



Harvard Extension School
HARVARD DIVISION OF CONTINUING EDUCATION

PSYC E-1515

The Psychology of Competition and Peak Performance

Spring Term 2023

Course Information

CRN: 26318

Section Number: 1

Format: Online (live) web conference

Credit Status: Undergraduate, Graduate, Noncredit

Credit Hours: 4

Class Meetings: Mondays, January 23-May 13, 6:30pm-8:30pm

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 a competitor or audience 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. 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.

Prerequisites: Familiarity with general psychology is helpful.

Instructor Information & Office Hours

Emily Hangen

Preferred Pronouns: she/her/hers



Email: emilyhangen@fas.harvard.edu

Office Hours:

[Office hours sign up link](#)

Please use the link above to sign up for my virtual office hours. I welcome you to come to my office hours! Office hours are an opportunity to ask questions, discuss ideas, or to simply introduce yourself.

Additional Information:

The best way to contact me is via email. Please note that my usual response time is within 24 hours from receiving an email on weekdays but that I do not respond to emails on the weekends.

Section Meetings

In addition to our regular class meetings on Monday evenings, there are required weekly sections. The dates and times of these sections will be determined after the first week of the course and asynchronous participation in these sections will be offered if necessary.

Course Goals / Learning Outcomes

By choosing to fully engage in this course, you will be able to develop the following skills:

Specialized scholarly skills

- **Recall.** Understand and recall contemporary theories and principles related to the psychology of competition.
- **Evaluate.** Enhance your ability to read and evaluate original, scholarly journal articles

Transferrable practical skills

- **Communicate.** Succinctly and clearly convey a topic to others via both verbal and oral methods of communication.

- **Identify and apply.** Identify principles of competition in everyday life and know which evidence-based strategies to use to help you achieve your peak performance.

Mode of Attendance

Class meetings take place over Zoom. Because they involve active participation, discussion, and dialogue, you are expected to attend all class meetings. Please arrive on time. You should attend Zoom meetings with a functional web-camera and microphone, prepared with materials needed, to engage thoughtfully, and with your camera on. You may turn off your camera for occasional interruptions or momentarily for privacy.

You will also need the most up-to-date Zoom client installed on your computer to join class. Please participate from a safe and appropriate environment with appropriate clothing for class. Participating while traveling or in a car is not permitted. In addition, please do not join class via mobile phone or web browser.

Please refer to the Participation Policy section of this syllabus for additional details.

Participation Policy

Attendance is required in all classes and sections. We only have one class and one discussion section each 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 (-2% of your total grade per absence) and more than 2 absences can be grounds for removal from the course.

Please be sure to review the following important information about [Student Policies and Conduct](#).

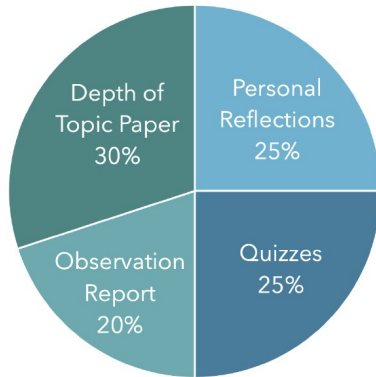
Graduate Credit Requirements

Graduate students will be required to complete the same coursework required of undergraduates, but will be held to a higher standard. Additionally, the length of the Depth of Topic paper length is extended from 6-9 pages (for undergraduates) to 10-15 pages for graduate students.

Grading

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%

Total	100%
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25% Personal Reflections - Due before classes on Mondays

25% Quizzes

20% Observation report - Feedback due Fridays by midnight (individual report dates to be assigned)

30% Depth of Topic paper - Due midnight May 8th

Motivationally-informed course design: As a motivation researcher, I recognize that deep learning and long-term retention of the material comes when students are autonomously motivated and approach oriented. For these reasons, I deliberately designed the coursework and grading scheme using empirically-based strategies to foster long-term retention and motivation. For example, I ensure that every assignment has a meaningful purpose (absolutely no “busy work”) and I openly share this purpose with you. I also utilize 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.

