

# PSYCHOLOGY OF COMPETITION AND PEAK PERFORMANCE

## Course Basics

**Mondays 7:20-9:20pm (ET)**

**Live online classes**

**Course website:** <https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/96192>

## Instructor

**Dr. Emily Hangen**



### Email:

[emilyhangen@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:emilyhangen@fas.harvard.edu)

*I regularly check and respond to emails within 24 hours on weekdays. (I do not respond to emails on the weekends.)*

### Office hours:

[Office hours sign up link](#)

*I welcome you to come to sign up and come to my virtual office hours! This is a time to ask questions, discuss ideas or to simply introduce yourself.*



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Why take this course?

By taking this course you will earn the psychological science behind competition and how to use this knowledge to achieve your peak performance.

# Course Description

**Competition is ubiquitous:** athletes compete on the sport field, dancers and actors audition for coveted roles, candidates vie for employment or political positions, businesses compete for profit, and students compete for scholarships and program admission. Why do some individuals choke under the pressure of competition, while others thrive? How does having an audience or competitor watching you affect how well you perform?

In this course we elucidate the relation between competition and performance in discussions of social comparison theory, social facilitation, goal adoption, the opposing process model of competition, performance under stress, and deliberate practice.



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Students develop a scientifically-grounded understanding of how competition affects motivation and performance and learn practical, evidence-based tips for how to reach their own peak performance.

## Teaching Philosophy

As a motivation researcher, I recognize that deep, long-lasting learning comes when students are intrinsically motivated and approach-oriented.

For these reasons, I deliberately designed this class with you, my students in mind, and by using empirically-based strategies to foster long-term learning and motivation, such as:

- Ensuring every assignment has a meaningful purpose (absolutely no “busy work”) and sharing this purpose with you
- Allowing you multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery of material by using grading schemes that favor correction over immediate perfection
- Capitalizing on the testing effect by using frequent pass/fail quizzes to help you retain what you learn

Ultimately, I have designed this course to help you master the course material and to encourage you to enjoy the learning process rather than fret over points and grades.



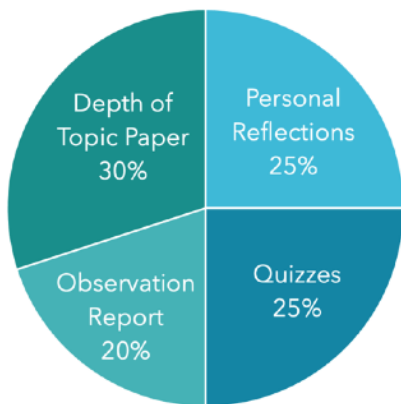
Photo by Ales Krivec on Unsplash

By choosing to fully engage in this course, you will be able to:

- **Recall:** Understand and recall contemporary theories and principles related to the psychology of competition
- **Evaluate:** Read and evaluate original, scholarly journal articles
- **Communicate:** Succinctly and clearly convey a topic to others via both verbal and oral methods of communication.

## Grade Breakdown

Final Grade Breakdown



### Learning behaviors (50%)

Personal Reflections	25%
Learning Quizzes	25%

### Demonstrate your mastery (50%)

Observation Report	20%
Depth of Topic Paper	30%

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**Total 100%**

Grade	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	Etc.
%	93 - 100	90 - 92.9	87 - 89.9	83 - 86.9	80 - 82.9	77 - 79.9	73 - 76.9	70 - 72.9	<70

# Coursework: Purpose & Descriptions

## Personal Reflections (25%)

**Purpose:** The personal reflection exercises are designed to bring awareness to your intuition and to encourage you to reflect on how your understanding has changed in response to the readings. This heightened awareness exercise can prevent hindsight bias, enhance curiosity for the readings, and scaffold the new knowledge presented in the readings.

**Details:** You will complete a personal reflection for each class which will consist of a response to a pre-reading prompt and a post-reading prompt. You will provide a brief response (around 1 paragraph) to each reflection prompt provided. Your personal reflections should be completed no later than by **8am ET the day of class (Mondays)**.

