the major branches of Philosophy? Why is it important to “do” philosophy as you study philosophy? Set the stage – Plato and Aristotle.

Selected Readings:

Plato, *Euthyphro*

Plato, *Allegory of the Cave* (from Plato, *Republic*)

II. Logic Round I

Topics Include: Basic terminology and definitions. What is an argument? Introduction to Argument Mapping. Construct Truth Tables and basic translations.

III. Epistemology

Topics Include: Historical Foundations, Foundationalism, Coherentism, Externalism, Skepticism, The Problem of Induction, Epistemic responsibility. What do we know and how do we know that we know it? When can we say that we ‘know’ something to be true?

Selected Readings:

Clifford, *The Ethics of Belief*

Plato, *Meno* (Excerpts)

Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (excerpts)

Descartes, *Meditations*

Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (excerpts)

Chisholm, *The Directly Evident*

Bonjour, *Elements of Coherentism*

Goldman, *What is Justified Belief?*

Gettier, *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?*

IV. Logic Round 2

Topics Include: Advanced Argument Mapping, Basic argument forms and proofs

V. Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind

Topics Include: Free Will and Determinism, Personal Identity, Dualism and Physicalism

Selected Readings:

Van Inwagen, *The Powers of Rational Beings: Freedom of the Will*

David Lewis, *Are we Free to Break the Laws?*

Bernard Williams, *The Self and the Future*

Derek Parfit, *Personal Identity*

Tim Crane, *The Mind-Body Problem*

Gertler and Shapiro, *The Problem of Consciousness* and *Is the Mind Physical?*

VI. Existentialism

Topics Include: What is existentialism? What are the implications of radical freedom?

Selected Readings:

Kierkegaard, Various selections

Nietzsche, Various selections

Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* and *No Exit*

VII. Ethics

Topics Include: What is the right thing to do? Are there objective moral standards that apply throughout time and across cultures? If so, what are they? Relativism, Egoism, Utilitarianism, Deontology, Virtue Theory, Ethics of Care

Selected Readings:

Ruth Benedict, *A Defense of Ethical Relativism*

Louis Pojman, *A Critique of Ethical Relativism*

Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (excerpts)

Brian Medlin, *Ultimate Principles and Ethical Egoism*

John Stewart Mill, *Utilitarianism*

Bernard Williams, *Against Utilitarianism*

Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals* (excerpts)

VIII. Practical Ethics

Topics Include: Genetic Enhancement and Aid to the distant needy

Selected Readings:

President's Council on Bioethics, *Beyond Therapy – General Reflections*

Michael Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection*

Allen Buchanan, *Human Nature and Enhancement*

Frances Kamm, *Is there a Problem with Enhancement*

Salvulescu, *Genetic Beneficence*

Peter Singer, *Rich and Poor*

James Fishkin, *The Limits of Obligation*

Onora O'Neil, *Ending World Hunger*

Lief Wenar, *Responsibility and Severe Poverty*

IX. Political Philosophy

Topics Include: Social Contract Theory; Distributive justice (Rawls and Nozick); Rights, Liberties, and Obligations of Citizens; Beyond the nation-state?

Selected Readings:

John Stewart Mill, *On Liberty*

Rousseau, *Social Contract*

Plato, *The Crito*

Martha Nussbaum, *Capabilities and Human Rights*

John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (excerpts)

Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*

Robert Paul Churchill, *Human Rights and National Sovereignty*

X. Aesthetics

Topics Include: What is art? What is good art? What is the purpose of art? Can we gain knowledge from works of art?

Assessments and Grades:

Grades for this course will be calculated using a rolling (cumulative) gradebook and a total points system. Students will complete a variety of assessments including: projects, tests, quizzes, discussions, and individual and group classwork and homework. Each assessment will be worth a specified number of points and grades will be determined by dividing the number of points the students earns by the number of possible points. Participation in class is essential. In a rolling gradebook, grades from each quarter carry over and build upon the previous quarter. Quarter grades are a snapshot of a student's current progress in the course and demonstrate performance to that date, not just the quarter. Final grades are determined by a combination of all assignments and assessments throughout the year, regardless of the quarter the work was completed. Here is the language from FCPS: This course uses a Rolling Gradebook. A rolling gradebook is a cumulative document. A student's final grade is determined by a combination of all assignments and assessments throughout the year, regardless of the quarter in which the work was completed. There is no averaging of quarter marks. The grade posted at the end of each traditional quarter is a snapshot of a student's current progress in the course. For more information on Langley's rolling gradebook policy, please click [here](#). Late work will be accepted up to two weeks beyond the due date for a maximum of 50% credit. Cumulative homework grade will not exceed 10% of the quarter grade.