



TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY SAN ANTONIO

Professor: Sarah Harper, Ph.D., Assistant Professor
Preferred Titles: Dr. Harper; Professor Harper
Email: sarah.harper@tamusa.edu
Office Hours: By appointment in Zoom/Teams

CRIM5309 Courts & Sentencing
Fall 2026, Section 600
3 Credit Hours
Online course via Blackboard

Required Text:

No textbook is assigned for this course. Readings will be provided directly in Blackboard or available through the TAMUSA library and databases.

Course Description

This course provides an examination of the role of courts in the creation and maintenance of law, structure of courts and court processes, functioning and impact of the courtroom work group, nature and purpose of sentencing, and impact of changes in sentencing policy. Social science evidence regarding courts and sentencing will be critically analyzed. U.S. Supreme Court jurisprudence governing sentencing will also be discussed.

Student Learning Objectives & Outcomes

Upon successful completion of this seminar, students will be able to:

1. **Critically Evaluate:** Deconstruct the theoretical paradigms and socio-legal frameworks that explain courtroom decision-making and discretionary practices.
2. **Methodologically Analyze:** Critique the research designs, sampling strategies, and analytical models used in empirical studies of court processes.
3. **Synthesize Systemic Evidence:** Appraise multidimensional perspectives across legal doctrines, institutional constraints, and structural barriers affecting access to justice.
4. **Collaboratively Appraise:** Execute collaborative peer instruction through specialized analytical lenses (Innovator, Summary Lead, Theoretician, Methodologist, Practitioner) using primary source annotations and asynchronous presentations.
5. **Formulate Applied Solutions:** Design an evidence-based policy or program proposal that addresses systemic court challenges, addresses limitations of previous interventions, and incorporates constituent education strategies.

Course Structure & Grading

Graduate education requires moving beyond passive reading into active interrogation and application. In this online asynchronous seminar, learning is driven through authentic, performance-based scholarship.

- **Intro & Reflection Bookends (50 pts):** Two forms (25 points each) at the start and end of the semester to confirm attendance, assess baseline interests, and practice

metacognition.

- **Weekly Progress Check-Ins (130 pts):** Brief forms (10 points each) due weekly. These allow you to reflect on your pacing, identify conceptual bottlenecks, and communicate directly with the professor. Built-in “freebies” if you forget to do a few.
- **Course Exploration & Tool/Resource Overview (50 points):** The first two weeks’ discussion is an overview and opportunity to become familiar with course materials, tools, and resources.
- **Deep Reading Annotations & Margin Notes (300 pts):** Over six modules (50 points each), you are responsible for reading assigned peer-reviewed articles and uploading substantive annotations using the integrated Perusall tool. Annotations must reflect a deep "conversation with the text" rather than passive highlighting.
- **Jigsaw Module Engagements (300 pts):** Over six modules (50 points each), you will rotate through specialized collaborative roles to deconstruct literature from distinct angles. You will post your insights (via video or detailed commentary depending on the prompt) to teach your peers from the perspective of an *Innovator*, *Summary Lead*, *Theoretician*, *Methodologist*, or *Practitioner*.
 - **The Summary Lead:** Posts a 7–9 minute synthesized overview video of all assigned readings by **Sunday (Week I)**. Connects themes, highlights compelling findings, and poses guiding questions.
 - **The Theoretician:** Posts a video and detailed commentary by **Wednesday (Week II)** analyzing the conceptual frameworks, sociological/legal paradigms, and theoretical validity.
 - **The Methodologist:** Posts a video and detailed commentary by **Wednesday (Week II)** auditing the data, measurement strategies, sample constraints, and "what if" factors.
 - **The Practitioner:** Posts a video and detailed commentary by **Wednesday (Week II)** translating empirical findings into operational realities, courtroom feasibility, and policy reform.
 - **The Innovator:** Posts a video or commentary by **Wednesday (Week II)** introducing a recent (last 3–5 years) empirical study, dataset, or reform model from library databases that addresses gaps or limitations identified in the assigned texts.
 - **Group Synthesis & Branching Dialogue:** All members exchange follow-up video or typed responses through **Sunday (Week II)**, discussing cross-track perspectives.
- **Final Applied Policy/Program Proposal (200 pts):** A comprehensive, multi-stage capstone project where you will design and propose a solution to a critical issue within the courts/sentencing ecosystem. Rather than simply writing a traditional research paper