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 (200 words) to each reflection prompt provided. Your personal reflections should be completed before class (however, to get the most out of the weekly discussion sections you are encouraged to complete your reflections beforehand). You only need to complete 10 of the 13 weeks of personal reflections because 3 lowest scoring weekly personal reflections (3 pre-reading and 3 post-reading) will be dropped (you can skip 3 weeks of personal reflections--I recommend skipping the weeks where you are delivering your observation report).

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

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.

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.)

Grading: Your observation report will be graded on content however, your peers will be providing feedback on both your presentation content and delivery. Completion of peer feedback will contribute to your overall observation report grade.

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 3
- Full draft — Due April 24

- Peer feedback — Due May 1
- Final Paper — Due May 8

Grade Definitions

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

Students registered for undergraduate or graduate credit who complete the requirements of a course may earn one of the following grades:

A and A–

Earned by work whose superior quality indicates a full mastery of the subject—and in the case of A, work of extraordinary distinction. There is no grade of A+.

B+, B, and B–

Earned by work that indicates a strong comprehension of the course material, a good command of the skills needed to work with the course materials, and the student's full engagement with the course requirements and activities.

C+, C, and C–

Earned by work that indicates an adequate and satisfactory comprehension of the course material and the skills needed to work with the course materials, and that indicates that the student has met the basic requirements for completing assigned work and participating in class activities.

D+, D, and D–

Earned by work that is unsatisfactory but that indicates some minimal command of the course materials and some minimal participation in class activities that is worthy of course credit.

E

Earned by work that is unsatisfactory and unworthy of course credit. This grade may also be assigned to students who do not submit required work in courses from which they have not officially withdrawn by the withdrawal deadline. Zero or E grades are assigned to students for missing work. These grades are included in the calculation of the final grade.

Academic Integrity Policy

You are responsible for understanding Harvard Extension School policies on [Academic Integrity](#) and how to use sources responsibly. Violations of academic integrity are taken very seriously. Visit [Using Sources Effectively and Responsibly](#) and the [Harvard Guide to Using Sources](#) to review important information on academic citation rules.

Accessibility Services Policy

The Division of Continuing Education (DCE) is committed to providing an accessible academic community. The [Accessibility Services Office \(ASO\)](#) is responsible for providing accommodations to students with disabilities. Students must request accommodations or adjustments through the ASO. Instructors cannot grant accommodation requests without prior ASO approval. It is imperative to be in touch with the ASO as soon as possible to avoid delays in the provision of accommodation.

DCE takes student privacy seriously. Any medical documentation should be provided directly to the ASO if a substantial accommodation is required. If you miss class due to a short-term illness, notify your instructor and/or TA but do not include a doctor's note. Course staff will not request, accept, or review doctor's notes or other medical documentation. For more information, email accessibility@extension.harvard.edu.

Publishing or Distributing Course Materials Policy

Students may not post, publish, sell, or otherwise publicly distribute course materials without the written permission of the course instructor. Such materials include, but are not limited to, the following: lecture notes, lecture slides, video, or audio recordings, assignments, problem sets, examinations, other students' work, and answer keys. Students who sell, post, publish, or distribute course materials without written permission, whether for the purposes of soliciting answers or otherwise, may be subject to disciplinary action, up to and including requirement to withdraw. Further, students may

not make video or audio recordings of class sessions for their own use without written permission of the instructor.

Weekly Class Meeting Schedule

January 23: Class 1 - Welcome!

January 30: Class 2 - How does competing affect performance?

1. Elliot, A. J. (2020). Competition and achievement outcomes: A hierarchical motivational analysis. *Motivation Science*, 6(1), 3-11.
2. Elliot, A. J., & McGregor, H. A. (2001). A 2 x 2 achievement goal framework. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80(3), 501-519.
3. Johnson, D., Johnson, R., & Roseth, C. (2012). Competition and performance: More facts, more understanding? Comment on Murayama and Elliot (2012). *Psychological Bulletin*, 138, 1071-1078.

