

SOC 346:

The Sociology of Guns

(a.k.a. An Invitation to Gun Curiosity)

Fall 2026

Tuesday, 3:30-6:00 pm

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Office Hours: By appointment

GUNS AND THE SPIRIT OF CRITICAL CURIOSITY

Guns are an undeniable and contradictory presence in America, both widely owned and controversial. This course aims to achieve something truly remarkable: to foster insight over animosity in understanding the complex reality of guns in America.

Guns often loom large in the American imagination, from the Colt .45 “Peacemaker” to the AR-15 to George Zimmerman to Uvalde Elementary School. Guns are also a part of everyday life in communities across the country. They are used as tools of self-defense and criminal violence, and are one of the most commonly owned pieces of sporting equipment in the U.S.

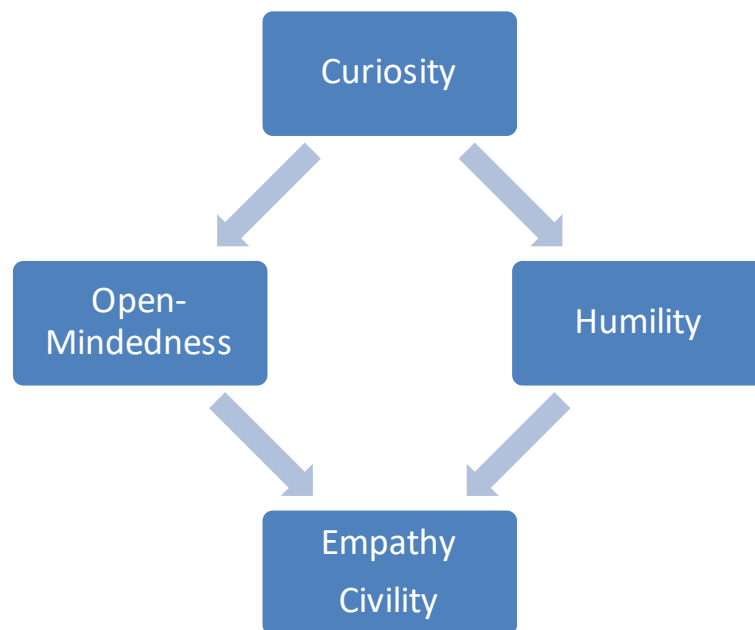
Clearly, guns are an important part of American society and culture. With over 400,000,000 guns held by at least 80 million private citizens and a Constitutional amendment associated with gun ownership, the possession, regulation, meaning, and use of firearms reach into important realms of American culture and society.

This course explores the multifaceted role guns play in the U.S. from a sociological perspective, including the prevalence and distribution of guns, lawful possession and use of firearms, and gun crime and injuries.



At the same time, the course addresses the feeling that cultural and political divisions are tearing the United States apart, with guns and gun violence as a wedge issue. As Kenneth Barish puts it, “There is, arguably, no more urgent question for American society today than how we can listen and talk with each other constructively, with less hostility and contempt.” This presents us with a challenge and an opportunity: to build a bridge across the division.

This course offers students a vehicle to bridge this divide. The promise of sociology is to help us understand the social world, negotiate it individually, and repair it socially. Key to accomplishing this goal will be students’ embracing and developing sociology’s Spirit of Critical Curiosity. In his classic 1963 book, *Invitation to Sociology*, Peter Berger declared, “It can be said that the first wisdom of sociology is this: things are not what they seem.” Social reality is complex and difficult to apprehend at first glance, and with each new discovery about some aspect of the social world, new complexities are revealed. Consequently, sociologists must constantly question what we see, not accept seemingly obvious answers, and pursue the truth even though it is ultimately elusive. Berger warned those considering his invitation, “People who feel no temptation before closed doors, who have no curiosity about human beings, who are content to admire scenery without wondering about the people who live in those houses on the other side of that river, should probably also stay away from sociology. They will find it unpleasant or, at any rate, unrewarding.”



Curiosity is, therefore, a key intellectual virtue cultivated in this course. Virtues are positive character traits that dispose us to think, feel, and act excellently in the face of

challenges. This course primarily seeks to promote students' development of the virtue of curiosity, with ancillary goals of promoting open-mindedness and humility, and ultimately empathy and civility.

Jason Baehr defines curiosity as: "A disposition to wonder, ponder, and ask why. A thirst for understanding and a desire to explore." His slogan for curiosity is, "Ask questions!" This calls to mind Immanuel Kant's answer to the question, What is Enlightenment? *Sapere aude*. Dare to know. This spirit guides our course.