on sentencing, your final project requires you to step into the role of a policy innovator. You will select an issue/topic covered during the semester and propose a specific policy, administrative rule, or courtroom program to address it. Your proposal must comprehensively address the following in a virtual and written presentation:

- Examine the current existing laws, rules, and research findings surrounding the issue. Why is this issue highly salient right now?
- Analyze the limitations of past or existing programs/policies. Where did they fail, face opposition, or yield unintended consequences? How does your proposal directly address these gaps?
- Articulate a clear, evidence-based argument for why courtroom practitioners (judges, prosecutors, defense) should support your proposal.
- Design a strategy to educate the public and local constituents about the importance and worthiness of supporting your reform.

Students are strongly encouraged to utilize the USC Research Proposal Guide, Dr. Joseph Hammer's Research Skills Development Resources, and Dr. Ashley Rubin's academic guides (linked in Blackboard) to structure their methodologies and literature reviews.

Grading Scale:

A: 90.0% – 100% (900 – 1000 points)

B: 80.0% – 89.9% (800 – 899 points)

C: 70.0% – 79.9% (700 – 799 points)

D: 60.0% – 69.9% (600 – 699 points)

F: < 60.0% (0 – 599 points)

Extra Credit

They will arise on occasion and will be given adequate notice for completion.

Course Specific Policies

Attendance, Late or Missed Assessments:

Attendance will be taken after Census Day (which is required by university policy) using the check-in forms in each module, but this is an online course that allows for flexibility in your day-to-day schedule. However, students will NOT earn credit for an exam, quiz, or assignment that was missed if you have not been in contact with the professor. In these cases, the student SHOULD notify the professor for advance approval or as early as possible so arrangements can be made. This is an online course, so you are expected to log in at least three times weekly for the accelerated semester.

Contact the professor **within two (2) business days** after the deadline to be considered for an alternative assignment. NO make-ups will be given for missing an activity due to lack of preparation or awareness of the assignment. Make-up exams may be fill-in-the-blank and essay, must be taken within one week of the original exam date, and will not be given before the original exam. You have advance notice of the deadlines and your classmates will depend on prompt submission for their discussion.

If you are not finished with your content at the deadline, you should send me an email with the work you have done thus far on the assignment, the amount of time you still need to complete it, and your plan for completing it in that timeframe.

Professionalism and Respect

1. I expect you to treat me, this course, and your classmates with respect. We are in a learning community together, and that requires trust in one another that we will treat one another with decency, put forth effort, and make the most of the semester.
2. There will be weekly readings, assignments, and content for which I am putting in the time and effort to create, grade, and provide feedback. In return, I ask that you take the assignments and readings seriously to understand the course material. I have recorded lecture materials for your use, and I expect you to use it. I will not accept an excuse about missing assignments or not understanding what is being asked of you if I notice that you have not checked the syllabus and course content before contacting me. This information is all available to you in Blackboard.
3. Respect each other. Everyone should be comfortable sharing their ideas or perspectives directly related to the course. It is important to have reputable source information to support your perspective and why you came to that conclusion.
4. I realize this course requires a certain awareness of the online learning system Blackboard; however, you are an adult learner and thus capable of locating the guides and resources available via TAMUSA to help you use email, Blackboard, Word, and other software. If you have difficulty accessing the internet at some point, please notify me ASAP. The university has resources like laptops you can check out/borrow, and it is likely your local library also offers similar services.
5. Some students will find this class easy, others may struggle. If you put forth the effort and ask for help, I will bend over backwards to assist. It is ultimately up to you.

