

Course Syllabus: Biomedical Ethics

McCoy College of Science, Mathematics, and Engineering

BIOL 5813 Section 180

Fall 2026; Thursdays 5:30 – 8:20pm

Contact Information

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Course Description

The purpose of this course is to provide students with a basic understanding of some of the complex moral questions affecting society and medicine. No course on ethics can address all issues; rather, the intent is to provide you with a basis upon which to at least begin to frame answers to problems you may encounter in the future. Topics include abortion, end-of-life decision-making, racism in medicine, and other issues.

Note: the course material may make some students uncomfortable.

Textbook & Instructional Materials

Instructional materials will be accessed online outside of D2L. There are many excellent textbooks on biomedical ethics available, but none are required. Lectures will primarily be based off of position papers posted to [The Hastings Center for Bioethics](#) website.

Attendance

Attendance is mandatory. This class only meets once per week and you are expected to be here and to stay for the entire class period. If you miss class, you must provide an explanation for your absence and it must have been for an exceptionally good reason.

Participation

You are expected to have read all assigned materials prior to class and to come ready to discuss them. You may not simply sit on the side and listen; all must participate because all of you have different backgrounds and thus different senses as to how hard questions should or could be answered. **Everyone's opinion/position is welcome in this class.** You may be asked to provide evidence to support your position, but **no one** should be afraid to state their position. We will discuss all possibilities that arise as they arise. You will not be marked down because

your position is different from mine, so **do not** attempt to figure out what I think and repeat my opinion back at me. I want to know what **you** think.

Policy on Late Work

Graduate students are expected to perform at a level higher than that of undergraduates. Thus, no late work of any kind will be accepted for any reason. This is a non-negotiable policy. Failure to prepare your work by the given deadline and/or failure to give a good faith effort will result in a zero for the assignment.

Problems with the Mechanics of Writing

You will be asked to write several papers in this course. If you require help with the basic mechanics of writing, you will need to come see me outside of class or work with another graduate student. I will help you some, but I will not typically edit student work at the sentence level beyond a paragraph or two to show you what to do. Final copies of assignments that are turned in with basic writing problems will be graded harshly and will result in poor grades in the class.

General Formatting Requirements

All assignments must be typed using the following formatting: 12pt Times New Roman font, double-spaced, 1-inch margins all the way around, page numbers on all pages. All assignments are to include a suitably descriptive title, your name, the date, and the assignment title/category. **Your thesis statement (the argument that you are going to attempt to convince me of in your writing) should always be made bold-faced and underlined so that I can find it.** Note: this class is essentially a philosophy class; thus, your writing will be that of the humanities, not science, which is why each paper you write has to have a central thesis statement.

Plagiarism

All forms of plagiarism are to be consciously and methodically avoided at all costs (this is, after all, a class on ETHICS). **Plagiarism is NEVER acceptable and there is no such thing as 'accidental' plagiarism.** Any assignment submitted in this class that is found to contain any form of plagiarism, no matter how minor an infraction, will receive a zero for a grade and you will receive no participation credit for that assignment. A second infraction will earn you an "F" in the course.

Students are prohibited from using generative AI for all assignments. Note: the use of grammar checkers, if they substantially rewrite your work, become generative in nature and thus grammar checkers should be used sparingly or not at all. If you use a grammar checker, you should put that in a footnote so that I am aware you are using AI.

Grading

Grades will be assessed as shown in Table 1 below. Overall grades for the course will be determined by using straight percentages: A = 90-100%; B = 80-89%; C = 70-79%; D = 60-69%; F is anything below 60. Attendance and participation are demerit modifiers (you lose points when you miss class and/or fail to participate). Most of your grade will be assessed using written responses to case studies.

Table 1: Points allocated to each assignment

Assignments	Percent of Grade
Case Studies (multiple; of my choosing)	30%
Class Presentation of your Major Paper	10%
Formal Term Paper	50%
Attendance	5%
Participation	5%
Total Percentage	100%

How to Present a Case Study

Over the course of the semester, you will be asked to analyze several case studies. Below are the general parts that must be included for each case study presented in this class.

1. Summarize the case: provide a short summary of the case that is NOT simply you re-typing the case as it is actually given to you.
2. Define and identify the ethical dilemma: what is the core issue?
3. Clarify the case:
 - a. Who are the stakeholders (all sides) and is the core ethical dilemma the same or different for each stakeholder?
 - b. What are the medical issues in general (diagnosis, prognosis, treatment options)?
 - c. What are the patient and family preferences? If these are not indicated (advanced directive, for example), then state this.
 - d. Quality of life: is there any indication of how the patient feels about their quality of life or other indications as to what this is?
 - e. Note: In some cases, you will not know a lot of this (i.e., with a fetus), so you will need to tailor your case study to the case at hand.
4. Context: social context, family dynamics, cultural context, religious background, financial situation, etc.; anything that could influence the resolution of the case should be discussed.
5. Analyze and balance the values involved using the 4 principles of bioethics as presented in the first reading assignment (Autonomy, Beneficence, Non-Maleficence, and Justice). Which of the 4 is/are the most important? Do they conflict? Do the important principles differ based on stakeholder? What should be the priorities? What choices are there to resolving the case?