Curiosity is not simply a "spark" that some people have and others do not. It is a discipline, a habit, a practice that students will be asked to cultivate actively in this course.

Curiosity is related to other intellectual virtues, including humility (a "willingness to own one's intellectual limitations and mistakes") and open-mindedness (an "ability to think outside the box," to give "a fair and honest hearing to competing perspectives"). Taken together, these three intellectual virtues can facilitate moral virtues that may help bridge our social divide, especially over guns. These include empathy – the capacity to understand and share the feelings of another person, recognizing their perspective and reality – and civility – the practice of showing respect in interactions with others, even when there are disagreements.

Students who adopt a spirit of critical curiosity relative to guns will be on their way to achieving the key learning objectives of the course enumerated below.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

If you engage this course thoughtfully and with commitment, by the end of the semester, you will:

[1] Deepen your knowledge of guns' multifaceted role in the U.S. from a sociological perspective, including their everyday uses and abuses.

[2] Be better able to apply curiosity as an intellectual virtue to the issue of guns. That is, you will cultivate your gun curiosity.

[3] Better understand your beliefs so as to make more informed, reflective choices about guns' place in your own life and your communities.



COURSE REQUIREMENT SUMMARY

1. Class Field Trip to Gun Range (*automatic course failure* for not completing)
2. Field Trip Reflection Essay (5%)
3. Gun Curiosity Journal (16%)
4. Active Reading (16%)
5. Bring Something New to the Table (8%)
6. Class Participation (20%)
7. Stand Your Ground Analysis (10%)
8. Presentation at Celebration of Learning Year-End Event (10%)
9. Final Reflection Essay (15%)

DETAILED COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Further information (including due dates, etc.) is provided in Canvas. There are 500 points possible for this course, broken down as follows:

[1] CLASS FIELD TRIP (*automatic course failure for not completing*):

The first week of class, we will take a FIELD TRIP to Veterans Range in Mocksville where students will have the opportunity to shoot. Although the range visit is mandatory, shooting is optional.

Failure to complete the field trip will result in a course grade of "F." There is no opportunity to make up the trip. Please plan accordingly.



[2] FIELD TRIP REFLECTION ESSAY (25 points):

In this essay, you will describe your experience participating in the range visit. The essay is a subjective recollection of your experience at the range, so the content is largely up to you, but it must answer the following question: *How did the experience fit with your prior understanding of guns in the US?*

To answer this question, you might benefit from thinking about the following related questions: What prior experience do you have with firearms? How did you feel before, during, and after shooting? What did you find surprising? What did you learn? What did you find appealing (or disturbing)? Although you can (and should) reference particular events, processes, or experiences, this essay should not be a mere “play-by-play” of what you did during the field trip. [Assignment from Brett Burkhardt, Oregon State University]

Also, although this is a “reflection essay,” the basic rules of writing (including organization, structure, and grammar) still apply.

Length: 500 words minimum (no maximum)

AI Rules for this assignment: You may use AI for diagnostic feedback: to check spelling/ grammar, to proofread your analysis, and to suggest areas for improvement in clarity and organization. You may not use AI for generative work: to make improvements for you or to develop any ideas for inclusion in your reflection. You must improve and develop those ideas by (and for!) yourself. You may never cut-and-paste any language provided by AI. If you use AI in any way for this assignment, you must provide your “receipts.”

[3] GUN CURIOSITY JOURNAL (10 points x 6 entries + 20 additional = 80 points):

You will keep a gun curiosity journal in this course. This is a small notebook (provided as part of your course materials) that you will use to make (at least) 6 formal entries worth up to 10 points each (5 points for completion; 5 points for quality). These will be stamped for completion during class and submitted for grading at the end of the semester. You can only submit one journal entry per week, so plan accordingly.

An additional 20 points will be based on entries written during class in response to in-class prompts. Again, these will be stamped for completion during class and submitted for grading at the end of the semester.

Do Not Lose Your Journal! As a backup, I strongly encourage you to take a photo of each journal page (including your completion stamp) as soon as possible (though not during class!). If your journal is ever lost, damaged, or misplaced before the end of the semester, contact me and we’ll figure out an appropriate path forward based on what documentation you have.

Formal entry suggestions: The following are some suggested writing prompts to foster your curiosity about the place of guns in the world and your life. Do not use the same prompt twice. If you have other ideas for prompts, please run them by me.