Technology

Students can email me directly or contact me through the class group chats for questions that pertain to all students (i.e. not your grades). Blackboard messages tend to get eaten by Outlook, so I do not recommend that for messages. I ask that your emails are formatted professionally since this is a habit that should be developed before you hit the job market. Dr. or Professor Harper are both acceptable honorifics. Please: sign your emails!

Blackboard will be the primary platform for finding all assignments, grades, and the most up-to-date syllabus. If you need help learning how to perform various tasks related to this course or

other courses being offered in Blackboard, consult the Blackboard help guides. You may also contact TAMUSA's ITS department.

Class Notes and Tape Recordings

Any student who wishes to save recorded class lectures MUST first get permission. *No student has permission to sell or distribute any recording or material made in the course. This includes Coursera or similar course material exchanges online.*

Emergency-Related Matters

I realize that we may have our attention in every direction besides school. I strongly encourage you to be in regular contact with me if you foresee any issues with things that affect your ability to work in this course as you need to. I have done what I can to ensure that you can access course materials offline where possible (recordings, namely) and do work offline.

Modifications to Course Schedule

While care and effort have been taken to delineate the lectures and assignments throughout the semester, I reserve the right to modify the syllabus and course schedule as needed. Such modifications can occur at any time and as many times during the semester as deemed necessary.

University Policies

IMPORTANT POLICIES AND RESOURCES

University Email Policy and Course Communications: All correspondence between professors and students must occur via university email accounts. You must have your Jaguar email account ready and working. If it is not working, contact the help desk at helpdesk@tamusa.edu or at 210-784-HELP (4357). If you don't hear back within 48 hours, contact them again. They have many requests during the first part of the semester, so you may need to follow up with them.

Academic Accommodations for Individuals with Disabilities: Texas A&M University-San Antonio is committed to providing all students with reasonable access to learning opportunities and accommodations in accordance with The Americans with Disabilities Act, as amended, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. If you experience barriers to your education due to a disability or think you may have a disability, Disability Support Services is located in the Central Academic Building, Suite 210. You can also contact us via phone at (210) 784-1335, visit us at the [website](#) or email us at dss@tamusa.edu. All students are encouraged to discuss their academic accommodation with Disability Support Services and their instructors as soon as possible.

Academic Learning Center: All currently enrolled students at Texas A&M University-San Antonio can utilize the Academic Learning Center for subject-area tutoring. The Academic Learning Center provides free course-based tutoring to all currently enrolled students at Texas A&M University-San Antonio. Students wishing to work with a tutor can make appointments through the Brainfuse online tutoring platform. Brainfuse can be accessed in the *Tools* section of Blackboard. You can contact the Academic Learning Center by emailing tutoring@tamusa.edu, calling (210) 784-1307, or visiting the Central Academic Building, room 202. Online tutoring is also available for after hours and weekend assistance.

While tutoring hours may change based on tutor schedules and availability, the current tutoring hours for MATH in the ALC are as follows:

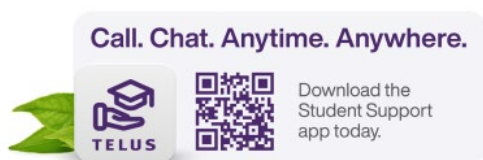
Appointments available MATH Walk in Tutoring – No
appointment needed

	Appointments available	Walk in Tutoring – No appointment needed
MONDAY	8 am – 6 pm	9 am – 5 pm
TUESDAY	8 am – 6 pm	9 am – 5 pm
WEDNESDAY	8 am – 6 pm	9 am – 5 pm
THURSDAY	8 am – 6 pm	9 am – 5 pm
FRIDAY	8 am – 5 pm	11 am – 4 pm

Counseling/Mental Health Resources: As a college student, there may be times when personal stressors interfere with your academic performance and negatively impact your daily functioning. If you are experiencing emotional difficulties or mental health concerns, support is available to you through the Student Counseling Center (SCC). To schedule an appointment, visit our website, call 210-784-1331 or visit Madla 120 between the hours of 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM.

