

Phil 235

**Philosophy of
Psychology: The
Attention Crisis**

Fall 2025

Instructor: Carolina Flores (she/they); caro.flores@ucsc.edu

Class Hours: Thursday, 12PM - 3PM

Classroom: Humanities 1 400.

Office: Cowell College Faculty Office Addition, Office 104.

Office Hours: Tuesdays 1-3pm, Wednesdays 4-5pm. (full schedule and sign-up sheet [here](#)). If you absolutely cannot make these times, email me to schedule an appointment.

You can address me as: Prof./Dr. Flores; Carolina; Caro, as you feel most comfortable. I aim to reply to emails within 48 hours (excluding weekends); if you don't hear from me within this time frame, feel free to send me a reminder email.

Required Texts

All readings, handouts, assignments, and announcements will be posted on Canvas.

Course Description

Are we living through an attention crisis? The standard answer is a resounding yes. According to this popular narrative, the enmeshment of digital technologies in our lives is making us lose our attention. Claims to this effect are often based purely on first-personal experience and (more offensively for philosophers!) betray deep conceptual murkiness about what attention even is, as well as its value and norms on it. This seminar surveys work in philosophy and psychology on attention with the goal of understanding and assessing the attention crisis. In doing so, students will also get a solid background in a range of topics in the philosophy of psychology.

The course has three parts. First, we will look at the most prominent empirically-informed philosophical accounts of attention. Second, we will critically consider various claims made in articulating the supposed attention crisis (such as the claim that we are addicted to digital devices, that our attention spans are growing shorter, or that we are losing time to mind-wander), with special attention to articulating the cognitive phenomena involved. Finally, we will briefly turn to normative questions about the ethics and politics of attention.

Course Goals

In this course, you will:

- Acquire knowledge of central debates in empirically informed philosophy about the nature, varieties, and norms of attention.
- Come to grasp central concepts, distinctions, and theories in the study of attention, as well as key background concepts and theories of the mind that these presuppose.
- Develop the ability to assess claims about the philosophy, ethics, and politics of attention in light of empirical findings.

In pursuing these course-specific goals, you will also acquire the following general skills:

- To engage in close and charitable readings of sophisticated arguments.
- To criticize views by giving focused objections to them and anticipating replies.
- To communicate complex ideas effectively and concisely in your writing.
- To engage in respectful, reasoned, and passionate debate with peers about complex topics that lack clear answers, and to use such debate as a tool for understanding.

Course Requirements

Regular work	Due date	55%
Reading annotations on Hypothesis (lowest 2 grades will be dropped, so you can miss 2 without penalty)	Wednesday, 11:59 pm	20%
Attendance and participation (i.e. exit tickets; can miss 1 without penalty)	When leaving class	20%
Presentation	Monday, 11:59 pm (key questions)	15%
Final paper		45%
Topic proposals	Nov 6, 11:59 pm	2.5%
Outline	Nov 16, 11:59 pm	5%
Paper draft	Nov 30, 11:59 pm	10%
30-minute office hours slot between November 1 and December 5	December 5, 6 pm	2.5%
Response to feedback (based on workshops and meeting with me)	December 12, 11:59 pm	5%
Final paper	December 12, 11:59 pm	20%

Workload expectations

I expect you to spend on average 8-9 hours per week working for this class (with additional work for the final):

- 4-5 hours on active reading and annotating the texts,
- 3 hours in the seminar,
- 1 hour on reading responses,
- 30 minutes on additional activities (such as organizing your weekly work, reflecting on feedback, coming to office hours, discussing material with your peers),

Schedule of Topics and Readings

Class date	Topic	Readings
Module 1. What is attention?		
Sep 25	Introduction	Clinton Castro and Adam K. Pham (2020), "Is the attention economy noxious?" <i>How to participate in seminars and talks</i>
Oct 2	Attention as a limited resource	William James (1890), <i>The Principles of Psychology</i> , chapter 11 (Attention) George Loewenstein and Zachary Wojtowicz (2025), "The economics of attention", sections 1-4 (remaining optional) <i>Close reading + reading across disciplines</i>
Oct 9	Attention and selection for action	Wayne Wu (2024), "We know what attention is!" Wayne Wu (2024), "Attention as selection for action defended", section 6 (rest optional; closely related to other Wu piece) Sebastian Watzl (2023), "What attention is: The priority structure account" <i>Coming up with research questions</i>
Module 2. Is our attention being stolen? In what ways?		
Oct 16	Failing to sustain attention	Gloria Mark (2023), <i>Attention Span</i> , chapters 4 and 5 Samuel Murray and Santiago Amaya (2024), "The strategic allocation theory of vigilance" <i>Developing objections</i>
Oct 23	Addiction	ONLINE