- *TIL ("Today I Learned") or "I was today years old when I learned"*: Identify and reflect on something new you learned about guns, gun owners, or gun culture.
- *Virtue Spotting*: Identify an example of curiosity about guns you saw "in the wild" – on TV or other non-fiction media; in a fictional world like a novel, play, or movie; in art; in social interaction; or elsewhere.
- *Mantra*: Write a mantra about gun curiosity to share with the class.
- *Meme*: Identify or create a meme that highlights some aspect of guns in the world and/or your life.
- *QOTD (Quote of the Day)*: Identify and reflect on a quote that challenges what you think you know about guns or highlights what you don't know. Discuss why the quote is significant to understanding guns in the world and/or your life.
- *Interview*: Ask a family member, friend, acquaintance, or stranger about their understanding of guns. Ideally this is someone who sees (or you think may see) guns differently than you.
- *Reflection*: Describe an experience or moment in your life that fostered or squashed curiosity about guns. Or, identify a situation in which curiosity was lacking and how curiosity could have improved that situation.
- *Phone Reminder*: Set a phone reminder once per day for five days in which you reflect on any aspect of guns in the world and/or your life at that moment. Possible prompts: What do I know? What have I learned? What more do I need to know?

AI Rules for this assignment: I see no need to use AI for your gun curiosity journal entries, but if you have an idea of some way to use it, please contact me.

[4] ACTIVE READING (10 points x 8 modules = 80 points):

To facilitate active reading, this course uses a social annotation platform called Hypothesis (hypothes.is) to make your reading process visible to you, your classmates, and me. For eight of the course's modules, you will annotate some of the assigned reading(s) using Hypothesis by 8:00am on the Monday of class. Late annotations will not be accepted.

For each "Hypothesis Annotation" designated reading, you must submit a minimum of three annotations:

- At least two annotations must engage the text directly
- At least one annotation must engage a classmate's annotation

(Note: If you're among the first to annotate a reading, there may not yet be enough classmate annotations to engage with. In that case, complete your two text-engagement annotations first, then return to the reading later – and before the deadline – to add your peer-engagement annotation once more classmates' annotations are available.)

You are being graded on quality as well as quantity of annotations. Annotations should do more than summarize or highlight. Aim to:

- Make connections to other readings, class discussion, or your own experience
- Ask questions that extend our consideration of the text
- Respectfully complicate a claim in the text or in a classmate's annotation

Because at least one annotation must engage a classmate, don't wait until the last minute. Give yourself time to read others' annotations and respond thoughtfully.

Grading Standard

Each module's annotations are worth up to 10 points, for a total of 80 points.

- **10/10 (A+):** All 3+ annotations meet the text/peer split and reflect exceptional thinking about guns as a sociological topic – genuinely original connections, incisive questions, or complications of the text/classmates that push the conversation somewhere new rather than simply demonstrating competence.
- **9/10 (A-):** All 3+ annotations meet the text/peer split and consistently do the intellectual work described above (connecting, questioning, extending, complicating).
- **8/10 (B):** All 3+ annotations meet the split; most show real engagement, though one may be thinner (closer to summary/observation than analysis).
- **7/10 (C):** Minimum met, but annotations are largely surface-level (restating the text, brief agreement without elaboration) rather than analytical.
- **6/10 (D):** Minimum count not fully met and/or missing the peer-engagement component, but a good-faith attempt at engaging the text is evident.
- **5/10 and below (F):** Annotations are perfunctory (single-word comments, pure highlighting with no commentary) regardless of count.
- **0/10:** Not submitted or submitted late.

AI Rules for this assignment: You may use AI for comprehension support: to clarify unfamiliar terminology, historical references, or theoretical concepts in the reading so you can engage with it more knowledgeably. You may not use AI for generative work: to identify connections, formulate questions, or draft responses to classmates for you. The annotations must reflect your own thinking about the text, not AI's. You may never cut-and-paste any language provided by AI.

[5] BRING SOMETHING NEW TO THE TABLE (8 points x 5 modules = 40 points):

Each module in this course is organized around a question. For five modules (indicated in Canvas), you will bring something new to the table in relation to that module's

question. This should be something not already part of the assigned course materials that helps illuminate, complicate, or extend our thinking about the question.

“New” can take any form: a research article, news story, video, social media post, meme, image, podcast clip, or something else entirely. Surprise me.