All mental health services provided by the SCC are free and confidential (as the law allows). The Student Counseling Center provides brief individual and group therapy, crisis intervention, consultation, case management, and prevention services. *Crisis support is available 24/7/365 by calling the SCC at 210-784-1331 or through the TELUS student support App.*

The TELUS Student Support App provides a variety of mental health resources to including 24/7/365 support for in the moment distress, crisis support, an anonymous peer-to-peer support network, mental health screenings, podcasts, and articles to improve your mental wellbeing.



Emergency Preparedness: JagE Alert is Texas A&M University-San Antonio's mass notification system. In the event of an emergency, such as inclement weather, students, staff and faculty, who are registered, will have the option to receive a text message, email with instructions and updates. To register or update your information visit: <https://tamusa.bbcportal.com/>. More information on emergency response may be found at: [Emergency Operations Plan](#) and the [Emergency Action Plan](#). Download the SafeZone App (<https://safezoneapp.com/>) for emergencies or call (210) 784-1911. Non-Emergency (210) 784-1900.

Financial Aid and Verification of Attendance: According to the following federal regulation, 34 CFR 668.21: U.S. Department of Education (DoE) Title IV regulation, a student can only receive Title IV funds based on Title IV eligibility criteria which include class attendance. If Title IV funds are disbursed to ineligible students (including students who fail to begin attendance), the institution must return these funds to the U.S. DoE within 30 days of becoming aware that the student will not or has not begun attendance. Faculty will provide the Office of Financial Aid with an electronic notification if a student has not attended by the published Census Date (the first week of class). Any student receiving federal financial aid who does not attend prior to the published Census Date (the first week of class) will have their aid terminated and returned to the DoE. Please note that any student who stops attending at any time during the semester may also need to return a portion of their federal aid.

Jaguar Writing, Language, and Digital Composing Center (WLDCC): The WLDCC provides support to graduate and undergraduate students in all three colleges as well as faculty and staff. Writing tutors work with students to develop reading skills, prepare oral presentations, and plan,

draft, and revise their written assignments. Our language tutors support students enrolled in Spanish courses and students composing in Spanish for any assignment. Our digital studio tutors support students working on digital projects such as eportfolios, class presentations, or other digital multimedia projects. The WLDCC offers face-to-face, synchronous online, and asynchronous digital appointments. Students can schedule appointments with the WLDCC in JagWire under the Student Services tab. Click on “Writing, Language, and Digital Composing Center” to make your appointment. Students wanting to work in realtime with a tutor can schedule an “Online Appointment.” Students wishing to receive asynchronous, written feedback from a tutor can schedule an “eTutoring” appointment. More information about what services we offer, how to make an appointment, and how to access your appointment can be found on our [website](#) . The WLDCC can also be reached by emailing wldcc@tamusa.edu.

Meeting Basic Needs: Any student who has difficulty affording groceries or accessing sufficient food to eat every day or who lacks a safe and stable place to live, and believes this may affect their performance in the course, is urged to submit a [CARE report](#) for support. Furthermore, please notify the professor if you are comfortable in doing so. This will enable them to direct you to available resources. A food pantry is available on campus; click [here](#) for hours and contact information.

Military Affairs: Veterans and active-duty military personnel are welcomed and encouraged to visit the Office of Military Affairs for any question involving federal or state VA Education Benefits. Visit the Patriots’ Casa building, room 202, or to contact the Office of Military Affairs with any questions at military.va@tamusa.edu or (210)784-1397.

Religious Observances: Texas A&M University-San Antonio recognizes the wide variety of faiths represented among the campus community and protects the rights of students, faculty, and staff to observe religious holidays according to their tradition. Under the policy, students are provided an opportunity to make up any examination, study, or course work requirements that may be missed due to a religious observance provided they notify their instructors before the end of the second week of classes for regular session classes.