		<p>Vikram R. Bhargava and Manuel Velasquez (2020), "Ethics of the attention economy: The problem of social media addiction"</p> <p>Hanna Pickard (2020), "What we're not talking about when we talk about addiction"</p> <p>Jesper Aagard (2020), "Beyond the rhetoric of tech addiction: Why we should be discussing tech habits instead"</p> <p><i>Writing outlines</i></p>
Oct 30	Habits of attention and loss of attentional control	<p>ONLINE</p> <p>Yuhong Jyang and Caitlin Sisk (2019), "Habit-like attention"</p> <p>Awh et al. (2012), "Top-down vs. bottom-up attentional control: A failed dichotomy"</p> <p>Dylan J. White and Josh Skorburg (forthcoming), "Decisions, decisions, decisions: A value-based account of the attention economy"</p>
Nov 6	No room to mind-wander and loss of creativity	<p>Zac Irving, Catherine McGrath, Lauren Flynn et al. (2022), "The shower effect: Mind wandering facilitates creative incubation during moderately engaging activities"</p> <p>Carolyn Dicey Jennings and Shadab Tabatabaeian (2023), "Attention, technology, and creativity"</p> <p><i>Building a bibliography</i></p>
Module 3. Assessing attention		
Nov 13	Ethics of attention	<p>Simone Weil (1951), "Reflections on the right use of school studies with a view to the love of God"</p> <p>Iris Murdoch (1970), <i>The Sovereignty of the Good</i>, chapter 1 (The Idea of perfection) (focus p. 16-44)</p> <p><i>Writing a paper</i></p>
Nov 20	Commodifying attention	<p>Katharine Browne and Sebastian Watzl (2025), "The attention market - and what is wrong with it"</p> <p><i>Outline workshop</i></p>
Nov 27	No lecture (Thanksgiving break)	
Dec 4	Concluding thoughts + draft workshop	<p>ONLINE</p> <p><i>Draft workshop</i></p>

Instructions for assignments and rubrics

Regular work

Reading annotations on Hypothesis

I expect you to annotate the texts using Hypothesis, a program for collective study. You can access the readings on Hypothesis from the Home page on Canvas: by clicking on “Article title (Read & Annotate)”. This lets you view others’ annotations, upvote your favorites, and comment on others’ annotations.

I encourage you to comment and engage as much as you want, including by making small points, noting where you are unsure, etc. (I will read these before class and address them.) However, to get credit, you **must write, for each paper, a comment of 100-200 words that addresses a specific passage in the text.** The goal of this is to practice close reading and the skill of focusing on specific claims made by an author and directly addressing those (instead of vaguely addressing the overall vibes of a text). This will also be useful for you in deciding on a topic for your final paper.

Specifically, you should select a passage in the text that seems especially important or interesting to you, and do one of the following:

- Offer **reasons in favor** of the point made in that passage (where these are your own reasons, not just a discussion of the reasons stated in the text)
- Pose an **objection** to the statement or argument made in that passage
- Offer a concrete real world **example** of the phenomenon discussed in that passage (and explain why it is an example)
- Pose a thoughtful **question** on that passage, one that invites further exploration (e.g. What does this imply for a range of cases that interest you? Or Could we expand this idea further? Or Why doesn’t the author go for some alternative view that you find interesting?), with an explanation of the motivation for your question
- **Contrast** the view expressed in that passage with another view - one that we have discussed in class, or another one of interest to you.

These are due at midnight the day before class (Wednesday). They will be graded incomplete (0%); poor effort (80%); and complete (100%). (If you write something that shows you did the reading and raises a genuine question for the class, then you should get a complete.) Since part of the point is to help contribute to discussion, you’ll get a “poor effort” (80%) if you miss the midnight deadline but turn it in before class, and an “incomplete” (that is, a zero) if you don’t hand it in before class (i.e. after 12 pm on the Thursday in which we discuss the paper).

Seminar attendance and participation

Attending and actively participating in class is mandatory. **You get 1 excused absence** (which should be reserved for illness). Each additional unexcused absence will lower your final grade by approximately

1.5%. Additional excused absences will require a doctor's note. Attendance and participation is taken via exit tickets at the end of each class.

Presentation / leading discussion

Everyone enrolled in the class will be asked to lead one class discussion, in pairs. I will email you ahead of time with a brief explanation of how I see the readings fitting together and key points to understand and convey.

