

PS 398

Strategic International Relations

Spring 2026

1 Essentials

- Course Number: 62312
- Meeting Time: Mondays and Wednesdays, 10:00am–11:20am
- Meeting Location: 331 Armory
- Course Website: canvas.illinois.edu/courses/67348

2 Staff

- Instructor: Rob Carroll¹
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¹I prefer to be called “Rob.” If you are more comfortable calling me “Professor Carroll,” that is fine, too. For whatever reason, my ear is not attuned to “Dr. Carroll,” so I would prefer that you not call me that. If you go by first name with me, do the same with Myla; if you go by last name with me, do the same with Ms. Burton. Woe be unto you if you show Myla, Ms. Burton, Myla Burton, or any other Avatar of the Grader any disrespect. *Woe. Be unto you.*

3 Course Description

This upper-level undergraduate course introduces students to...I mean, I don't even know what to call it. You can call it "strategic" if you want, but I can't promise you that we'll cover all the topics that you might expect to see in a course with that title. Frankly, I don't even know what "strategic" means.² And I definitely don't know what I.R. means.³ Evidently I am not the right person to ask about what this course is about, but I'll give it a go anyway.

It's probably easier to think of this as "theoretical I.R. with a healthy dose of mathematical modeling, especially game theory." Put differently, this is an introduction to a particular method of doing I.R. theory; any course on method is essentially a course on how to think. So, if you're interested in learning how to think about I.R.—and perhaps even how to think about how to think about I.R.—then this is the course for you.

Now, I know that you're probably not thrilled about the prospect of taking a course on method, and particularly not thrilled about the prospect of taking a course on method that involves math. I get it. Many of you are probably thinking, "I'm not a math person." I'm not one, either. But look, it's not like you're going to be solving any differential equations or anything like that. And if you're anything like previous students, you're more than capable of doing the math that we'll do in this course. Nevertheless, there may be some level of math anxiety in this course, and I want to be clear about that up front. If you are willing to work through that anxiety, I promise that you will be rewarded with a new way of thinking about I.R. If not, well, *vaya con dios*.

But really, the source of discomfort for most isn't math—it's *abstraction*. We will not use many proper nouns, nor will we discuss many specific events. Instead, we will talk about *models* of states, *models* of conflict, *models* of trade, and so on. In so doing, we allow ourselves to identify the *essence* of the things we study, and to think about them in a more general way. It's also a lot of fun.

²The etymology of "strategy" is interesting, though: it comes from the Greek *stratēgia*, which means "generalship" or "the office of a general." See! You learn facts and stuff!

³If you are looking for a class taught by an instructor who knows things, you should probably drop this course and enroll in something taught by someone else. I don't know anything, and (frankly) I like it that way. Moreover, people with lots of questions are way more fun than people with lots of (purported) answers. So if you think you're going to stroll into my classroom and impress me with some scintillating dinner-party pablum you read in today's *Times*, you're sorely mistaken. It'll wrap fish tomorrow, and we still won't know anything.

4 Course Mechanics

4.1 Meetings

We will meet twice a week, on Mondays and Wednesdays, from 10:00am–11:15am, in 331 Armory. I've decided to take a slightly different approach to the course this semester, and I'm not sure how it will work out. So here's the idea: on Mondays I will provide a technical lecture of the topic in question—*e.g.*, bargaining, signaling, etc. You'll be assigned a paper adjacent to the technique in question to read for the following Wednesday; we will then discuss that paper in class. I'm hoping this will help you to see how the techniques we discuss are actually used in practice while also giving you a firm grounding in the technique itself. We'll see how it goes.

4.2 Evaluation

Your grade will be based on the following components:

1. **Problem Sets (30 points):** there are three problem sets in this course, each worth 10 points.
2. **Response Papers (30 points):** you must submit a response paper for three of the papers we read in class, each worth 10 points.
3. **Final (40 points):** you may either submit a final paper or take a final exam; in either case, it is worth 40 points.

