Introduction to Computing Ethics

The question of how we should act is *inescapable*. We each answer it, at least implicitly, every day. And the question of how we should act is *important*. Our beliefs about how we should act affect our relationships, influence which long-term projects we pursue, and help determine who we are.

Computers pose a special challenge. They are ubiquitous, and technology advances quickly enough that it is easy for morally questionable uses of computers to become widespread. Since the question of how we should use computers is inescapable, important, and especially challenging, we should practice answering it. That's what this course will help you do.

- **The first goal** of this course is to help you get better at expressing and justifying your beliefs about how people should use computers.

- **The second goal** of this course is to help you get better at interpreting and evaluating the justifications that others give for *their* beliefs about how people should use computers.

Notice that these goals are about getting better at *doing certain things*: expressing, justifying, interpreting, and evaluating various claims. That makes this a **skill-based course**; it's less about learning useful facts and more about developing useful skills, so there won't be much to memorize but there will be lots to do. In that respect, taking this course will be more like learning to play a musical instrument than, say, learning about human anatomy.

The rest of this syllabus is split into two parts. The first part explains how this course is designed to help you achieve those goals; the second part explains how you will eventually demonstrate that you've achieved them.

1 Developing Your Skills

The only way to get better at doing something is to practice doing it, so this course will give you lots of high-quality, varied, low-stakes opportunities to practice the relevant skills. Your best opportunities to practice will take place during our in-class discussions, although you should also take advantage of the opportunities to practice outside of class that are available to you.

1.1 Attendance (Points Vary)

There are serious advantages to practicing the relevant skills in class. **First**, it lets me give you immediate feedback about how well you are doing; we want to correct any potential mistakes before they become bad habits. **Second**, it lets you more easily interact with your classmates; the relevant skills are collaborative, so you need to have others around to practice them successfully. For these reasons, I expect you to attend every class. Your best opportunities to practice will be during our discussions, so you shouldn't miss them.

You've one free unexcused absence. You'll lose 5 points from your overall grade for each additional unexcused absence; you'll lose 1 point for each day that you are late. (Unless you've missed more than half the period, in which case you'll count as being absent instead.)

You cannot make up any work missed because of an absence or lateness unless you have documentation of a special circumstance discussed with me in advance or a documented emergency. If you need to make up work due to an excused absence, then you are responsible for scheduling a time with me to make it up.

1.2 Active Participation (100 points)

You'll succeed in this course only if you practice the relevant skills, and this will require your regular and active participation. Actively participating in our **in-class discussions** is the best way to practice, but I know that not everyone is comfortable speaking in class, especially at first, and we won't always have time in class to hear from everyone. So you should supplement your in-class participation by practicing outside of class, too.

The best ways to practice outside of class are posting to our **online discussion board**, speaking with me during **office hours**, and **emailing** me. If you email me, then please include "[1338.2]" in the subject line and give me a few days to reply. (I get a lot of emails, and I don't want to miss anything important! The tag in the subject line helps me filter my inbox.)

It can be hard for students to know whether they are participating enough, so I encourage you to ask me throughout the semester. This will help ensure that you're not disappointed with your active participation grade, but here are some rough guidelines. First, more participation is always better; even professionals continue to practice. Second, the pattern of your contributions and their quality matter, rather than merely their frequency; for example, posting several good discussion posts on the last day of the semester will count for less than if you had spread those same posts out more, but it will count for more than if those posts were of lower quality. Third, as a general rule, you are unlikely to earn more than 80 points if you make fewer than four good contributions—either in-class, by email, in office hours, or on Carmen—per week.

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1.3 Required Readings and Study Guides (Ungraded)

Many college courses fit a familiar pattern: your professor introduces some new material during lecture, you ask a few clarifying questions about it, and you primarily engage with that material outside of class as homework. To give you better quality practice, we'll **invert that pattern**.

In this course, you'll first introduce yourself to new material outside of class, using guides that I have created to help you, and primarily engage with that material in class as a group. This will let me give you real-time feedback and make it easier for you to collaborate.

However, this pattern works only if you come to class prepared to have a high-quality discussion. The more time we spend in class reviewing the material, the less time we'll have to practice the skills you need to develop, and your grades will eventually suffer from lack of practice.

You can expect around **40–60 pages of required reading each week**. Previous students report needing to spend, on average, three hours per reading assignment to be fully prepared for discussion.

Each required reading will have **an accompanying study guide**. The purpose of these study guides is to help you understand the readings on your own so we can devote most of our in-class time to practice. These study guides are ungraded, and I will not collect them, but I strongly suggest that you complete them. First, if you complete the study guides, then you will always have something to contribute to discussion, which will help your active participation grade. Second, completing them will make any quiz on that reading significantly easier. (More on this below.)

1.4 Quizzes (150 points)

To help motivate everyone to arrive ready for a good discussion, we'll sometimes have an unannounced reading quiz at the start of class. The quiz questions will always be taken directly from that day's study guide, so the quizzes should be easy for everyone who has prepared.