You will post your find to that module’s discussion thread on Canvas by 8:00 am on the Monday of class. Note that this is the same deadline as your Active Reading annotations, so plan accordingly. Posting to Canvas means your classmates can see what you found before class, so your contribution can help shape our discussion, not just satisfy an assignment.

Submit (as a Canvas discussion post):

1. The item itself (link, file, image, or embedded video)
2. A few sentences (at least 3) explaining what it is, where you found it, and how it speaks to the module's question

Grading Standard

- **8/8:** Item is genuinely new, clearly relevant to the module’s question, and the explanation thoughtfully connects the item to the question.
- **4/8:** Item submitted on time but connection to the module’s question is weak, underdeveloped, or the explanation is minimal.
- **0/8:** Not submitted, submitted late, or the item doesn’t meet the “new” requirement.

AI Rules for this assignment: Organic discovery is preferred here: notice something in your own information diet that connects to the module’s question. If nothing comes to mind, you may use AI to help locate potential material. You may not use AI to write your explanation of why you selected the item. That reflection must be your own thinking, in your own words. You may never cut-and-paste any language provided by AI. If you use AI for any part of this assignment, you must provide your “receipts.”

[6] CLASS PARTICIPATION (100 points):

Thoughtful completion of requirements 3 (curiosity journal), 4 (active reading) and 5 (bring something new) sets you up for success in this requirement.

Throughout the semester, you will be given opportunities to participate in the communal life of this course. Collectively this will constitute 20% of your final grade. I weight this component so heavily not to penalize anyone, but because I truly believe

it's where you'll do your best thinking in this course. This class and our learning is a collective enterprise. If you do not contribute, you are what economists and sociologists call a free-rider: someone who benefits from a collective good without contributing to it.

There is nothing preventing you from earning all of these points other than your own effort and initiative. That said, as in life, you do not get credit in this class just for showing up. You must participate thoughtfully and actively in our class discussions to do well in this course component.

"Thoughtful" participation entails being prepared for class, volunteering your ideas about the course materials for the day, asking good questions informed by the course materials, and volunteering informed responses to questions raised.

As should be clear, "thoughtful" participation is based not on your personal opinions and experiences, but on your careful consideration of the course materials. Therefore, reading and thinking about the course materials is a prerequisite for thoughtful participation (see assignment 4). Of course, the sharing of personal opinions and experiences is important in a class like this, but participation limited to that is inadequate.

"Actively" here does not mean constantly. It means that you are regularly involved in the course discussions, can be expected to contribute, and do not go mentally AWOL for periods. Merely preparing for class or "listening actively" in class is not considered participation.

If you are not comfortable speaking in group settings, this is a real opportunity to develop a skill that will serve you well beyond this course — not unlike the growth expected of people who find reading and writing difficult but keep at it anyway. Please come see me during office hours early in the semester. We can work together to find strategies that help you participate meaningfully. Most students who struggle with this at first find real footing by mid-semester with a little support and practice.

Participation is weighted heavily in this course because I believe it's where the real learning happens. If, after genuinely trying, you find this format isn't workable for you, we can talk about whether this is the right course for you this semester.

An important note about the grading of this component of the course can be found at the end of the syllabus.

[7] STAND YOUR GROUND LAW ANALYSIS (50 points):

This assignment has two purposes: First, it will help you better understand what “stand your ground” laws do and do not mean. Second, it will help you better understand the strengths and limitations of generative artificial intelligence (AI).

Each student will “draft” two states in class that will be the focus of their analysis. By the due date, you will submit a single written document that does the following:

- (A) Uses generative AI to define “stand your ground” laws. In this section of the document, include the AI bot you used, your prompt, and the bot’s response (cut-and-paste). (10% of total grade)
- (B) Research the stand your ground laws in the states you drafted. Include exact text of statutory language or court decisions that establish stand your ground in each state. Include a link to the source of your language, which must be a primary source (the state’s code of law and/or decisions) (cut-and-paste). (20% of total grade)
- (C) Based on what you found in Part B, how would you define and explain stand your ground laws? (300 words minimum). (30% of total grade)
- (D) Assess the quality of the AI definition of stand your ground laws by comparing and contrasting your definition to what you found using AI. (500 words minimum). (40% of total grade)

AI Rules for this assignment:

Part A: AI is allowed (required, in fact) as described.

Part B: You may use AI to find statutory language or court decisions, but you must draw the operative SYG language from a primary source and include a link to that primary source so I can double-check it. Do not assume that text or a link provided by an AI bot is accurate. If you use AI in this part, you must provide your “receipts.”