The Six-Drop Rule: Students are subject to the requirements of Senate Bill (SB) 1231 passed by the Texas Legislature in 2007. SB 1231 limits students to a maximum of six (6) non-punitive course drops (i.e., courses a student chooses to drop) during their undergraduate careers. A non-punitive drop does not affect the student’s GPA. However, course drops that exceed the maximum allowed by SB 1231 will be treated as “F” grades and will impact the student’s GPA.

Statement of Harassment and Discrimination: Texas A&M University-San Antonio is committed to the fundamental principles of academic freedom, equal opportunity, and human dignity. To fulfill its multiple missions as an institution of higher learning, A&M-San Antonio encourages a climate that values and nurtures collegiality and the uniqueness of the individual on our campus and within our state, nation, and world. All decisions and actions involving students and employees are to be based on applicable law and individual merit. Texas A&M University-San Antonio, in accordance with applicable federal and state law, prohibits discrimination, including harassment, on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, national origin, age, disability, genetic information, veteran status, sexual orientation, or pregnancy/parenting status. Individuals who believe they have experienced harassment or discrimination prohibited by this statement are

encouraged to contact the University's Civil Rights Officer at 210-784-2061 or titleix@tamusa.edu.

Texas A&M University-San Antonio faculty are committed to providing a safe learning environment for all students and for the university as a whole. If you have experienced any form of sex discrimination or harassment, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, domestic or dating violence, or stalking based on sex, know that help and support are available. A&M-San Antonio's Title IX Coordinator can support those impacted by such conduct in navigating campus life, accessing health and counseling services, providing academic and housing accommodations, and more. The university strongly encourages all students to report any such incidents to the Title IX Coordinator. Please be aware that all A&M-San Antonio employees (other than those designated as confidential resources such as counselors and trained victim advocates) are required to report information about such discrimination and harassment to the university. This means that if you tell a faculty member about a situation of sexual harassment, sexual violence, or other related sex-based misconduct, the faculty member must share that information with the university's Title IX Coordinator (titleix@tamusa.edu, 210-784-2061, CAB 439K). If you wish to speak to a confidential employee who does not have this reporting requirement, you can contact the Student Counseling Center at (210) 784-1331 or visit them in Madla 120.

Pregnant/Parenting Students: Texas A&M-San Antonio does not require a pregnant or parenting student, solely because of that status or issues related to that status, to (1) take a leave of absence or withdraw from their degree or certificate program; (2) limit the student's studies; (3) participate in an alternative program; (4) change the student's major, degree, or certificate program; or (5) refrain from joining or cease participating in any course, activity, or program at the University. The university will provide such reasonable accommodations to pregnant students as would be provided to a student with a temporary medical condition that are related to the health and safety of the student and the student's unborn child. These could include maintaining a safe distance from substances, areas, and activities known to be hazardous to pregnant individuals and their unborn child; excused absences because of illness or medical appointments; modified due dates for assignments; rescheduled tests/exams; taking a leave of absence; and being provided access to instructional materials and video recordings of lectures for excused absences, if these would be provided to any other student with an excused absence. Pregnant/parenting students are encouraged to contact the Title IX Coordinator with any questions or concerns related to their status (titleix@tamusa.edu; 210-784-2061; CAB 439K).

Texas A&M-San Antonio has also designated the Title IX Coordinator as the liaison officer for current or incoming students who are the parent or guardian of a child younger than 18 years of age. The Title IX Coordinator can provide students with information regarding support services and other resources.

Young Jaguars can support parenting students with daycare if students meet this criteria: (1) must be enrolled in classes at Texas A&M-San Antonio in the current semester, (2) must be Pell eligible or a single parent, (3) child(ren) must be aged 3 to 12-years-old, and (4) child(ren) must be enrolled in Pre-K-3 through 6th grade. Hours of operation is Monday-Thursday 3:30pm-

9:00pm. For more information, please contact Young Jaguars at youngjaguars@tamusa.edu or call (210) 784-2636.

Students' Rights and Responsibilities: The following statement of students' rights and responsibilities is intended to reflect the philosophical base upon which University Student Rules are built. This philosophy acknowledges the existence of both rights and responsibilities, which is inherent to an individual not only as a student at Texas A&M University-San Antonio but also as a citizen of this country.

