

**“Why People Believe Weird Things”**  
**INTD 101, Spring 2004**  
**Monday, 3:30 – 4:20, Bailey 10C**

Dr. Gregg Hartvigsen, Office in Bailey 4

Office Hrs: MWF 9:00 – 10:00, or by appointment

Required Text: Micheal Shermer. 1997. Why People Believe Weird Things

**Goal #1 - Content (fun).** I think this is fun stuff. I really hope you learn something about why we believe weird stuff and about some of the things people believe that’s really weird. The topics we cover somewhat depend on you. The course description best sums this up:

People believe weird things. In this class we will discuss both the weird things people believe (e.g., the paranormal, aliens, cults, strict creationism, urban legends, and pseudoscience) and why people believe these things. The course also will address the foundations of science and skepticism. We will build from a book with the same title as this course, written by a professor at Occidental College and publisher of “Skeptic” magazine. Students will write three short papers and give two formal, five-minute oral presentations.

**Goal #2 - Get to know a professor.** When I was in college the professors all seemed pretty intimidating. I think it might help you down the road to find out, in an informal setting, what one professor is like. Perhaps we’ll keep in touch during your academic career here, too.

**Goal #3 – Get prepared for other, more demanding courses.** We’ll discuss life and academics here at Geneseo. Hopefully we’ll chat about study skills, problems you’re having, and share success stories. We’ll discuss the game of being a student; perhaps what it takes to be a good student if you want. You’ll write two papers and get some input from me. And you’ll give a presentation.

Grading

Papers (two)	30% (that’s 15% each)
Presentation	20%
Contributions to discussions	50%

**Attendance:** I want you to come to all meetings. Come prepared, awake, and ready to participate (I will try this, as well). I expect you to provide your input on talks by your colleagues.

There is no final exam. The class ends at mid-semester (being a one-credit class that meets twice a week).

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**INFORMATION YOU FIND ON THE WEB IS UNRELIABLE.** Searching “google” or “yahoo” for information on any of these topics will lead you **straight to the proponents of the weird.**

Only **SOME** of what you find in books and magazines is reliable. Some books and respectable magazines are highly reliable. You should know that **people with really weird ideas** can often and **easily get books published** because the public is so willing to buy anything (literally and figuratively). A good example is the nearly endless number of weird diet schemes to help people lose weight. The sad and boring truth is that **only way to become and stay thin** is to eat less and exercising more. That simple fact isn’t appealing and doesn’t sell books (so don’t waste your time writing such a book!).

The **vast majority** of information in peer-reviewed journals (not magazines) **is reliable.** That material is generally found in the basement of Milne. Ask a librarian for help – that’s their job!

**If you are unsure** about the quality of information in a source **please check with me well before your presentation and writing of your paper.** IT IS MY JOB to know what is reliable and what is bunk.

Detailed schedule:

<b>Date</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Reading</b>	<b>Assignment Due</b>
1-12	Introductions	Everything before C1	
1-19	Martin Luther King Day		
1-26	Skepticism and Weirdness	Chapter 1	Paper #1
2-2	Science	Chapter 2	
2-9	How thinking goes wrong	Chapter 3	
2-16	Deviations	Chapter 4	
2-23	Near Death	Chapter 5	
3-1	Abducted!	Chapter 6	
3-8	SPRING BREAK		
3-15	Epidemics of accusations	Chapter 7	
3-22	Creationism	Chapters 9, 10, 11	
3-29	Individual Presentations		Paper #2 with
4-5	Individual Presentations		your oral presentation
4-12	Individual Presentations		
4-19	Individual Presentations		
4-26	Wrap-up		