

Lane Kenworthy

Soci 10: American Society

University of California-San Diego
Spring 2024-25
MWF 3:00-3:50, Cognitive Science Building 001

[Lane Kenworthy](#)

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course explores key issues in contemporary America, how social scientists — as well as journalists, advocates, and policy makers — approach them, and what can be done to make things better.

Materials and requirements:

- The course has 20 modules, two per week.
- Readings and videos are available via Canvas.
- In weeks 2-10, class attendance is required on Mondays and Wednesdays. You'll need an iClicker remote, which you should bring to class.
- For each module, beginning with the third, you will take a 10-question quiz, accessed via Canvas, on the readings and videos.
- In weeks 3-5 and 7-10, you'll write a comment on assigned readings/videos and post it to a discussion board on Canvas. These are due at 11:59pm on Thursdays. You will also respond to the comments of two other students; these responses are due at 11:59pm on Sundays. Discussion sections won't meet in person.
- There are two open-note take-home essay exams, one in week 6 and the other in week 11.

SCHEDULE

Here are the topics we'll cover. The full schedule is in Canvas.

- Week 1. Module 1: Course introduction
- Week 1. Module 2: How do we know?
- Quizzes and required class attendance begin in week 2
- Week 2. Module 3: American exceptionalism
- Week 2. Module 4: Why don't Americans live longer?
- Discussion board posts begin in week 3
- Week 3. Module 5: Why haven't we eliminated poverty?
- Week 3. Module 6: Inequality
- Week 4. Module 7: Homelessness
- Week 4. Module 8: Guns

- Week 5. Module 9: Are Black Americans catching up with whites?
- Week 5. Module 10: Are we near gender parity?
- Exam 1
- Week 6. Module 11: How far have we come on LGBT+ inclusion?
- Week 6. Module 12: What's gone wrong with non-college-degree whites?
- Week 7. Module 13: Should we have less globalization or more?
- Week 7. Module 14: When can US military intervention do more good than harm?
- Week 8. Module 15: Loneliness
- Week 8. Module 16: Trust
- Week 9. Module 17: Education
- Week 9. Module 18: Why don't Americans work less?
- Week 10. Module 19: Would it be good to have lower taxes?
- Week 10. Module 20: Is America too polarized?
- Exam 2

COURSE AIMS

The course aims to help you

1. Recognize, describe, and evaluate scientific hypotheses, evidence, and conclusions about key social issues in the contemporary United States.
2. Apply critical thinking skills to academic writing, journalistic writing, and other sources of claims: identify significant questions; identify testable hypotheses; evaluate source credibility; identify and assess relevant evidence, including quantitative data presented in graphical form; evaluate counterarguments; reason from evidence to conclusions.
3. Write concise analytical comments and essays assessing explanations of social processes and outcomes.

Let me elaborate a bit on the things you can expect to get from the course:

- *Substantive knowledge.* The course aims to improve your understanding of the issues we cover.
- *Approaching issues scientifically (this is often called "critical thinking").* This means examining evidence and reasoning from that evidence rather than relying solely on theory, ethical beliefs, or anecdotes. What kind of evidence? And what kind of reasoning? Social science often is similar to detective work, with the social scientist more like Sherlock Holmes than like a chemist in a lab. Seldom is the story simple, and rarely do we have the exact evidence we would need in order to be strongly confident about our conclusion. So we use various

types of data, and we may deploy a mixture of analytical methods. We ask: “What would we expect to observe if a particular hypothesis were true? Is that what we in fact observe? If so or if not, what does that tell us about the answer to our question?” Then we piece together a conclusion from multiple imperfect and incomplete bits of evidence. For each topic we cover in the course, there will be one or more readings and videos. Focus on the question(s) being posed, the answer(s) given, the key pieces of evidence, and the way the author reasons in reaching a conclusion.

- *Good argument.* The course is designed to improve your ability to develop and convey effective argument. Keys include focusing on a specific question, formulating a clear proposal or position, making use of relevant evidence, addressing potential objections and counterarguments, and communicating clearly.
- *Written communication.* Good writing usually comes from two things. The first is clear thinking. But writing isn’t just a way to express what you’re thinking; it’s a way to clarify your thinking. Don’t wait until you have it all figured out before beginning to write. Start writing; doing so will help you develop your thoughts. The second key is extensive editing. Write a draft. Then edit it. Then edit it again. And again. (For a helpful guide to good writing, see [this](#).) If you struggle with writing, you’re like virtually everyone else. The course aims to help you improve, by practicing.
- *Concision.* Information and opinion are plentiful these days, so brevity is a valuable skill. The discussion posts and exams for the course are short, so you’ll need to focus on the information and argument that is most relevant or useful.
- *Comfort with quantitative data.* A generation ago there was a scarcity of numerical data. Now we have an abundance: data are everywhere. That’s a good thing, because data are key to answering important questions about society. You will encounter lots of quantitative data in this course, often in graphical form. If you aren’t already comfortable interpreting such data and reasoning from them, by the end of the course you should be.