Taking this as your starting point, start with a 5-10- minute summary of the week's reading(s). (Since everyone is expected to do all the reading, these should just be geared towards reminding people of what they have read.)

Then prepare a set of questions and/or discussion topics for the rest of the class time. These questions/topics might include:

- main aspects of the reading(s)
- problems or points of confusion
- connections to other readings that day or from earlier in the course
- nuances of answers they provide to some of the course's questions
- distinctions between various authors' positions, and so on.

On Thursday morning, take a look at everyone else's annotations, and organize for potential discussion in a way that aligns with what you've prepared. You are encouraged to make a short handout to guide the discussion and, if you like, to send it to me by Monday evening so that I can get back to you with comments; you might also want to meet with me about the readings in office hours ahead of time.

Presentations Rubric

A

Presentation of papers is between 5 and 10 minutes. It demonstrates that the presenter did the reading very carefully, and does a good job being selective about presenting the most important parts of the relevant reading and reminding the class what they are, in a clear manner. Any major points that the presenter found particularly confusing are flagged, and the presenter's confusion is explained. The plan for discussion incorporates most to all of the class's relevant comments/queries, and organizes them in a way that makes them manageable. The presenter moderates the discussion attentively, switching topics when appropriate, and not letting any one person dominate the discussion.

B

The presentation demonstrates that the presenter did the reading carefully, but the presentation either runs on for too long, focuses on trivial points to the detriment of important ones, or is somewhat confusing to the class. The presenter's own points of confusion are not all flagged, which muddies the presentation's clarity. The presenter moderates the discussion, but sometimes fails to intervene when

appropriate, in order to prevent dominating discussion, or to make sure we have time for all the class's comments/questions.

C

It is not clear from the presentation that the presenter did the reading carefully. The presenter has not made an effort to plan the discussion in a controlled way, or fails to keep it on track, such that we don't get to what much of the class wanted to talk about.

NOTE: Plus, or minus grades will be given to presentations that fall between letter-grade benchmarks. Particular strengths in some areas may make up for weaknesses in others.

Final paper

The goal is for you to write an essay of 3,000 to 4,000 words which engages closely with 1-2 of the course readings, on a topic of your own crafting. Attention is an enormous topic, and we will only scratch the surface; you are welcome to go beyond the material covered, but expected to engage with at least some of the readings.

The final paper will include **multiple stages** and **in-class workshops**. All deadlines are at midnight. All should be submitted via Canvas, by the deadline, in a standard font, size 12, double-spaced. With those specifications, the outline should be around 2 pages. The paper draft should be (2,500-4,500 words), and the final paper 3,000-4,000 words. The response to feedback should be 1-2 pages.

November 6	November 16	November 20	November 30	December 4	December 12
Hand in potential topics (2.5%).	Hand in outline (5%).	Participate in the outline workshop.	Hand in draft (10%).	Participate in the draft workshop.	Hand in final paper (15%) + response to feedback (5%).
Between November 1 and December 5: Book a 30-minute slot and attend office hours to discuss your work. (2.5%)					

You can get a 72-hour extension in one of these without penalty; additional extensions will be downgraded about 10% a day, up to 3-and-a-half days (e.g. noon of November 20 for the outline). This is to enable you to get feedback on your proposed topics before you start on your outline, to allow you to participate in the outline and draft workshops, and to enable me to get grades in by the official deadline of December 17.

I will grade and give you comments on all of the materials (on the final paper, only by request). Rubrics for all these are below.

In addition to submitting all these materials, you must, at some point during the process of working on your paper, meet with me for a 30-minute office hours slot to discuss your progress. You are obviously

welcome to attend additional times. The goal is for you to get more detailed feedback from me on your topic, outline, draft, or how to incorporate peer feedback.

Finally, you must participate in two in-seminar workshops where you will give each other feedback on your outlines and drafts, respectively. During these workshops, you will fill in a feedback sheet on the work that you review. If you can't make it to the section in which the workshop happens for unavoidable reasons (which will require a doctor's note): you will be allowed to make up for this by completing the activity with a peer after the in-seminar workshop, and will receive credit for attending that class. In that case, you should email me by the day after the class you missed to make arrangements.

Rubric for the potential topics

You have to hand in 2 (optionally: 3) potential topics to me, which I will give you feedback on. These will be graded incomplete (0%); poor effort (80%); and complete (100%), with penalization for lateness (10%/day).

- 100% (2.5 points): poses 2 questions, explains why those questions are interesting to you, and notes what readings you would engage with.
- 80% (2 points): only proposes one question or proposes two questions but without the required explanation.
- 0% (0): not handed in by Nov 10 at noon.