These add up to 100 points. (Math!) The grading scale is as follows:

Points	Letter	Points	Letter
[93, 100]	A	[73, 77)	C
[90, 93)	A-	[70, 73)	C-
[87, 90)	B+	[67, 70)	D+
[83, 87)	B	[63, 67)	D
[80, 83)	B-	[60, 63)	D-
[77, 80)	C+	[0, 60)	F

I will not round up your grade. Repeat: I will not round up your grade. Once more, this time with feeling: *I will not round up your grade.*⁴

4.2.1 Problem Sets

There are three problem sets in this course, each worth 10 points. You can think of these as breaking the course into modules:

1. Weeks 1–5 cover the topic of *rationality*. The problem set for this module will be due at 11:59pm on Wednesday, March 4. Topics include:
 - (a) Logic, sets, relations, functions.
 - (b) Decision theory.
 - (c) The rational unitary actor assumption and social choice theory.
 - (d) Choice under uncertainty.
2. Weeks 6–10 cover the topic of *strategy*. The problem set for this module will be due at 11:59pm on Wednesday, April 15. Topics include:
 - (a) Optimality.
 - (b) Bargaining versus competition; conflict versus exchange.
 - (c) Games in strategic form.
 - (d) Nash equilibrium and dominance concepts.
3. Weeks 11–15 cover the topics of *time and information*. The problem set for this module will be due at 11:59pm on Wednesday, May 13. Topics include:
 - (a) Games in extensive form and repeated games.
 - (b) Subgame perfection and backward induction.
 - (c) Games in Bayesian form.
 - (d) Signaling, screening, and reputation.

⁴ “Will you round up my grade?” No, I will not round up your grade.

You will submit a write-up for each problem set on Canvas. It may be typed or handwritten, but it must be legible; illegibility will be taken as a sign of disrespect for the grader, and then woe be unto you.⁵ You may work in groups of up to three people on the problem sets, but you must submit your own write-up. In case you're wondering whether your write-up is "your own," here's a good rule of thumb: if you could not explain every step of your write-up to me, then it's not your own. If you work in a group, you must list the names of your collaborators on your write-up.

4.2.2 Response Papers

You must submit a response paper (R.P.) for three of the papers we read in class, each worth 10 points.⁶ You may submit a R.P. for any paper we read in class, but you must submit it *before* we discuss the paper in class—*i.e.*, it is due at 11:59 the Monday before we discuss it on Wednesday.

In terms of mechanics: your R.P. should be typed and free of typographical errors. It must include a word count on the first page; papers are expected to span about 1,000–1,500 words. You should not summarize the paper; instead, you should engage with it *critically*. If it helps, you might try to answer some of the following questions, to the degree that they are relevant for the week:

1. What is the paper's central question?
2. What is the paper's central argument?
3. What alternative explanations are there for the phenomenon in question?
4. Why are those alternative explanations less compelling than the one offered by the author?
5. How well does the author carry out their argument?
6. What are some of the argument's key assumptions? What happens if these assumptions are relaxed?

⁵Woe! Be unto you! Be nice to the grader!

⁶Actually, you may submit an R.P. for all of the papers we read in class, but only your best three will count. No, you may not submit an R.P. for the same paper twice. No, you may not submit an R.P. for a paper that we did not read in class. No, you may not earn extra credit by submitting more than three R.P.s. Just do the work.

7. What scope limitations do/should the authors place on their argument?
8. What is a real-world example of the phenomenon in question?
9. What real-world example does the paper fail to explain?
10. How might the argument/model be extended? What new insights might be gained from such an extension?
11. What are some of the paper's key takeaways? What policy recommendations might be drawn from the paper?

Or you might try another tack entirely.

Here's the rubric for the R.P.s:

Points	Description
0	There is no R.P.—wha happen?!
1	There is an R.P., but it is not on the assigned paper.
2	The R.P. is on the assigned paper, but it is incomprehensible.
3	The R.P. is on the assigned paper, and it is comprehensible, but it is less than 500 words long.
4	The R.P. is on the assigned paper, and it is comprehensible, but it is between 500 and 999 words long.
5	The R.P. meets the minimal requirements but demonstrates fundamental misunderstandings of the paper.
6	The R.P. meets the minimal requirements but demonstrates some misunderstandings of the paper.
7	The R.P. meets the minimal requirements and demonstrates good understanding of the paper, but it merely summarizes it.
8	The R.P. meets the minimal requirements and demonstrates good understanding of the paper and adequate engagement with it.
9	The R.P. meets the minimal requirements and demonstrates good understanding of the paper and solid engagement with it.
10	The R.P. meets the minimal requirements and demonstrates good understanding of the paper and excellent engagement with it.