You may **use your notes** on these quizzes, including your completed study guide, but you may not use the readings themselves. This means that you shouldn't write your notes on the readings if you want to use those notes on a quiz.

1.5 Electronics Honor Code (Mandatory)

To help promote an atmosphere conducive to having a good discussion, each student must do the following two things by the start of class on **2 September 2022**:

- You must sign and submit a copy of the **Electronics Honor Code**. The easiest way to

submit it is to upload a signed PDF on Carmen using the link in the assignment details, but you are welcome to submit a printout if you prefer. The Electronics Honor Code is posted on Carmen; its purpose is to minimize any distractions or disrespect that the use of electronics in class can cause.

- Your Carmen User Profile must include a recent and recognizable **picture of your face**. The thumbnails on Carmen are very small, so it is best if the picture contains only your head rather than, say, your entire body. The purpose of this is to help me and your classmates learn your name. First, this will help promote the sort of camaraderie that we need to maintain a good atmosphere for discussions. Second, my knowing your name will ensure that I can give you all of the points that you deserve for your active participation.

2 Demonstrating Your Skills

I will grade you based on how well you demonstrate to me that you have achieved the two course goals. The following take-home assignments are opportunities for you to do this.

2.1 Practice Essay (Ungraded)

You may, if you want the extra practice, write an approximately 1,000-word ungraded essay. In this essay, you will need to interpret and evaluate an argument from a passage that I select for you. I will post more detailed instructions and a sample essay on Carmen. If you want feedback on your practice essay, then please submit it no later than the start of class on **17 October 2022**.

2.2 Writing Exercises (50 points, 50 points, 100 points)

You need to complete a sequence of three writing exercises throughout the semester. These exercises will help you develop a good argument for your persuasive essay by guiding you through the initial planning. At the end of the sequence, you will have a complete outline of your persuasive essay. I will post more detailed instructions for each exercise on Carmen. The first exercise is due by the start of class on **21 November 2022**; the second one is due by the start of class on **28 November 2022**; the third one is due by the start of class on **5 December 2022**.

2.3 Presentation (250 points)

Once during the semester, you need to deliver a 10-minute oral presentation and, immediately following your presentation, lead the class in a 5-minute discussion of its content. The

presentation needs to have two parts. First, you will need to present a charitable interpretation of an argument from an assigned reading. Second, you will need to raise at least one original objection to that argument. I will post more detailed instructions on Carmen.

I will randomly assign you each a presentation date, and you need to present on your assigned date unless you can find someone who wants to switch with you. I'll give a mock student presentation on **23 September 2022**. Student presentations will begin the following week, **30 September 2022**, and continue throughout the semester.

2.4 Persuasive Essay (300 points)

You need to write an approximately 2,000-word persuasive essay. Your essay needs to do several things. First, you need to raise a moral question about how we use computers. Second, you need to answer the question you raise and support your answer with good reasoning. Third, you need to defend your answer by replying to at least one interesting objection. I will post more detailed instructions on Carmen. The persuasive essay is due by **11:59pm EST on 9 December 2022**.

2.5 Summary of Available Points

Practice Essay:	0 points	A	930–1000	C	730–769
Active Participation:	100 points	A-	900–929	C-	700–729
Quizzes:	150 points	B+	870–899	D+	670–699
Writing Exercises:	200 points	B	830–869	D	600–669
Presentation:	250 points	B-	800–829	E	0–599
Persuasive Essay:	300 points	C+	770–799		
Total:	1000 points				

3 Administrative Notices

3.1 Misconduct

Academic misconduct is a serious offense. I expect you to know what counts as academic misconduct. I also expect you not to commit it. If I suspect that you've committed academic misconduct, then I'm required to report my suspicion to the Committee on Academic Misconduct, which may impose punishments ranging from course failure to expulsion. To read more about academic misconduct, see Section 3335-23-04 (A) of the *Code of Student Conduct*.

3.2 Disabilities

Students who might need accommodations should contact me and Disability Services (098 Baker Hall, 614-292-3307) as soon as possible. It is especially important to contact me soon if your disability might interfere with your ability to attend class regularly or participate in class discussions, since it will be very hard for me to provide alternate ways for you to complete the course's active participation requirements after the fact.

3.3 General Education Statement

This course satisfies the Culture and Ideas requirement of Ohio State's General Education program. The goals and expected learning outcomes for this requirement are as follows:

Goals

Students evaluate significant cultural phenomena and ideas in order to develop capacities for aesthetic and historical response and judgment; and interpretation and evaluation.

Expected Learning Outcomes

1. Students analyze and interpret major forms of human thought, culture, and expression.

This course achieves this outcome by introducing you to the most important ethical theories of the Western philosophical tradition. You'll use these theories to analyze and interpret social and moral issues arising from the use of computers within and across cultures.

2. Students evaluate how ideas influence the character of human beliefs, the perception of reality, and the norms which guide human behavior.

This course achieves this outcome by examining specific, real-life social interactions and applying concepts from ethical theories to evaluate individual and group behavior.

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