Parts C and D: You may use AI for diagnostic feedback: to check spelling/grammar, to proofread your analysis, and to suggest areas for improvement in clarity and organization. You may not use AI for generative work: to make improvements for you or to develop any ideas for inclusion in your reflection. You must improve and develop those ideas by (and for!) yourself. You may never cut-and-paste any language provided by AI. If you use AI in this part, you must provide your “receipts.”



[8] CELEBRATION OF LEARNING YEAR-END EVENT PRESENTATION (50 points):

On the last day of class, you will give an 8-minute (maximum) presentation as a preview of your Final Reflection Essay (assignment #9).

Although your presentation should be polished, your thoughts do not have to be finalized. Use this time to think out loud, in conversation with the class, about where your semester of curiosity, open-mindedness, and humility has taken you. Where did you start and where are you now? Where did curiosity get you? How has your mind changed (or not) over the course of the semester? What do you still not understand well enough and want to keep exploring? You might even speculate about where you're heading in your final essay's conclusion.

You do not need to cover everything you'll eventually write about in your Final Reflection Essay. Choose the part(s) of the assignment that feel most worth exploring right now in the time allotted.

A grading rubric will be provided in advance of your presentation.

AI Rules for this assignment: You may use AI for diagnostic feedback: to check spelling/grammar and to suggest areas for improvement in clarity and organization of your talk. You may use AI to help format or design slides (e.g., layout, color scheme, images) if you choose to use presentation software, but the content of your slides (the actual reflections, ideas, and connections you present) must be your own thinking. You may not use AI to develop the ideas or connections you'll discuss. You may never cut-and-paste any language provided by AI into your talking points or slide text. If you use AI for any part of this assignment, you must provide your "receipts."

[9] FINAL REFLECTION ESSAY (75 points):

Over the course of this semester, you have practiced the intellectual virtues of curiosity, open-mindedness, and humility in relation to guns. In this essay, you will revisit your previous personal experience with and understanding of guns in the U.S. (as expressed, for example, in your Field Trip Reflection Essay) in light of your work this semester, bringing your practice of these virtues together into a coherent reflection on your own growth.

Drawing on your Field Trip Reflection Essay, Gun Curiosity Journal, Bring Something New to the Table submissions, and the course readings and discussions, address each of the following:

Curiosity: How did you practice curiosity about guns this semester? Point to specific moments — journal entries, finds you brought to the table, discussions, readings — that best capture your own curiosity in action. What did that practice teach you about guns, or about yourself?

Open-mindedness: Did your thinking about any aspect of guns change over the course of the semester? If so, what changed, and what specifically prompted the shift? What experiences, observations, readings, classmates' perspectives, and/or reflections made a difference? If your thinking did not change, what did the semester confirm or deepen about views you already held and how/why?

Humility: What do you still not know or understand well enough about guns in America? Having spent a semester studying this topic closely, what has become clearer to you about the limits of your own understanding? What would you still want to learn?

In your conclusion, address this open-ended question: Where do you personally or we as a society go from here on guns? Whatever you conclude, be sure to ground it in your reflections on curiosity, open-mindedness, and humility in relation to your work this semester.

Length: 750 words minimum (no maximum, but remember to be coherent in your writing).

AI Rules for this assignment: You may use AI for diagnostic feedback: to check spelling/grammar, to proofread your analysis, and to suggest areas for improvement in clarity and organization. You may not use AI for generative work: to make improvements for you or to develop any ideas for inclusion in your reflection. You must improve and develop those ideas by (and for!) yourself. You may never cut-and-paste any language provided by AI. If you use AI in any way for this assignment, you must provide your "receipts."

COURSE GRADES

Note that an “A” grade is not given for good work that meets all requirements. An “A” grade represents exceptional work that well exceeds expectations. The scale for grades based on the number of points earned over the course of the semester is as follows:

Exceptionally High

A 94-100

Superior

A- 90-93

B+ 87-89

B 84-86

Satisfactory

B- 80-83

C+ 77-79

C 74-76

Unsatisfactory

C- 70-73

D+ 67-69

D 64-66

D- 60-63

Failure

F Less than 60

IMPORTANT NOTES ABOUT CLASS

1. Electronics in class: Studies show that we learn better taking notes by hand, rather than on computers. Studies also show that computers in class, especially when not used appropriately, distract users and their classmates. Therefore, **computers/tablets cannot be used in class** unless I specifically say so.