Rubric for the outline and paper draft

The outline and paper draft are meant to be exploratory, revealing of real effort and thinking, but by no means perfect. This is reflected in the rubric. Below is roughly what each letter grade means. Note that '+' and '-' grades will be assigned for fine-tuning.

A: The selected question is (at least close to) appropriate: relevant to the course, interesting, and not overly ambitious. The outline/draft fully answers the question. It includes a sketch of what could be turned into a strong argument, though at this stage there might be imprecisions and gaps. It considers an objection. It is clear enough that it can be easily understood. More importantly, it shows independent and creative thinking, going beyond what we discussed in class, as well as making a serious attempt to grapple with some of the key relevant concepts and ideas we have covered in the course.

B: The question is appropriate and mostly answered, but it is missing crucial parts of the argumentative structure or does not consider an objection. OR: It does not show independent thinking, merely providing a rote summary of points made in class, despite fully answering an appropriate question. OR: Despite fully answering an appropriate question, it fails to engage with key concepts and ideas covered in the course, with the analysis staying at a superficial level. OR: Is at A-level, but under or over the page count, OR: the question asked is faulty (not relevant, not interesting, or too ambitious).

C: More-or-less off-topic and unclear. Fails to provide an argument and shows significant confusion about major points.

D and below: scarce evidence of effort or understanding along all dimensions.

F: dishonest work.

Rubric for the response to feedback

Jointly with the final paper, you will be requested to submit a summary of how you implemented feedback (coming from either the outline workshop, the paper draft workshop, or from me). This will be graded out of 5 as follows, with grades ending in 0.5 for fine-tuning:

- **5 points:** clearly and specifically notes at least 3 pieces of feedback received, as well as summarizing how they are addressed and in what ways addressing them improved the paper.
- **4 points:** does the same as above, but only for 2 pieces of feedback. Or: notes 3 pieces of feedback, but for one of them precisely one of how it is addressed or how doing so improved the paper is not clear.
- **3 points:** Notes 2 or 3 pieces of feedback, but only for one of them is it clear how it is addressed and how doing so improved the paper.
- **2 points:** only considers one piece of feedback, but does it well. Or: considers 2 or 3 pieces of feedback, but why those were chosen and how they were addressed is not clear for any of them.
- **1 point:** only considers one piece of feedback, and there are issues there.
- **0 points:** unintelligible and unrelated.

Rubric for the final paper

This is roughly what each letter grade means. Note that '+' and '-' grades will be assigned for fine-tuning.

A: Fully answers the question in a concise and convincing manner. Provides a strong argument, with a clearly stated, relevant thesis, a transparent argument structure, and compelling premises. Considers objections and makes a persuasive effort to address them. Writes clearly, in plain language, and uses terminology in a precise manner. Shows insight by going beyond examples, views, or objections discussed in class.

B: Answers most of the question. Provides a solid argument, with a clear thesis, mostly transparent argument structure, and relevant premises, though the argument may have some significant gaps. Displays understanding of the topic by considering other views, though perhaps without articulating points independently or while showing confusion about some significant point. Writes mostly in a clear manner, though there might be inaccuracies that compromise the points made.

C: More-or-less off-topic and unclear. Fails to provide an argument and shows significant confusion about major points.

D and below: scarce evidence of effort or understanding along all dimensions.

F: dishonest work.

Grading scale

Most of you are grade Satisfactory - Unsatisfactory; Satisfactory starts at a C.

For those receiving a letter grade, this class uses the following standard UCSC grading scale:

A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-	F
95-100	<95-90	<90-87	<87-83	<83-80	<80-77	<77-73	<73-70	<70-67	<67-63	<63-60	<60

Extra credit

Extra credit will be granted only for the following: 1% for attending office hours, having sent in 2 substantive questions by email in advance.

- Examples of substantive questions are: “I didn’t understand this argument /concept in the reading. Can you explain?”; “What are the applications of view X for real-world issue Y?”; “Here is my objection to the view in paper X.”; or questions about your own work, e.g. “How can I improve the structure of my papers?”, or “How can I improve my time management?”

You can get at most 1% of extra credit, though feel free to send questions for office hours multiple times! No additional extra credit will be granted.

Academic integrity and plagiarism

I expect you to be familiar with and to abide by the [university’s academic misconduct policy](#). Violations of this policy include cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, denying others access to information or material, and facilitating violations of academic integrity.

