

14.73: The Challenge of World Poverty

Syllabus Fall 2020

Frank Schilbach (MIT)

Mon/Wed 1:00 pm to 2:30 pm

1 Course Description

- Do you want to be prepared to tackle global poverty?
- Do you want a hands-on class with real-world case studies every week?
- Do you want to get to know J-PAL, one of MIT's leading research labs?
- Do you want to satisfy your CI-H requirement?
- Do you want to master the art of effective oral and written presentations?

If so, 14.73 Challenges of World Poverty is exactly the right class for you. This course is designed for those who are interested in the challenges posed by massive and persistent world poverty, and are hopeful that economists might have something useful to say about this challenge.

In the comfort of your dorm room or home, you will listen to video lectures taught by Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, based on their award-winning book [Poor Economics](#). In class, you will apply your minds, in small teams, to solve real-world cases, present them to your peers, and discuss their solutions. Even better, you will write and revise several essays and satisfy your CI-H requirement!

2 Administration

- **Instructor**

Frank Schilbach (fschilb@mit.edu, E52-560)

Office hours by appointment. Please sign up [HERE](#).

- **Teaching assistants**

Lisa Ho (lisayz@mit.edu)

Hannah Ruebeck (hruebeck@mit.edu)

- **Recitations**

Recitation 1: Friday 1:00-2:00pm ET on [Zoom](#) (Hannah)

Recitation 2: Friday 2:00-3:00pm ET on [Zoom](#) (Lisa)

- **Writing advisor**

Caroline Beimford (beimford@mit.edu)

Office hours by appointment.

- **Virtual classroom**
All class meetings on Mondays and Wednesdays will take place on Zoom. Recitations and TA office hours will also take place at the same Zoom link. <https://mit.zoom.us/j/92254060259>
- **Course website** (written assignments, readings, etc.)
<https://canvas.mit.edu/courses/3483>
- **14.73x website** (for online lectures)
https://lms.mitx.mit.edu/courses/course-v1:MITx+14.73r_5+2020_Fall/course/
- **Piazza website** (for Q&A and discussions)
www.piazza.com/mit/fall2020/1473

3 (No) Prerequisites

There are no prerequisites! This class should be an excellent introduction to economics: you will see immediately how it can help us solve some of the world's most important problems. Fresh(wo)men, students from other fields, and economists are welcome. However, attending class and completing the online viewing of lectures is a requirement.

4 Organization of this Course

This course has a somewhat unorthodox structure, but one that we think offers an exciting and novel approach to learning the course material. It is organized around a series of core topics in Development Economics: The Role of Evidence, Food, Health, Education, Inside the Family, Risk and Insurance, Credit and Microfinance, Savings, Entrepreneurship, and Political Economy. These topics are covered one week at a time through a combination of reading material, online video lectures, online assignments, in-class student presentations/discussions, and essay writing instead of traditional in-class lectures.

4.1 Reading materials

The course closely follows the book Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty by Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo (book chapters are posted on 14.73x).

As we proceed through each topic, it will be assumed that you have read the corresponding chapter of *Poor Economics* before class. Everything else will be much easier for you if you have. In addition, some topics will include supplemental reading posted on the course website, also to be completed beforehand.

4.2 Online video lectures

At 8 am ET on Monday *the week before* we cover the relevant topic in class, we will release two video lectures relevant to the topic on the online site for the class. Each video lecture is sub-divided into short segments (8-10 minutes on average), and you will be invited to complete quick 'finger exercises' after each segment. These exercises are designed to probe basic comprehension of the video content and you are strongly encouraged to complete them. You'll learn from it, you'll be able to check your understanding and move on with confidence, and we will learn which concepts are harder than others, but the answers you give will not contribute to your grade in 14.73.

4.3 Online assignments

In addition to the finger exercises, there are also ‘homework exercises’ on 14.73x. There is one set of homework exercises per topic from ‘Food’ onward making eight in total. These are mandatory for 14.73 and will contribute to your final grade, as described below. All the homework exercises are weighted equally for the course—do not pay any attention to the number of points indicated on the 14.73x site.

The purpose of these homework exercises is to check that you have achieved sufficient understanding of the material in *Poor Economics* and the online video lectures; both will be necessary for success on the homework exercises. Online assignments are due at 8pm ET the day before the class with presentations on the same topic. Late assignments will not be accepted or graded.