6. Make a recommendation:
 - a. You must clearly state what you would do if you had to decide; what you would recommend if you had to make a recommendation.
 - b. Link your choices to each stakeholder.
 - c. If a decision was already rendered for this case, analyze it: do you agree or disagree? Should the resolution have included ideas that it did not?
 - d. This is an important element in your case study so you can't be vague and you can't be wishy-washy about your decisions. You do not need a medical degree to know what you think is right or wrong in these cases, but you do need to be able to explain to me why you think something is right or wrong. Remember, this is not about you, this is about doing what is best for the patient.
7. Draw final conclusions.
 - a. Is there meaning for similar cases or is your recommendation really only applicable here?
 - b. How good a solution was reached (either by you or in reality)? Is there any hope of improving such decisions?
 - c. Should the law be changed to reflect your recommendations?
 - d. Draw any other conclusions you can.
8. There is no set length requirement for your analyses so long as you address the points above and bolster your work with outside references (i.e., do not simply give me an opinion paper unless you are asked for one).

Formal Term Paper

The formal term paper is essentially a large case study of your choosing. You will pick a topic, research it, write about it, and present it to the class. Your topic will need to be somewhat specific. For example, do not just pick "abortion"; rather, choose something specific, such as "the permissibility of abortion in cases of severe fetal anomaly". A topic that is too broad will be overwhelming. The following are the requirements for the term paper.

1. You must pick your topic and get it approved by me no later than XXXX date.
2. Your paper must contain between 5000 and 6000 words (roughly 25 pages) excluding footnotes and references.
3. Your paper must contain a minimum of 15 references from the literature. These 15 references may NOT include textbooks, online ebooks, or newspapers UNLESS these sources contain important resource material you cannot find elsewhere. Books that are specifically about your topic may be used, and these are preferred over textbooks. References may be MLA, APA, or AMA. Just be consistent. ALL REFERENCES MUST BE CITED IN THE TEXT WHERE THEY ARE USED AND APPEAR IN A BIBLIOGRAPHY AT THE END OF THE PAPER.
4. Formatting: 12-point Times New Roman, double spaced, 1-inch margins, page numbers. You should roughly have the same parts to the formal term paper as you have for your small case studies.
5. Grading of the final paper will be as follows:

- a. Quality of your research: How complete is your examination of the relevant ethical/medical/legal sources? How well have you found information necessary to support your thesis?
 - b. Quality of your analysis: How well have you structured your argument to support your thesis? Is your evidence adequate to support your argument?
 - c. Quality of your writing: Is your thesis statement clear? Is your paper organized to support your thesis? Is your paper coherent/well written? Is it free of errors? Are the citations appropriate and correct? Is it clear you put in effort?
6. Due Dates:
- a. Preferred Due Date: when you present your paper to the class.
 - b. Hard Due Date: Monday, December 7, 2026 by 5:00pm.

Presentation of the Term Paper

You will present your research to the class. Each student will have a maximum of 30 minutes total. This total time includes both your talk and answering questions, so you cannot take all 30 minutes to talk. Plan for a 20 minute talk to allow for 10 minutes of questions. You need to present your topic, your thesis statement, your argument and evidence, and give a clear indication of why your topic matters to everyone in the room. You are NOT required to do PowerPoint, but if you do not do a PowerPoint, then you will need to prepare a single sheet handout for the class with an outline of your topic, thesis, argument, and evidence.

***Notice:** Changes in the course syllabus, procedure, assignments, and schedule may be made at the discretion of the instructor.

Course Schedule:

Unless otherwise noted, all reading materials may be found at The Hastings Center for Bioethics website. In the event the links do not work, go to the website and scroll towards the bottom until you come to the Bioethics Briefings header. Click at the bottom of the short list to expand this section to the full list of topics and then choose the appropriate topic for the class meeting.

Date	Readings
Aug 27	Course Introduction
Sept 3	Principles of Clinical Ethics (paper may be downloaded through pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7923912)
Sept 10	Abortion
Sept 17	Aging
Sept 24	AI in Healthcare
Oct 1	Clinical Trials
Oct 8	End-of-Life Care
Oct 15	Enhancing Humans
Oct 22	Law Enforcement & Genetic Data
Oct 29	Medical Aid-in-Dying
Nov 5	Organ Transplantation
Nov 12	Pandemics: The Ethics of Mandatory and Voluntary Interventions
Nov 19	Racism and Health Equity
Nov 26	Thanksgiving Holiday
Dec 3	Student Presentations 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
Dec 7	Absolute last day to turn in Term Papers (by 5:00pm)