February 6: Class 3 - Risk-taking and Stress

1. Hangen, E. J., Elliot, A. J., & Jamieson, J. P. (2016). The opposing processes model of competition: Elucidating the effects of competition on risktaking. *Motivation Science*, 2(3), 157-170.
2. Turner, M. J., Jones, M. V., Sheffield, D., & Cross, S. L. (2012). Cardiovascular indices of challenge and threat states predict competitive performance. *International Journal of Psychophysiology*, 86(1), 48-57.

Weekly section - TBD

February 13: Class 4 - Social Comparisons

1. Suls, J., Martin, R., & Wheeler, L. (2002). Social comparison: Why, with whom, and with what effect?. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 11(5), 159-163.
2. Garcia, S. M., Reese, Z. A., & Tor, A. (2019). Chapter 5 Social comparison before, during, and after the competition. In Suls, R. & L. Wheeler (Eds). *Social Comparison, Judgement and Behavior*, Oxford University Press (pp. 105-142).
Reading instructions: Skip the section "Social Comparison During the Competition" (p. 115-130).

3. Mussweiler, T., Rüter, K., & Epstude, K. (2004). The ups and downs of social comparison: Mechanisms of assimilation and contrast. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 87*(6), 832-844.
4. Elliot, A. J., Weissman, D. L., Hangen, E., & Thorstenson, C. A. (2021). Social comparison information, performance expectancy, and performance goal adoption. *Motivation Science, 7*(1), 56-67.

Weekly section - TBD

February 20: NO CLASS (President's Day)

February 27: Class 5 - Trait Competitiveness

1. Saccardo, S., Pietrasz, A., & Gneezy, U. (2018). On the size of the gender difference in competitiveness. *Management Science, 64*(4), 1541-1554.
2. Kesebir, S., Lee, S. Y., Elliot, A. J., & Pillutla, M. M. (2019). Lay beliefs about competition: Scale development and gender differences. *Motivation and Emotion, 43*(5), 719-739.
3. Cassar, A., & Rigdon, M. L. (2021). Prosocial option increases women's entry into competition. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 118*(45), e2111943118.
4. Newby, J. L., & Klein, R. G. (2014). Competitiveness reconceptualized: Psychometric development of the competitiveness orientation measure as a unified measure of trait competitiveness. *The Psychological Record, 64*(4), 879-895.

Weekly section - TBD

March 6: Class 6 - Perceiving competitive environments

1. Elliot, A. J., Jury, M., & Murayama, K. (2018). Trait and perceived environmental competitiveness in achievement situations. *Journal of Personality, 86*(3), 353-367.
2. Weissman, D. L., Elliot, A. J., & Sommet, N. (2022). Dispositional predictors of perceived academic competitiveness: Evidence from multiple countries. *Personality and Individual Differences, 198*, 111801.
3. Gordils, J., Elliot, A. J., & Jamieson, J. P. (2021). The effect of perceived interracial competition on psychological outcomes. *PloS one, 16*(1), e0245671.

Weekly section - TBD

March 13: NO CLASS (Spring Break)

March 20: Class 7 - Competitors & Rivals

1. Garcia, S. M., Reese, Z. A., & Tor, A. (2019). Chapter 5 Social comparison before, during, and after the competition. In Suls, R. & L. Wheeler (Eds). *Social Comparison, Judgement and Behavior*, Oxford University Press (pp. 105-142).
Reading instructions: Read the "Social Comparison During the Competition" (pp. 115-130).
2. Garcia, S. M., & Tor, A. (2009). The N-effect: More competitors, less competition. *Psychological Science*, 20(7), 871-877.
3. Kilduff, G. J., Elfenbein, H. A., & Staw, B. M. (2010). The psychology of rivalry: A relationally dependent analysis of competition. *Academy of Management Journal*, 53(5), 943-969.
4. Pike, B. E., Kilduff, G. J., & Galinsky, A. D. (2018). The long shadow of rivalry: Rivalry motivates performance today and tomorrow. *Psychological Science*, 29(5), 804-813.

Weekly section - TBD

March 27: Class 8 - Rankings

1. Chun, J. S., & Larrick, R. P. (2022). The power of rank information. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 122(6), 983-1003.
2. Garcia, S. M., Tor, A., & Gonzalez, R. (2006). Ranks and rivals: A theory of competition. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32(7), 970-982.
3. Garcia, S. M., & Tor, A. (2007). Rankings, standards, and competition: Task vs. scale comparisons. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 102(1), 95-108.