I'd be lying if I said that the quality of your prose doesn't matter; write well. (Proofread! Read it out loud to yourself!) If you're doing this right, the word count will take care of itself; write economically. Don't be afraid to write with style, and—for the love of the Almighty—don't be afraid to use the first person.⁷

Don't be afraid to be critical! The people that wrote these papers are, like, *people*. They're not gods; they're not infallible; they're not even particularly smart. They're just professors, and the only inference you can draw from this fact is that they cannot dance. One and three, baby! That's how you clap!

⁷All good things in moderation: don't go overboard with the first person, else you'll sound like a five-year old, or a narcissist, or both. Wait, that's redundant.

4.2.3 Final

Again, there are two ways to satisfy the final requirement in this course: you may either submit a final paper *or* take a final exam.⁸

1. **Paper option:** you may submit a final paper worth 40 points. The paper should be 4,000–6,000 words in length—put a word count on a dedicated title page—and it should be on a topic of your choosing. You must:
 - (a) *Identify* a puzzle or problem in I. R. that you find interesting. This can be something abstract, like “why do states fight wars?” or something more concrete, like “why did Russia invade Ukraine in 2014?” You should also explain why it is interesting and important.
 - (b) *Explain* how the puzzle or problem has been addressed in the literature. You should identify a handful of papers—more than three, but fewer than ten—that address the question. What insights do these papers offer? What are their key assumptions? What tensions exist between them, or what gaps have they left unfilled?
 - (c) *Model* the puzzle or problem in question. You should develop a mathematical model that sheds light on what you’ve spent the first part of the paper discussing. This model should be original to you—*i.e.*, you should not simply copy a model from one of the papers we’ve read. Of course, you are free to draw inspiration from those papers or any other—that’s how research works!—but you should not simply copy a model from someone else. Regardless, cite your sources appropriately.
 - (d) *Analyze* the model. What does it tell us about the puzzle or problem in question? If decision-theoretic, what is the optimal course of action? If game-theoretic, what are the equilibria? What substantive interpretations can we draw from these mathematical outputs?
 - (e) *Conclude*. What have you learned? What might be reasonable next steps for research on this topic?

The paper is due on Canvas at 11:59pm on Friday, May 15.

⁸The word “or” is exclusive in this context: you may not do both. You will declare which option you’ll take toward the end of the semester, though if you’re doing the paper you should probably start thinking about it sooner rather than later. Also, if you want to use this course for honors credit, you *must* do a paper, and the standards will be higher than those given here.

2. **Exam option:** you may take a final exam worth 40 points. The exam date is still to be determined; it will be announced on March 11. Regardless, this is the only date on which the exam will be offered; there will be no alternative dates. If you need to miss the exam, you'll need to do the paper option instead. The exam will be closed to books and technology but open to notes. It will be cumulative, and each module will be worth 15 points.⁹ allow you to choose which module you'd like to be graded on again. You need not bring anything to the final other than a pen and your brain.

4.2.4 Attendance

0% of your grade is based on attendance; frankly, my friend, I don't give a damn. If you do not attend class, you will miss out on the opportunity to ask questions and to engage with your peers. You'll also miss out on a chance to parse through some of the more difficult readings together. But, you will not be penalized. Please do not email me to tell me you won't be coming to class, and please do not email me to ask whether you missed anything important. If you are concerned about missing class, please ask a peer.

5 Readings

In terms of your Wednesday reading responsibilities: all the papers we discuss will be available on Canvas at least one week before the Wednesday on which we discuss them. Again, you are expected to have read them before class, especially if, you know, you wrote a response paper on them.