**Grading:** These responses will be graded on a 0-5 scale:

- 0 = Missing
- 1 = Incomplete or Insufficient
- 2 = Late AND room for major improvement
- 3 = Late OR room for major improvement
- 4 = Room for minor improvement
- 5 = Excellent

## Learning Quizzes (25%)

**Purpose:** In-class quizzes are graded based on completion because they are included for the purpose of helping you remember newly learned concepts for longer periods of time (see research on the testing effect). Brief assignments and activities are provided to give you greater exposure to concepts discussed in class and to reinforce your understanding of these ideas.

**Details:** In each class you will complete a quiz and receive immediate feedback about the correct & incorrect answers. . You will receive full points for completing the quiz. No make up quizzes will be administered. Given that unforeseen circumstances may arise (health issues, family emergencies, etc.), you can miss up to 3 quizzes without any penalty to your grade.

## Observation Report (20%)

**Purpose:** To reinforce your learning and demonstrate your ability to identify concepts learned in class in real-world settings. An additional purpose of this assignment is to provide an opportunity for you to practice communicating effectively to an audience.

**Details:** Observe a competition (e.g. sporting event, reality tv competition, audition, debate, etc.). Analyze the competition or a specific competitor's motivation using at least 2 concepts from class. You will need to provide observational evidence to support your analysis and sufficiently define the psychology concepts for your audience. You will share your analysis with the class in a brief presentation. Please practice and refine your presentation so that it is highly succinct, easy to follow along, and demonstrates thoughtful analysis. (More details about duration of presentation and materials will be provided in class.)



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## Depth of Topic Paper (30%)

**Purpose:** The purpose of the paper is to provide you an opportunity to dig deeper into a topic interest, gain experience with the scholarly work involved in reviewing an area of research, and practice your writing and revising skills.

**Details:** Choose a topic of interest related to competition or peak performance. Conduct an extensive literature search and synthesize key findings in a 6-9\* page review paper (\*10-15 pages for graduate students). In a quality review paper, the writer demonstrates that they have a thorough grasp of the literature and have formulated a useful analysis. Importantly, in your review paper you need to do more than simply summarize the literature, you need to offer some sort of analysis and explain the relevance of the topic.

- **Topic & List of references — Due April 4th**
- **Full draft — Due April 25th**
- **Peer feedback — Due May 2nd**
- **Final Paper — Due May 9th**

# Course Policies

## Attendance

Attendance is required in all classes. We only meet once a week so even a single missed class will put you at a serious disadvantage in your learning. For that reason, absences will negatively affect your final grade and can be grounds for removal from the course.

## Accommodation Requests

Harvard Extension School is committed to providing an inclusive, accessible academic community for students with disabilities and chronic health conditions. The Accessibility Services Office (ASO) (<https://extension.harvard.edu/for-students/support-and-services/>



[accessibility-services/](https://extension.harvard.edu/for-students/support-and-services/accessibility-services/)) offers

accommodations and supports to students with documented disabilities. If you have a need for accommodations or adjustments, contact Accessibility Services directly via email at [accessibility@extension.harvard.edu](mailto:accessibility@extension.harvard.edu) or by phone at 617-998-9640.

## Late work & Deadline Extensions

You will **lose 10% per day for late work**. However, I encourage you to be proactive! If you believe you cannot make an upcoming deadline please request a **deadline extension at least 2 days in advance**. In general, I will grant a 1-day extension no questions asked. However, if you have a reasonable need and anticipate a longer deadline extension, please contact me and explain your need for a longer deadline extension. I will determine if you qualify for a longer

deadline extension. **However, the deadline extension policy does not apply to any of the final paper deadlines. No extensions will be available for the final paper.**

## ***Academic Integrity***

You are responsible for understanding Harvard Extension School policies on academic integrity (<https://extension.harvard.edu/for-students/student-policies-conduct/academic-integrity/>) and how to use sources responsibly. Stated most broadly, academic integrity means that all course work submitted, whether a draft or a final version of a paper, project, take-home exam, online exam, computer program, oral presentation, or lab report, must be your own words and ideas, or the sources must be clearly acknowledged. The potential outcomes for violations of academic integrity are serious and ordinarily include all of the following: required withdrawal (RQ), which means a failing grade in the course (with no refund), the suspension of registration privileges, and a notation on your transcript.