Here are a few things you *won’t* get from this course:

- It’s not all awful. Social scientists and journalists often emphasize our problems and shortfalls. That’s helpful, because it spurs us to do better and (hopefully) helps us figure out how. But it also can give us the impression that things are getting worse. Sometimes that’s accurate, but in other instances it’s misleading. In fact, in many areas of life we could be doing better *and yet* things have been improving.
- We won’t focus on sociological concepts such as norms, roles, socialization, habit, groups, community, systems, networks, interaction, structure, social

reproduction, stratification, class, status, power, deviance, discrimination, segregation, professionalization, bureaucracy. We'll come across some of these, but I won't attach any special importance or centrality to them.

- We won't make use of the functionalist, conflict, and interactionist theoretical perspectives that are prominent in some sociology textbooks.
- We'll pay little attention to influential theorists. For this, consider taking a sociological theory or history of sociology course.
- In some social science and humanities courses, a key objective is to learn how to decipher complex or abstract texts — to convert them into understandable terms and concepts in order to gauge their usefulness for analyzing contemporary issues. We won't spend time on this.

COURSE MATERIALS

Most of the readings are from a digital textbook: Lane Kenworthy, [The Good Society](#). It's online and free. Direct links to the chapters, and to additional required readings and videos, are in Canvas.

You'll need an iClicker remote (see below).

GRADING

Course grades will be determined as follows. See below for details.

- 10%: class attendance
- 25%: quizzes
- 35%: discussion board comments and responses
- 15%: exam 1
- 15%: exam 2

Each of these will be graded on a scale of 0 to 100. So your numerical course grade is calculated as: (class attendance grade x .10) + (quizzes average grade x .25) + (discussion boards grade x .35) + (exam 1 grade x .15) + (exam 2 grade x .15).

Your letter grade for the course will be determined as follows:

- 96.67 to 100 = A+
- 93.34 to 96.66 = A
- 90 to 93.33 = A-
- 86.67 to 89.99 = B+
- 83.34 to 86.66 = B
- 80 to 83.33 = B-

- 76.67 to 79.99 = C+
- 73.34 to 76.66 = C
- 70 to 73.33 = C–
- 60 to 69.99 = D
- below 60 = F

There will be no extra-credit projects or assignments.

CLASS AND ATTENDANCE

In class we'll discuss questions, evidence, and reasoning on that day's topic. You'll find this much more interesting and informative if you've read/watched the materials before class.

No laptops, tablets, or phones in the classroom. The [evidence suggests](#) that college students tend to learn more when *not* using electronics during class. If you want to take notes, use pen and paper. If you need an exception to this policy, please see me.

In weeks 2 through 10, class attendance is required on Mondays and Wednesdays. You don't have to talk, but you must show up.

Attendance grades will be based on in-class polling.

- You'll need an iClicker remote (not your phone). You can purchase one — new or used — at the campus bookstore or online.
- Register your remote for this class. There's a registration link in the Canvas course page, or you can go to student.iclicker.com. When registering, use your UCSD email address. If you need help with registration, [instructions are here](#).
- For technical support with iclickers, contact [EdTech Support](#).
- The base station frequency in our classroom is BA. To set your remote to this frequency at the start of class, turn on your remote, then press the power button for 3 seconds. When the frequency on the remote display starts to blink, press "B" then "A."

Reasons for an excused absence from attendance include: (1) holidays or special events observed by organized religions (for students who show affiliation with that particular religion), (2) absences pre-approved by the UCSD Dean of Students (or Dean's designee), (3) extended illness (this requires a doctor's note). I'll need written verification of the circumstances.

There will be 17 attendance days: every Monday and Wednesday in weeks 2-10, except Monday, May 26, which is a holiday. Only your highest 14 grades will count.

QUIZZES

For each module, beginning with the third, you will take a quiz on the readings and videos. Each quiz will have 10 multiple choice or true/false questions.