4.4 In-class student presentations

The central part of the classes on Monday and Wednesday will be student presentations of case studies. About half of the classes will be presentation classes, which will be organized around a presentation by student teams of three to four students each. Teams of students will be randomly assigned at the beginning of each presentation class period.

The remaining classes will be ‘traditional’ lecture classes, in which we will discuss additional topics. We will also have a movie class, a guest lecture by JPAL on writing policy briefs, and several other guest lectures, including one by Nobel Laureate Esther Duflo.

Important: If you cannot attend class and recitation regularly and arrive on time every time, you should not take this class. Participation requires attendance and timeliness, as group work will start promptly at 1:05 pm ET.

In-class student presentations will work as follows.

- (1) Each presentation will center on a particular ‘case study’ that relates to the topic of study for the week. Prior to this presentation class, we will distribute (on the course website by Thursday morning) a set of background readings related to the case study. It is essential that you read these materials before class. In the recitation prior to the class, the TA will generally help you with some background and tools that will help you to navigate the case.
- (2) At the start of each class, the professor will introduce the topic and then hand out a series of questions related to the case study.
- (3) Each presentation team will then have about 45 minutes to prepare a 5-to-7-minute presentation (with slides) on the case study questions.
- (4) Since you won’t know the case study questions beforehand, you will need to arrive to class promptly and be willing to work interactively and intensively with your team members to complete your presentation during the class time.
- (5) The teaching staff will provide guidance and will be available to answer questions during this time. In Section 5.1 below we describe the characteristics of a successful presentation.
- (6) At the end of the 45 minutes, all teams will email their presentations to the TA. Then one of the teams will be chosen randomly to present. While only one team will be actually delivering their presentation, all teams’ presentation slides will be graded after the class.
- (7) After the presentation, there will be a group discussion, moderated by the professor. One goal of this class is for you to learn the art of constructive criticism from these exchanges.

(8) Finally, the class will conclude with a short summary and overview from the professor.

4.5 Written assignments

Throughout the term, you will be asked to write two essays (1,500 words each) and a policy brief (2,000 words). You will be supported by the professors, the TA, and an MIT specialist writing advisor!

4.5.1 Essays

Essays will be write-ups related to the cases discussed in class. For example, if in the case we are asking you to advise a government on a topic, the essay will be to write a memo on this topic. There will be some variety on the style of essays.

You will have flexibility in choosing the cases that you wish to summarize:

- **Essay 1 (due Oct 18, 8 pm ET):** must be based on either case 1 or 2.
- **Essay 2 (due Nov 2, 8 pm ET):** must be based on either case 3, 4, 5, or 6.

You will meet (online) with your writing advisor to receive feedback on your essay drafts. Your assigned writing advisor will be in touch with you to schedule a meeting. Please submit a draft of your essay (via the MIT Canvas website) before the deadline that corresponds to the case that you choose to write about.

A first draft of your first essay is due on Oct 4 at 8 pm ET. This draft essay will not be graded. However, you are required to meet individually with your writing advisor to receive feedback. Based on this feedback, you will revise your draft and submit it by Oct 18 at 8 pm.

4.5.2 Policy brief

In addition to the essays, you will be asked to write a **policy brief** along the lines of actual policy briefs published by JPAL [HERE](#)). To adequately prepare you for this task, Claire Walsh, Associate Director of Policy at J-PAL Global at MIT, will give a guest lecture on policy briefs and how to write them.

A first draft of your policy brief is due on November 18 at 8 pm ET. This draft will be graded. You will then revise and resubmit it on December 4 at 8 pm ET for a final grade using detailed feedback on the first version of your essay. Both grades will count towards your final grade, as described below.

4.6 Recitations

Recitations are an essential part of this class – remember that this is a CI-H class. To be able to take this class, you must be available during one of the recitation time slots and attend recitation regularly. Recitation will cover:

- Tips from writing advisor and graduate students on presentation and writing;
- Re-cap of the concepts and materials covered in the previous week during online lectures and the case study; and
- Background on the case to be covered in the following week.

4.7 Getting help outside of class.

If you have questions regarding the class material or problem sets, there are four ways to get help:

- (i) Use the online forum ([Piazza](#)). We will have threaded discussions (monitored by the TAs and professor) for all class-related topics, which should allow you to get a timely, high-quality answer to most of your questions.
- (ii) Drop in during TA office hours (see info above).
- (iii) Go to the professors' office hours (see info above).
- (iv) Ask questions during recitation and in class.