Using sources responsibly (<https://extension.harvard.edu/for-students/support-and-services/using-sources-effectively-and-responsibly/>) is an essential part of your Harvard education. We provide additional information about our expectations regarding academic integrity on our website. We invite you to review that information and to check your understanding of academic citation rules by completing two free online 15-minute tutorials that are also available on our site. (The tutorials are anonymous open-learning tools.)



# Course Schedule

No textbooks are required for this course, instead you will be reading original scholarly work (i.e. peer-reviewed articles), which are listed below. Readings can be found on the course website.

Date	Course Readings
Mon Jan 24	<p><b>Does competition enhance or hinder performance?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elliot, A. J. (2020). Competition and achievement outcomes: A hierarchical motivational analysis. <i>Motivation Science</i>, 6(1), 3-11.</li> <li>• Johnson, D., Johnson, R., &amp; Roseth, C. (2012). Competition and performance: More facts, more understanding? Comment on Murayama and Elliot (2012). <i>Psychological Bulletin</i>, 138, 1071-1078.</li> </ul>
Mon Jan 31	<p><b>Risk-taking</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hangen, E. J., Elliot, A. J., &amp; Jamieson, J. P. (2016). The opposing processes model of competition: Elucidating the effects of competition on risk-taking. <i>Motivation Science</i>, 2(3), 157-170.</li> <li>• Turner, M. J., Jones, M. V., Sheffield, D., &amp; Cross, S. L. (2012). Cardiovascular indices of challenge and threat states predict competitive performance. <i>International Journal of Psychophysiology</i>, 86(1), 48-57.</li> </ul>
Mon Feb 7	<p><b>Social Comparisons &amp; Trait Competitiveness</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suls, J., Martin, R., &amp; Wheeler, L. (2002). Social comparison: Why, with whom, and with what effect?. <i>Current Directions in Psychological Science</i>, 11(5), 159-163.</li> <li>• Garcia, S. M., Reese, Z. A., &amp; Tor, A. (2019). Chapter 5 Social comparison before, during, and after the competition. In Suls, R. &amp; L. Wheeler (Eds). <i>Social Comparison, Judgement and Behavior</i>, Oxford University Press (pp. 105-142). <b>*Instructions: Only read from the beginning through page 115 (stop at the header "Social Comparison During the Competition") and pick up from the header "Social Comparison After the Competition" on page 130 and read to the end.</b></li> </ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Newby, J. L., &amp; Klein, R. G. (2014). Competitiveness reconceptualized: Psychometric development of the competitiveness orientation measure as a unified measure of trait competitiveness. <i>The Psychological Record</i>, 64(4), 879-895.</li> <li>Kesebir, S., Lee, S. Y., Elliot, A. J., &amp; Pillutla, M. M. (2019). Lay beliefs about competition: Scale development and gender differences. <i>Motivation and Emotion</i>, 43(5), 719-739.</li> </ul>