The quizzes are posted on Canvas. Each quiz will be available for 48 hours, from 12:01am on the first day until 11:59pm on the second day. Once you begin a quiz, you'll have 30 minutes to complete it.

The quizzes are open-note open-computer.

If you have the Canvas app, you can take the quizzes using your phone.

There will be 18 quizzes. Only your highest 16 grades will count.

DISCUSSION BOARDS

In weeks 3-5 and 7-10, you'll write a comment on assigned readings/videos and post it to a discussion board on Canvas. These are due by 11:59pm on Thursdays. You will also write brief responses to the comments of two other students. The responses are due by 11:59pm on Sundays. You have to post your own comment before you're allowed to see the comments posted by other students.

Your discussion board comments should be on the following modules:

- Week 3: module 4, 5, or 6
- Week 4: module 7 or 8
- Week 5: module 9 or 10
- Week 7: module 11, 12, 13, or 14
- Week 8: module 15 or 16
- Week 9: module 17 or 18
- Week 10: module 19 or 20

Comments should address something in the course materials for that module, should engage with evidence, and should be written well. Here are a few examples, just to give you a feel. You don't need to follow these examples; this is just to give you some ideas in case you aren't sure what is expected.

- The textbook reading for this module was interesting, but I wasn't convinced, because the author didn't consider
- The optional reading for this module says that Figure 3 supports gun control. But it seems to me that's wrong because

- In the video, the narrator argues that women's freedom increased because more were entering paid work. If that were true, I think we'd expect to see ..., but there's no mention of this.
- The textbook reading shows that the pattern across countries supports the hypothesis that weak labor unions are a key cause of rising income inequality in the United States, but in another class I took we learned that

If you have the Canvas app, you can post your comment and responses using your phone. But don't write as though you're texting or tweeting. Write real sentences and use proper spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

Grading for each discussion board comment and responses:

- 100: comment and two responses submitted, excellent quality, well written, comment includes evidence
- 95: comment and two responses submitted, very good quality, well written, comment includes evidence
- 85: comment and two responses submitted, good quality, well written, comment includes evidence
- 75: comment and two responses submitted but low quality or poorly written or comment doesn't include evidence
- 60: comment submitted but only one response
- 50: comment submitted but no responses
- 0: no comment submitted

There will be 7 discussion boards. Only your 6 highest grades will count.

EXAMS

Each exam will have one question. The question will be posted on Canvas one week before your answer is due.

The exams are open-note open-computer.

You should draw on the course materials. You can also use outside sources if you wish, but that isn't required.

Grading will be based on the following:

- Answer the question.
- Refer to relevant evidence.
- Address potential objections. What would a critic say are the weak points in

your case? How do you respond?

- Use footnotes (not a reference list or bibliography) to give credit to anyone from whom you borrow evidence or argument. The footnotes aren't included in the word count. I'm not picky about the formatting of the footnotes, but include the author(s), title, and year rather than just an internet address.
- Write clearly. Use proper grammar and punctuation ("I," "me," and contractions are fine).
- Length: No more than 1,000 words (excluding charts, tables, and footnotes). List your word count on the first page, along with your name and the date. If you include charts and/or tables, put them at the end and don't include them in the word count.
- Formatting: single-space, 12-point font size, 1-inch top and bottom margins and 2-inch side margins.

If you need help with writing, consider seeking assistance from the UC San Diego [Writing Hub](#).

The due dates are listed in Canvas. An exam turned in late but within 48 hours of the deadline will be penalized 25 points (out of 100). An exam turned in more than 48 hours late, or not turned in at all, will receive a grade of zero.

Upload your exam answer on Canvas. Emailed or hard copy exam answers won't be accepted.

Submit your answer in a word processing program format (Microsoft Word, Google docs, Pages, etc.). Don't submit it as a pdf document.

Don't plagiarize. If you aren't sure what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it, see the UC San Diego Library's [guide to preventing plagiarism](#).

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Students are encouraged to share intellectual views and discuss freely the principles and applications of course materials. However, graded work must be the product of independent effort unless otherwise instructed. Students are expected to adhere to [UC San Diego on academic integrity policy](#).

SPECIAL NEEDS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Students who need special accommodation or services should contact the [Office for Students with Disabilities](#) (OSD). You must register and request that the OSD send me official notification of your accommodation needs as soon as possible. Please

meet with me to discuss accommodations and how the course requirements and activities may impact your ability to fully participate.

SUBJECT TO CHANGE

Information here, other than the grade and attendance policy, may be subject to change with advance notice as deemed appropriate by the instructor.