Please avoid sending us your class-related questions by email (except for personal class-related matters). The discussion forum and office hours are more efficient ways for us to communicate with you, and your forum questions and responses will benefit many of your classmates. Note that you can also ask questions on Piazza anonymously.

4.8 Schedule of classes and readings

We will proceed as described in the detailed schedule below. You should complete the mandatory 14.73x lectures and *Poor Economics* chapters prior to any case-study class.

- September 2: **Introduction – What is this Class About?**
 - All students meet on Zoom <https://mit.zoom.us/j/92254060259>
- September 7: **No class (Labor Day)**
- September 9: **Case 1: What Does it Mean to be Poor?**
 - Read Poor Economics: Chapter 1 before class.
 - See Canvas Module for additional readings
- September 14: **How to Work Collaboratively Online**
- September 16: **Case 2: The Role of Evidence**
 - Watch Esther Duflo's TED Talk "[Social Experiments to Fight Poverty](#)" before class.
 - See Canvas Module for additional readings
- September 21: **Case 3: Food**
 - Read Poor Economics: Chapter 2 before class.
 - See Canvas Module for additional readings
- September 23: **How to Write an Essay**
 - Essay #1 assigned.
- September 28: **Case 4: Health**
 - Read Poor Economics: Chapter 3 before class.

- See Canvas Module for additional readings
- September 30: More on health: **The Name of the Disease (movie!)**
 - First draft of Essay #1 due Sunday, 10/4 at 8pm ET
- October 5: **Case 5: Education**
 - Read Poor Economics: Chapter 4 before class.
 - See Canvas Module for additional readings
- October 7: **The Psychological Lives of the Poor (Lecture by Frank)**
- October 13: **Case 6: Risk and Insurance**
 - NO CLASS on Monday 10/12; Tuesday 10/13 is a Monday schedule
 - Read Poor Economics: Chapter 6 before class.
 - See Canvas Module for additional readings
- October 14: **Health Insurance in the US and JPAL North America**
 - Guest lecture by Prof. Amy Finkelstein
 - (Revised) first essay due on Sunday 10/18 at 8pm ET
- October 19: **Becoming A Social Entrepreneur**
 - Guest lecture by Noam Angrist, 14.73 Alumnus and Co-Founder of the NGO [Younglove](#)
 - Essay #2 assigned
- October 21: **Using Evidence to Give More Effectively**
 - Guest lecture by Alicia Weng, MIT Economics Alumna, now working at [GiveWell](#)
- October 26: **Case 7: Credit**
 - Read Poor Economics: Chapter 7 before class.
 - See Canvas Module for additional readings
- October 28: **TBD**
- November 2: **How Does Research Affect Policy?**
 - Guest lecture by Claire Walsh, Associate Director of Policy at J-PAL Global
 - Essay #2 due at 8pm ET
 - Policy brief assigned
- November 4: **How to Write a Policy Brief**
- November 9: **Case 8: Savings**
 - Read Poor Economics: Chapter 8 before class.

- See Canvas Module for additional readings
- No class on November 11 (Veterans Day)!
- November 16: **Case 9: Entrepreneurship**
 - Read Poor Economics: Chapter 9 before class.
 - See Canvas Module for additional readings
- November 18: **Firms, Entrepreneurship, and Trade**
 - Guest lecture by Prof. David Atkin
 - First draft of policy brief due at 8pm ET
- Week of November 23: **No Class - Thanksgiving break**
 - Policy brief returned with comments
- November 30: **Case 10: Political Economy**
 - Read Poor Economics: Chapter 10 before class.
 - See Canvas Module for additional readings
- December 2: **More on Political Economy**
 - Guest lecture by Prof. Ben Olken
 - Final version of policy brief due on Dec 4 by 8pm ET
- December 7: **The Origins of J-PAL**
 - Guest lecture by Prof. Esther Duflo
- December 9: **Wrap-Up Lecture (Frank)**
- Finals Week: **Final exam**
 - The date of the final exam will be determined by the MIT Registrar’s Office later in the semester. We will let you know as soon as we learn about the date.

4.9 Schedule of assignment

All assignments are due at 8:00 pm ET sharp. Remember that late submissions will NOT be accepted (for any of the assignments).