There is to be ***absolutely no*** use of **cell phones, smart watches, PDAs, or other communication devices** during class. Please keep your phone in your purse/murse/satchel/book bag at all times. If you need to send or receive a message from someone, please step out of class to do so. That is not a problem (unless you are regularly leaving class). Disrupting the class and disrespecting Professor Yamane and your classmates is a problem. The solution to the problem is reducing your class participation grade to 0. No warnings, no questions asked.



2. Más vale prevenir que lamentar: It is better to *prevent* problems than to *lament* them once they occur. Similarly, it is easier to *prevent* problems than to *undo* them once they are done. So please be in touch with me early and often and as much as necessary. My door is always open to you.

3. Honor Code violations: Suspected violations will be reported to the Honor and Ethics Council. See also the Policy on Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI).

4. Attendance policy and missed classes: I do not take attendance. Students are adults with various obligations that might require them to miss class occasionally. Students are also people and sometimes have challenges that require them to stay home and attend to their well-being. Repeated absences will affect your course participation grade since you cannot participate if you are not in class. You cannot do “make-up” work since there is no substitute for being there. If you know you will miss class, please let me know so I will not expect you. If you cannot submit an assignment on time, please see the class policy on late assignments below. Also, remember important note #2 above.

5. Late Assignments: Following the deadlines established in this syllabus is important. It keeps you prepared to engage with your peers in class and gives you regular opportunities for feedback on your learning. If you know you won't meet a deadline, contact me ahead of time to discuss whether flexibility is possible. Extensions will be granted only in exceptional circumstances. Late assignments are penalized 25% for each day or part of a day they are late, except where a specific assignment states that no late work is accepted (e.g., Active Reading and Bring Something New to the Table).

6. Electronic mail communication: I check my e-mail regularly and you are welcome to contact me by e-mail with questions or comments. I will try to respond to emails regarding class within 24 hours but in no more than 48 hours. However, please be aware that e-mail is not an appropriate medium for highly personal or confidential correspondence. Finally, because I may not immediately receive or reply to your messages, pressing issues should be anticipated or handled in person whenever possible.

7. On disabilities: According to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, individuals with a physical or mental impairment (“disability”) are entitled to equal access, integration, and the provision of reasonable accommodations by federally supported institutions like Wake Forest. The university is required to make “*academic adjustments*” for qualified disabled persons. Adjustments may include modifications to course examinations or other procedures for evaluating students’ academic achievement.

Academic accommodations are coordinated through the Center for Learning, Access, and Student Success (CLASS). If you would like to request accommodations for this course, you should contact CLASS at the beginning of the semester (class.wfu.edu, 118 Reynolda Hall). In addition to the notification I will receive through the CLASS office, you *must* contact me privately at the beginning of the semester to discuss and implement any accommodations. Retroactive accommodations will not be provided.

IMPORTANT NOTE ON CLASS PARTICIPATION GRADING

Class participation is not graded on a conventional A through F scale where below 60% is a failing grade. If you do not participate in class, you get 0 points. Remember: You do not get credit just for showing up. The rubric I will use for giving out class participation grades is as follows:

GRADING CRITERIA		Quality of Participation		
		High (>40 points)	Middling (25-40 points)	Low (<25 points)
Quantity of Participation	High (>40 points)	Participates frequently and consistently. Demonstrates high level of engagement with class content, assigned readings, and fellow students. (Score > 80 points)	Participates frequently and consistently. Demonstrates some engagement with class content, assigned readings, and fellow students. (Score: 65-90 points)	Participates frequently and consistently. Does not demonstrate deep engagement with the class content, assigned readings, or fellow students. (Score: 40-75 points)
	Middling (25-40 points)	Participates regularly. Demonstrates high level of engagement with class content, assigned readings, and fellow students. (Score: 65-90 points)	Participates regularly. Demonstrates some engagement with class content, assigned readings, and fellow students. (Score: 50-80 points)	Participates regularly. Does not demonstrate deep engagement with the class content, assigned readings, or fellow students. (Score: 25-65 points)
	Low (<25 points)	Participates occasionally, sporadically, or less. Demonstrates high level of engagement with class content, assigned readings, and fellow students. (Score: 40-65 points)	Participates occasionally, sporadically, or less. Demonstrates some engagement with class content, assigned readings, and fellow students. (Score: 25-65 points)	Participates occasionally, sporadically, or less. Does not demonstrate deep engagement with the class content, assigned readings, or fellow students. (Score: < 50 points)