Mon Feb 14	<p><b>Competitive Environments</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Elliot, A. J., Jury, M., &amp; Murayama, K. (2018). Trait and perceived environmental competitiveness in achievement situations. <i>Journal of Personality</i>, 86(3), 353-367.</li> <li>Eisenkraft, N., Elfenbein, H. A., &amp; Kopelman, S. (2017). We know who likes us, but not who competes against us: Dyadic meta-accuracy among work colleagues. <i>Psychological Science</i>, 28(2), 233-241.</li> <li>Gordils, J., Sommet, N., Elliot, A. J., &amp; Jamieson, J. P. (2020). Racial income inequality, perceptions of competition, and negative interracial outcomes. <i>Social Psychological and Personality Science</i>, 11(1), 74-87.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Mon Feb 21 Presidents Day (NO CLASS)</b></p>	
Mon Feb 28	<p><b>Rankings &amp; Rivalries</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Garcia, S. M., &amp; Tor, A. (2009). The N-effect: More competitors, less competition. <i>Psychological Science</i>, 20(7), 871-877.</li> <li>Garcia, S. M., Tor, A., &amp; Gonzalez, R. (2006). Ranks and rivals: A theory of competition. <i>Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin</i>, 32(7), 970-982.</li> <li>Garcia, S. M., Reese, Z. A., &amp; Tor, A. (2019). Chapter 5 Social comparison before, during, and after the competition. In Suls, R. &amp; L. Wheeler (Eds). <i>Social Comparison, Judgement and Behavior</i>, Oxford University Press (pp. 105-142). <b>*Instructions: Only read from "Social Comparison During the Competition" header on page 115 to the header "Social Comparison After the Competition" on page 130.</b></li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kilduff, G. J., Elfenbein, H. A., &amp; Staw, B. M. (2010). The psychology of rivalry: A relationally dependent analysis of competition. <i>Academy of Management Journal</i>, 53(5), 943-969.</li> <li>• Pike, B. E., Kilduff, G. J., &amp; Galinsky, A. D. (2018). The long shadow of rivalry: Rivalry motivates performance today and tomorrow. <i>Psychological science</i>, 29(5), 804-813.</li> </ul>
<p>Mon Mar 7</p>	<p><b>Audience &amp; Teamwork</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blascovich, J., Mendes, W. B., Hunter, S. B., &amp; Salomon, K. (1999). Social "facilitation" as challenge and threat. <i>Journal of Personality and Social Psychology</i>, 77(1), 68-77.</li> <li>• Morris, R. L., &amp; Kavussanu, M. (2008). Antecedents of approach-avoidance goals in sport. <i>Journal of Sports Sciences</i>, 26(5), 465-476.</li> <li>• Høigaard, R., Boen, F., De Cuyper, B., &amp; Peters, D. M. (2013). Team identification reduces social loafing and promotes social laboring in cycling. <i>International Journal of Applied Sports Sciences</i>, 25(1), 33-40.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Mon Mar 14 Spring Break (NO CLASS)</b></p>	
<p>Mon Mar 21</p>	<p><b>Emotions in Competition</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aviezer, H., Trope, Y., &amp; Todorov, A. (2012). Body cues, not facial expressions, discriminate between intense positive and negative emotions. <i>Science</i>, 338(6111), 1225-1229.</li> <li>• Larsen, J. T., Peter McGraw, A., Mellers, B. A., &amp; Cacioppo, J. T. (2004). The agony of victory and thrill of defeat: Mixed emotional reactions to disappointing wins and relieving losses. <i>Psychological science</i>, 15(5), 325-330.</li> <li>• Richins, M. T., Barreto, M., Karl, A., &amp; Lawrence, N. (2019). Empathic responses are reduced to competitive but not non-competitive outgroups. <i>Social neuroscience</i>, 14(3), 345-358.</li> </ul>