Due Date	Assignment
September 20	Online assignment on Chapter 'Food'
September 27	Online assignment on Chapter 'Health'
October 4	Draft of first essay due (based on either case 1 or 2)
October 4	Online assignment on Chapter 'Education'
October 12	Online assignment on Chapter 'Risk and Insurance'
October 18	Revised first essay due (based on either case 1 or 2)
October 25	Online assignment on Chapter 'Credit'
November 2	Second essay due (based on either case 3, 4, 5, or 6)
November 8	Online assignment on Chapter 'Savings'
November 15	Online assignment on Chapter 'Entrepreneurship'
November 18	First draft of Policy Brief due
November 29	Online assignment on Chapter 'Institutions'
December 4	Final version of Policy Brief due
December 14-18	Final exam period; date of final exam TBD

5 Grading

The final grade will be scored out of 130 points based on the following six components:

5.1 In-class student presentations (35 points)

All presentation slide decks (not just those randomly selected to be delivered orally) will be graded. Therefore, slides should include all relevant information from the presentation. All members of a group will receive the same grade. Students who were absent from class on the given day will receive a zero score on that presentation.

Only the best 7 out of 10 presentation grades will count towards your final score—among other motives, we hope that this will allow students to make allowances for unavoidable illnesses or other absences.

The key to success on these presentation grades is to (i) address the questions posed in the case study, (ii) defend your position with clear and relevant logic, and (iii) relate your ideas to the required reading and online lecture videos.

5.2 Written assignments (36 points)

You will write two essays (1,500 words each) and one policy brief (2,000 words). While you can discuss the content of these assignments with your classmates, you will need to work on them individually. You will receive feedback on the policy brief and you will submit a revised version. Each of the two essays will be worth 9 points, and the policy brief will be worth 18 points (6 for the first submission, 12 for the revised version).

Successful essays will have the same attributes of successful presentations: (i) answers relevant to the question asked, (ii) clear exposition and logic, and (iii) connection with material covered in the course.

5.3 Online assignments (18 points)

The online homework exercises will be due at 8 pm on the Sunday before a topic is covered, as indicated in the schedule above. For example, the ‘Food’ topic is covered in class presentations starting starting on Monday, September 21st, so the ‘Food’ homework exercise is due on Sunday, September 20th, at 8 pm.

The deadlines indicated on the schedule above are hard deadlines. That is, late submissions will neither be accepted nor graded and each topic’s exercise will be taken down from 14.73x at the time of the deadline.

There are 8 homework exercises, and only your best 6 of these will count toward your final grade. Unfinished questions will receive a grade of zero without exceptions. All homework exercises carry the same weight; do not pay any attention to the number of points on the 14.73x site.

5.4 End-term exam (23 points)

The final exam—up to 3 hours in length, though we expect it to take less than that—will consist of one section on the material covered in the readings and online lectures and one section with a case study related to various topics covered throughout the term. While the exam will be in written form, the same attributes that contribute to high presentation and essay grades will be rewarded on this exam. The final exam will take place during the final-exam period as determined by the MIT registrar later in the semester.

5.5 In-class participation (18 points)

The last component of your final grade in this course is in-class participation, including attendance in lectures and recitation. We intend to reward students who deliver presentations well (so take turns equally within your group), those who deliver constructive and relevant comments as the first responder, and students who contribute helpfully and usefully to the overall discussion. Incomplete attendance will hurt your participation score.

5.6 Collaboration between students

You are allowed to discuss both the essays and the policy brief with your classmates. However, you should submit your own individual copy of these written assignments. Each of you should work on your own written assignments, which need to be distinct from the other students' submission. You are allowed to watch and discuss the online videos and complete the finger exercises (non-graded) with your classmates. However, you should complete the online (graded) assignments individually.

6 Check

Great, you are still reading! To confirm that you indeed read the syllabus, please email a picture of a sheep to Prof. Schilbach (fschilb@mit.edu) with the subject line "14.73 sheep confirmation".

7 Other MIT Resources

The Department of Economics values an inclusive environment. If you need a disability accommodation to access this course, please communicate with us early in the semester. If you have your accommodation letter, please meet with the faculty so that we can understand your needs and implement your approved accommodations. If you have not yet been approved for accommodations, please contact Student Disability Services at sds-all@mit.edu to learn about their procedures. We encourage you to do so early in the term to allow sufficient time for implementation of services/accommodations that you may need.

The Writing and Communication Center offers free one-on-one professional advice from communication experts with advanced degrees and publishing experience. The WCC can help you further develop your oral communication skills and learn about all types of academic and professional writing. You can learn more about the WCC consultations at <http://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center> and register with the online scheduler to make appointments through <https://mit.mywconline.com>. Please note that the WCC hours are offered on Monday to Friday, 9 am to 6 pm, and fill up fast.