In general, anything more than 3 consecutive words from another source should include a citation to that source. If you submit work that appears to have been written using unauthorized sources, I will ask you to meet with me to discuss your thinking and writing process. I will also ask you to talk through your submission orally so I can assess your knowledge in real time. If, after our conversation, I conclude it’s more likely than not that you did not personally complete an assignment you submitted under your name, you will get a 0 on the assignment, I may give you a failing grade for the entire course, and I will definitely report the incident to the university administration for further sanctions.

ChatGPT and other generative AI tools

TL;DR: Unless you are specifically instructed to use AI in an assignment prompt, using generative AI for ANY task related to this course is not allowed.

Full version: Philosophy is all about critical thinking and skillful writing, both of which can only be developed through concerted effort over time. You're here to learn those skills, and using AI will keep you from doing that.

The easiest way to ensure that your writing does not come under suspicion for AI use is to not use AI. Here is the AI policy for my classes:

- You may not use ChatGPT or any other generative AI platform or technology, including (but not limited to) Bing, Bard, DALL-E, Grammarly Premium, StudyBuddy, predictive text, etc.
- Unless *explicitly* instructed to do so for a specific assignment, you may not use AI for any reason, including (but not limited to) thinking, writing, brainstorming, researching, outlining, editing, or literally any other purpose on the planet that you could conceive of.
- Translation software (including, but not limited to, Google Translate) counts as an AI platform, so its use is strictly prohibited. Even if English is not your first language, you must write your papers directly in English rather than writing them in your native language and translating them. You may look up individual words in an English/Your-Native-Language online dictionary, but you may not use an online translator to translate phrases, sentences, paragraphs, or papers.
- I expect you to be able to easily define any word you use in your writing; please be sure to learn and memorize the definitions of any new words you have gotten from a dictionary.
- For spell-check and grammar-check functions, you are limited to Grammarly Basic (*not* Premium) or the basic spell-check and grammar-check features that come pre-loaded with word-processing software such as MS Word or Google Docs. You may not use any other editing software, nor should you use the suggestive/predictive text that such software proposes.

If you have any questions about this policy, please ask me so I can provide clarification.

Discourse Norms and Expectations

I expect all participants to observe basic norms of civility and respect. This means stating your own views directly and substantively: focusing on reasons, assumptions, and consequences rather than on who is offering them, or how. And it means engaging others' views in the same terms. No topic or claim is too obvious or controversial to be discussed; but claims and opinions have a place in the discussion only when they are presented in a respectful, collegial, and constructive way.

Other Writing Support

In addition to coming to office hours, discussing your work with one another, and/or emailing other faculty to meet with them about your writing projects, you can also book an appointment at the [Writing Center](#).

Accessibility accommodations

UC Santa Cruz is committed to creating an academic environment that supports its diverse student body. If you are a student with a disability who requires accommodations to achieve equal access in this course, please follow instructions [here](#). I also encourage you to discuss with me ways we can ensure your full participation in this course. I encourage all students who may benefit to learn about the DRC and the UCSC accommodation process. You can visit the DRC website at drc.ucsc.edu, where you can find all information about disability accommodations, book appointments, etc. You can make an appointment and meet in-person with a DRC staff member. The phone number is [831-459-2089](tel:831-459-2089), or email drc@ucsc.edu.

Religious accommodations

UC Santa Cruz welcomes diversity of religious beliefs and practices, recognizing the contributions differing experiences and viewpoints can bring to the community. There may be times when an academic requirement conflicts with religious observances and practices. If that happens, students may request reasonable accommodation for religious practices. The instructor will review the situation in an effort to provide a reasonable accommodation without penalty. You should first discuss the conflict and your requested accommodation with your instructor early in the term. You or your instructor may also seek assistance from the [Dean of Students office](#).

Title IX

Title IX prohibits gender discrimination, including sexual harassment, domestic and dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. If you have experienced sexual harassment or sexual violence, you can receive confidential support and advocacy at the Campus Advocacy Resources & Education (CARE) Office by calling (831) 502-2273. In addition, [Counseling & Psychological Services](#) (CAPS) can provide confidential counseling support, (831) 459-2628. You can also report gender discrimination directly to the University's Title IX Office, (831) 459-2462. Reports to law enforcement can be made to UCPD, (831) 459-2231 ext. 1.

Please be aware that if you tell me about a situation involving Title IX misconduct, I am required to share this information with the Title IX Coordinator. Although I have to make that notification, you will control how your case will be handled, including whether or not you wish to pursue a formal complaint. The goal is to make sure that you are aware of the range of options available to you and that you have access to the resources you need.