Mon Mar 28	<p><b>Winning &amp; Losing on motivation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Huang, S. C., Etkin, J., &amp; Jin, L. (2017). How winning changes motivation in multiphase competitions. <i>Journal of Personality and Social Psychology</i>, 112(6), 813-837.</li> <li>Buser, T. (2016). The impact of losing in a competition on the willingness to seek further challenges. <i>Management Science</i>, 62(12), 3439-3449.</li> <li>Wadhwa, M., &amp; Kim, J. C. (2015). Can a near win kindle motivation? The impact of nearly winning on motivation for unrelated rewards. <i>Psychological Science</i>, 26(6), 701-708.</li> </ul>
<p>Mon Apr 4</p> <p>Due by midnight: <b>Topic &amp; List of references</b></p>	<p><b>Motivational Downsides to Competition</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reeve, J., &amp; Deci, E. L. (1996). Elements of the competitive situation that affect intrinsic motivation. <i>Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin</i>, 22(1), 24-33.</li> <li>Huang, S. C., Lin, S. C., &amp; Zhang, Y. (2019). When individual goal pursuit turns competitive: How we sabotage and coast. <i>Journal of Personality and Social Psychology</i>, 117(3), 605-620.</li> <li>Kuczka, K. K., &amp; Treasure, D. C. (2005). Self-handicapping in competitive sport: Influence of the motivational climate, self-efficacy, and perceived importance. <i>Psychology of Sport and Exercise</i>, 6(5), 539-550.</li> </ul>
Mon Apr 11	<p><b>Dark side of competition</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Kilduff, G. J., Galinsky, A. D., Gallo, E., &amp; Reade, J. J. (2016). Whatever it takes to win: Rivalry increases unethical behavior. <i>Academy of Management Journal</i>, 59(5), 1508-1534.</li> <li>Charness, G., Masclet, D., &amp; Villeval, M. C. (2014). The dark side of competition for status. <i>Management Science</i>, 60(1), 38-55.</li> <li>Anderson, M. S., Ronning, E. A., De Vries, R., &amp; Martinson, B. C. (2007). The perverse effects of competition on scientists' work and relationships. <i>Science and Engineering Ethics</i>, 13(4), 437-461.</li> </ul>

Mon Apr 18	<p><b>Choking under Pressure</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beilock, S. L., &amp; Carr, T. H. (2001). On the fragility of skilled performance: What governs choking under pressure?. <i>Journal of Experimental Psychology: General</i>, 130(4), 701-725.</li> <li>• Mesagno, C., &amp; Beckmann, J. (2017). Choking under pressure: theoretical models and interventions. <i>Current Opinion in Psychology</i>, 16, 170-175.</li> <li>• Ramirez, G., &amp; Beilock, S. L. (2011). Writing about testing worries boosts exam performance in the classroom. <i>Science</i>, 331(6014), 211-213.</li> </ul>
Mon Apr 25  Due by midnight: <b>Full Draft</b>	<p><b>Stress Reappraisal</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jamieson, J. P., Peters, B. J., Greenwood, E. J., &amp; Altose, A. J. (2016). Reappraising stress arousal improves performance and reduces evaluation anxiety in classroom exam situations. <i>Social Psychological and Personality Science</i>, 7(6), 579-587.</li> <li>• Oveis, C., Gu, Y., Ocampo, J. M., Hangen, E. J., &amp; Jamieson, J. P. (2020). Emotion Regulation Contagion: Stress Reappraisal Promotes Challenge Responses in Teammates. <i>Journal of Experimental Psychology: General</i>. Advance online publication.</li> </ul>
Mon May 2  Due by midnight: <b>Peer Feedback</b>	<p><b>Deliberate practice</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ericsson, K. A. (2006). The influence of experience and deliberate practice on the development of superior expert performance. In K. A. Ericsson, N. Charness, R. R. Hoffman, &amp; P. J. Feltovich (Eds.), <i>The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance</i> (pp. 685-705). New York: Cambridge University Press.</li> <li>• Ericsson, K. A. (2016). Summing up hours of any type of practice versus identifying optimal practice activities: Commentary on Macnamara, Moreau, &amp; Hambrick (2016). <i>Perspectives on Psychological Science</i>, 11(3), 351-354.</li> <li>• Duckworth, A. L., Kirby, T. A., Tsukayama, E., Berstein, H., &amp; Ericsson, K. A. (2011). Deliberate practice spells success: Why grittier competitors triumph at the National Spelling Bee. <i>Social Psychological and Personality Science</i>, 2(2), 174-181.</li> </ul>

<p>Mon May 9</p> <p>Due by midnight: <b>Final Paper</b></p>	<p><b>Last Class — Overview</b></p>
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