Weekly section - TBD

April 3: Class 9 - Audience & Teammates (Topic & References due by midnight)

1. Blascovich, J., Mendes, W. B., Hunter, S. B., & Salomon, K. (1999). Social "facilitation" as challenge and threat. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77(1), 68-77.
2. Fu, D., Hase, A., Goolamallee, M., Godwin, G., & Freeman, P. (2021). The effects of support (in) adequacy on self-confidence and performance: Two experimental studies. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*, 10(1), 15-26.
3. Hoigaard, R., Tofteland, I., & Ommundsen, Y. (2006). The effect of team cohesion on social loafing in relay teams. *International Journal of Applied Sport Sciences*, 18(1), 59-73.

Weekly section - TBD

April 10: Class 10 - Emotions in Competition

1. Medvec, V. H., Madey, S. F., & Gilovich, T. (1995). When less is more: counterfactual thinking and satisfaction among Olympic medalists. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(4), 603-610.
2. Aviezer, H., Trope, Y., & Todorov, A. (2012). Body cues, not facial expressions, discriminate between intense positive and negative emotions. *Science*, 338(6111), 1225-1229.
3. Larsen, J. T., Peter McGraw, A., Mellers, B. A., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2004). The agony of victory and thrill of defeat: Mixed emotional reactions to disappointing wins and relieving losses. *Psychological Science*, 15(5), 325-330.

Weekly section - TBD

April 17: Class 11 - Motivational downsides to competition

1. Reeve, J., & Deci, E. L. (1996). Elements of the competitive situation that affect intrinsic motivation. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 22(1), 24-33.
2. Huang, S. C., Lin, S. C., & Zhang, Y. (2019). When individual goal pursuit turns competitive: How we sabotage and coast. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 117(3), 605-620.
3. Kuczka, K. K., & Treasure, D. C. (2005). Self-handicapping in competitive sport: Influence of the motivational climate, self-efficacy, and perceived importance. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 6(5), 539-550.

Weekly section - TBD

April 24: Class 12 - Avoid choking under pressure (Full draft due by midnight)

1. Mesagno, C., & Beckmann, J. (2017). Choking under pressure: theoretical models and interventions. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 16*, 170-175.
2. Low, W. R., Sandercock, G. R. H., Freeman, P., Winter, M. E., Butt, J., & Maynard, I. (2021). Pressure training for performance domains: A meta-analysis. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology, 10*(1), 149-163.
3. Ramirez, G., & Beilock, S. L. (2011). Writing about testing worries boosts exam performance in the classroom. *Science, 331*(6014), 211-213.

Weekly section - TBD

May 1: Class 13 - Entering a challenge state (Peer feedback due by midnight)

1. Jamieson, J. P., Peters, B. J., Greenwood, E. J., & Altose, A. J. (2016). Reappraising stress arousal improves performance and reduces evaluation anxiety in classroom exam situations. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 7*(6), 579-587.
2. Oveis, C., Gu, Y., Ocampo, J. M., Hangen, E. J., & Jamieson, J. P. (2020). Emotion regulation contagion: Stress reappraisal promotes challenge responses in teammates. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 149*(11), 2187-2205.
3. Gu, Y., Ocampo, J. M., Algoe, S. B., & Oveis, C. (2022). Gratitude Expressions Improve Teammates' Cardiovascular Stress Responses. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*. Advance online publication.

Weekly section - TBD

May 8: Class 14 - Deliberate Practice (Depth of Topic paper due by midnight)

1. 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, & P. J. Feltovich (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance* (pp. 685-705). New York: Cambridge University Press.
2. Ericsson, K. A. (2016). Summing up hours of any type of practice versus identifying optimal practice activities: Commentary on Macnamara, Moreau, & Hambrick

(2016). *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 11(3), 351-354.

3. Duckworth, A. L., Kirby, T. A., Tsukayama, E., Berstein, H., & Ericsson, K. A.

(2011). Deliberate practice spells success: Why grittier competitors triumph at the National Spelling Bee. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 2(2), 174-181.