My goal for this course is to help students develop their ability to evaluate claims based on psychological science. Every day, claims-makers -- expert and amateur, public servant and salesman -- try to persuade you of the validity of important causal claims that are not readily verifiable (or refutable): that televised violence causes real violence; that optimism enhances immune function; that celebrity role models cause anorexia; that rape is motivated by misogyny rather than lust. How do we decide how much credence to place in these propositions? And how ought we to decide?

Ideally, we would like to make these decisions by evaluating relevant evidence, but in practice, we often rely on others (who we believe to be both competent and trustworthy) to have conducted the requisite evaluation for us. My primary ambition for this course is to improve your ability to do it yourself, that is, to evaluate the evidence that researchers collect, analyze, and interpret. This will require attention to problems of measurement and the operationalization of crucial constructs, research design, and data analysis. However, since it is unrealistic to expect you or anyone else to forsake all reliance on expert opinion and to seek out the relevant research on everything, we will also consider (time permitting) some of the factors that affect people's decisions about what sources they will accept as competent and trustworthy.

Students will work on two main projects, in groups of 3 or 4. In the first of these projects, you must (1) pick a media report about something that has allegedly been recently discovered or proven by psychological research, (2) find the relevant research report(s) in the professional literature, (3) compare the (explicit and implicit) claims in the media report with what the researchers said they had accomplished, and (4) evaluate the research with respect to operationalization of constructs, design, and data analysis. We'll have an interim report and full class discussion of each group's topic on September 24 and (if necessary) October 1, and group presentations of your full reports on October 15 and 22.

In the second project, the present plan is for you to identify a current controversy in psychological research and scrutinize/criticize the arguments on both sides.