As for the Mondays, there is no textbook for the course. I will provide notes for each topic,¹⁰ and you will be assigned readings from the literature. If you would like recommendations for supplementary readings or background material, please let me know. That said, I'll err on the side of covering too much rather than too little, and I'll sprinkle suggested readings throughout the notes. Don't even act like you don't love sprinkles. You *love* sprinkles.

⁹Yes, there are 45 available points. Yes, the exam is out of 40 points. *Just go with it.*

¹⁰The notes will probably read a little like a textbook, so you shouldn't think of them as a substitute for coming to class. The lectures will be at least somewhat distinct from the notes—if only because you're asking questions, and probably also because I'm making jokes or going off on tangents. These will *not* function like PowerPoint slides dumped on a Canvas page.

There are also [some old YouTube videos](#) I made for a previous version of this course; some of you may find them helpful. I'm just a bit embarrassed by them anymore; still, it's nice to be able to hit the pause button.

6 Policies

6.1 Good Faith

A good course is based on a foundation of trust between the instructor and the students. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the phrase “good faith” as “the sincere belief that what one is doing is right or correct; with honesty or sincerity of intention.” This is a useful concept; let me use it now.

1. I will act in good faith in my interactions with you: whatever I do, I will do with the sincere belief that it is right and correct, and I will do it with honesty¹¹ and sincerity of intention.
2. I will presume, until shown otherwise, that you will act in good faith in your interactions with me, with the grader, and with your peers. That is, I will presume that you will act with the sincere belief that what you are doing is right and correct, and that you will do it with honesty and sincerity of intention.
3. I will presume, until shown otherwise, that you are presuming, until shown otherwise, that I will act in good faith in my interactions with you. That is, I will presume that you will presume that I will act with the sincere belief that what I am doing is right and correct, and that I will do it with honesty and sincerity of intention.

This might seem like highfalutin nonsense, but it's really, *really* important. Good faith shapes both how we interact with one another and how we interpret

¹¹By “honesty” I mean a few things. The first is basic transparency of both the spirit and the letter of the law. The second is the more barbarous academic virtue of honesty: I will state the truth as best I know it, and I will not knowingly state falsehoods. This includes honesty in judgment, which occasionally makes for awkward conversations like “I'm sorry, but your paper is not very good—here's why, and here's how you can improve moving forward.” Please interpret such conversations in good faith: *I want you to improve, grow, and ultimately succeed, and I have faith that you can.* I will do all I can to help you do so, but I will not lie to you; pulling punches is not the same as acting in good faith, and indeed I'd argue that it is the opposite.

those interactions. The idea that a professor is “out to get you” is cheap and pernicious, and it is not the way I operate. Put differently, I will work hard to ensure that you feel comfortable coming to me with any concerns you may have about the course; when somebody offers to invest in you to that degree, it *hurts* to be rebuffed. So please, if you have a concern, come to me with it, and do so in good faith. I will interpret it as such and thus will take it seriously.

6.2 Appeals

If you believe that you have been graded incorrectly on an assignment, you may appeal your grade.¹² To do so, you must submit a written appeal within one week of receiving your grade. This appeal must be submitted via an email to the grader, and you must CC me. In your appeal, you must explain why you believe your grade is incorrect. The grader and I will then review your work and determine whether your grade should be changed. If it should be, we will change it; if not, we will explain why not. You may not appeal your grade after one week has passed. Please note that the grader and I will presume that you are acting in good faith in your appeal, and we will interpret it as such. However, this is also an excellent opportunity for you to demonstrate that you are not acting in good faith, so, you know, *caveat emptor*.

6.3 Late Work

Late work will be penalized 10% per day, including weekends. You may simply submit your work late—*i.e.*, you need not ask permission—but you will be penalized accordingly. If you have a legitimate reason for submitting your work late—*e.g.*, a documented/documentable medical emergency—please email the grader and CC me.¹³ If you do not have a legitimate reason for submitting your work late, please do not email anybody.

6.4 Accommodations

If you have a documented reason to receive accommodations in this course, please email me in the first week of the semester with the appropriate docu-

¹²Appeals are not a negotiation mechanism, Pre-Law. Also, your grade may go up or down.

¹³Of course, if your reason is sensitive enough that you’d rather just come to me directly, please do so. Remember that I will act in good faith in my interactions with you.

mentation from D.R.E.S. I hope it goes without saying that I will act in good faith in my interactions with you, and that I will do my best to ensure that you receive the accommodations to which you are entitled. My sense is that most students will not require accommodations on problem sets, response papers, or the final paper. However, some students will require accommodations for the final exam; let me state my preference that these accommodations are executed at the testing center. I am, of course, happy to discuss this with you, along with any other accommodations you may require.

6.5 Academic Integrity

You are expected to abide by the University's [Student Code](#), and I promise that I will abide by it, too. Of particular relevance here is Article 1, Part 4, which covers Academic Integrity and Procedure. Please read it. All potential academic integrity violations will be addressed through the channels describe therein, and they will be executed in good faith per those stipulations.

We're going to have to have a conversation about ChatGPT or other similar tools, so let me just say this much explicitly: if you use a tool like this to generate text for your problem sets, response papers, or final paper, you are cheating. However, it seems to me that other uses of these tools might not be cheating, and we (as a society) need to figure out where the lines are. For example, we'd probably agree that if you used a tool like this to check whether a paragraph is clearly written, that's not cheating. But what if you used it to confirm that your reasoning in some paragraph is valid? The difference between *finding* solutions and *confirming* solutions is subtle, but it's important—and as it happens, it forms the basis for one of the most important open questions in mathematics and computer science, the so-called [P versus NP problem](#).

We're too early in the process to know where the lines should be drawn, but we're too late in the process to pretend they don't exist. The thing with invisible lines is that you find them only when you cross them. This is why good faith is so important: if you're acting in good faith, you'll ask me where the lines are, and I'll do my best to tell you. Trial and error is key for learning, but it's not a good strategy for avoiding academic integrity violations.

That said, you ought to want to do more than copy and paste mediocre prose written by a robot. Your value-added as a human being is not in your ability to generate mediocre prose; it's in your ability to generate insights and to communicate them clearly. The world that awaits you is one in which the ability to generate mediocre prose is increasingly automated, and you should

be prepared for that world. If you don't plan on being awesome in everything you do, then you ought to prepare to be replaced by a robot. So, you know, be awesome—humanity depends on it.

As a general rule, if you're not sure whether something is cheating, it probably is, and you should ask me *before* you do it. I will act in good faith in my interactions with you, and I will interpret your question as an indication that you are acting in good faith in your interactions with me. If you do something that is cheating, I will interpret it as an indication that you are not acting in good faith in your interactions with me, and I will act accordingly. Don't cheat.

6.6 Mental Health

In the name of getting a really important thing really right, I'm going to copy and paste the University boilerplate on mental health here.

Significant stress, mood changes, excessive worry, substance [or] alcohol misuse or interferences in eating or sleep can have an impact on academic performance, social development, and emotional wellbeing. The University of Illinois offers a variety of confidential services including individual and group counseling, crisis intervention, psychiatric services, and specialized screenings which are covered through the Student Health Fee. If you or someone you know experiences any of the above mental health concerns, it is strongly encouraged to contact or visit any of the University's resources provided below. Getting help is a smart and courageous thing to do for yourself and for those who care about you.¹⁴

Here are some resources:

- Counseling Center: (217) 333-3704
- McKinley Health Center: (217) 333-2700
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: (800) 273-8255
- Rosecrance Crisis Line: (217) 359-4141 (available 24/7, 365 days a year)

¹⁴In the name of barbarous honesty: your humble professor would like to add that he has been there, and he knows how hard it is to ask for help. You're not alone, and you're not the first; that said, your experience is uniquely *yours*, and you deserve to be heard. Please, please, please: if you need help, ask for it, and don't dawdle in so doing.

- If you are in immediate danger, call 911.

Again, I hope it goes without saying that the Good Faith policy applies here: should you have an issue along these lines, I will most definitely interpret your actions as being in good faith, and I most definitely hope you will interpret my actions the same way. We can tailor a course of action that both suits your needs and treats you fairly with respect to the rest of the class. Please know that both of these are important: it's most crucial that we do what we can to protect and serve you, but we must do so in a way that doesn't create injustices to other students. I have plenty of faith that we can handle most PS 398 problems without too much trouble. I care about you beyond PS 398, however, and I will do all I can to support you should a trying time arise.

7 This Syllabus

We will discuss this syllabus in class on the first day of the semester. If you have any questions about it, please ask them then. For other questions that pop up:

1. If your question is not specific to your situation, please ask it on Canvas so that we have a record of it.
2. If your question is specific to your situation and not personally sensitive, please email the grader. If they cannot answer the question, they will come to me with it.
3. If your question is specific to your situation and personally sensitive, please email me directly and do not CC the grader.

As ever, the Good Faith policy applies, and most questions will be interpreted as an indication of good faith on your part. However, if your question is well-addressed in this syllabus, I will interpret it as an indication that you are not acting in good faith. The same goes for questions asked in a badgering manner—and don't even act like you don't know what those look and sound like, because you totally do.¹⁵

¹⁵It's amazing to your humble professor just how much more interested some students are in course accounting than in course content. (It's not entirely your fault; the system is partially to blame.) But, your path to success in this course depends a *lot* more on your ability to slog through hard—but totally interesting!—things than it does on your ability to game systems.

Though this syllabus records policies and procedures for the course, it should not be viewed as an exhaustive record of them. Rather, it should be viewed as a starting point for our conversation about how to make this course work for you. Again, the Good Faith policy applies.

8 General Expectations

I hate syllabi; they invariably make the professor sound like an asshole.¹⁶

Look, we're going to have a lot of fun doing something really hard. That fun depends on your hard work and your adherence to these policies, yeah, but it also depends on your openness to new intellectual experiences. If you don't try to have fun with this, you won't, and you won't get everything you can out of the struggle. Remember to be playful and to show loving disrespect for everything you hear. You don't buy a used car without kicking the tires, so why accept ideas without doing the same?

Otherwise, draw inspiration from academic virtues:

1. **Charity.** Approach discussions and debates with an intention to seek new knowledge. Interpret others' arguments in their strongest form, with respect to what you think you know, and striving for understanding before criticism.
2. **Curiosity.** Seek to know more than you think you know, including both new things and new aspects of things that you already think you know. Adopt an experimental mindset, and don't be afraid of the word "try."

System gamers are so *boring*. Do you want to be boring? Seriously, just stop and think about that question for a second: *do you want to be boring?* Maybe you don't mind, and if you don't, then you can just suffer through this class and get your B+ or whatever and go on your merry way. Try not to infect too many of your peers with your boringness, because it most definitely is contagious. Just remember that the days where you'll have such clear-cut systems to game are numbered, and you won't be able to turn off the boringness that you have so willfully imbued within yourself to get grades. It will be too late: your boringness will have gone chronic.

Every now and again, check in with yourself about the following ratio:

$$\rho := \frac{\text{number of course accounting questions you've asked}}{\text{number of substantive questions you've asked}}.$$

If this ratio is very high, then you're not doing it right. If this ratio is undefined, then you're *definitely* not doing it right.

¹⁶N.B.: the professor is an asshole, but not the sort of asshole implied by this syllabus.

3. **Generosity.** Be willing to express where you are, both in understanding and in misunderstanding. Generosity of understanding—*e.g.*, explaining a concept to a peer that's struggling with it—requires investing in others.¹⁷ Generosity of misunderstanding—*e.g.*, asking questions in class—requires investing in others, too: in your peers, who might have the same question (or might not even know that they have it!) and in your instructor, who never knows when he's being unclear. Like now, for instance.
4. **Honesty.** If you think you know something, report it truthfully. If you think you don't know something, acknowledge that truthfully.
5. **Humility.** Acknowledge that you might not know some of the things that you think that you know, and that some things might be un-knowable.
6. **Kai-Sui.** Remember that you control what you pay attention to, what you think about, and how you construct meaning from experience.

Most of all, be kind to yourself, your peers, the grader, and me.

¹⁷This investment always pays off: the best way to learn something is to try to teach it.