Students' Rights

1. A student shall have the right to participate in a free exchange of ideas, and there shall be no University rule or administrative rule that in any way abridges the rights of freedom of speech, expression, petition and peaceful assembly as set forth in the U.S. Constitution.
2. Each student shall have the right to participate in all areas and activities of the University, free from any form of discrimination, including harassment, on the basis of race, color, national or ethnic origin, religion, sex, disability, age, and pregnancy/parenting or veteran status in accordance with applicable federal and state laws.
3. A student has the right to personal privacy except as otherwise provided by law, and this will be observed by students and University authorities alike.
4. Each student subject to disciplinary action arising from violations of university student rules shall be assured a fundamentally fair process.

Students' Responsibilities

1. A student has the responsibility to respect the rights and property of others, including other students, the faculty, and administration.
2. A student has the responsibility to be fully acquainted with the published University Student Rules found in the Student Handbook, [Student Code of Conduct](#), on our website, and University Catalog, and to comply with them, as well as with federal, state, and local laws.
3. A student has the responsibility to recognize that student actions reflect upon the individuals involved and upon the entire University community.
4. A student has the responsibility to recognize the University's obligation to provide a safe environment for learning.
5. A student has the responsibility to check their university email for any updates or official university notifications.

We expect that students will behave in a manner that is dignified, respectful, and courteous to all people, regardless of sex, ethnic/racial origin, religious background, or disability. Conduct that infringes on the rights of another individual will not be tolerated.

Students are expected to exhibit a high level of honesty and integrity in their pursuit of higher education. Students engaging in an act that violates the standards of academic integrity will find themselves facing academic and/or disciplinary sanctions. Academic misconduct is any act, or attempt, which gives an unfair advantage to the student. Additionally, any behavior specifically prohibited by a faculty member in the course syllabus or class discussion may be considered as academic misconduct. For more information on academic misconduct policies and procedures please review the [Student Code of Conduct](#) or visit the resources available in the [OSRR website](#)

Important Fall 2026 Dates:

Dates	Event
August 20	Tuition & Fee Payments deadline
August 24	First day of class
September 7	Labor Day Holiday – No Classes / University Closed
September 9	Census Date – Students not paid in full or enrolled in a payment plan by 4:59 pm may be dropped for non-payment
October 5 – October 16	Midterm grading period
November 13	Last day to drop with an automatic “W”
November 25	Study Day – No classes
November 26-November 28	Thanksgiving Holiday – No Classes / University Closed
November 30	Last day to drop a course or withdraw from the University
December 4	Last day of classes
December 5 – December 11	Final exams
December 15	Commencement

The complete [academic calendar](#) is available online

No Use of Generative AI Permitted

This course assumes that all work submitted by students will be generated by the students themselves, working individually or in groups. Students should not have another person/entity do the writing of any portion of an assignment for them, which includes hiring a person or a company to write assignments and/or using artificial intelligence (AI) tools like ChatGPT. Use of any AI-generated content in this course qualifies as academic dishonesty and violates Texas A&M-San Antonio's standards of academic integrity.

Tentative Course Schedule (Subject to Change)

Phase 1: Course Orientation & Technological Sandbox

- **Week 1 (Aug 24 – Aug 28):** Introduction to Courts & Course Orientation. Complete Intro Bookend Form to secure attendance. Explore LibGuides, syllabus, and course dashboards.
- **Week 2 (Aug 31 – Sep 4):** Exploring our Tools
 - Focus on getting comfortable with Perusall, academic databases, and video recording tools. Focus is on technology adaptation.

Phase 2: Jigsaw Modules

Each of these modules will focus on a primary topic and at least 3 assigned readings. They will typically run for two weeks. Each reading set will be assigned at least two weeks before the annotations are due. Students will be placed in different groups that can be found in Blackboard. The overall two-week structure will look like this:

- **First Week**
 - Friday, 11:59PM: All students read assigned articles for the module and submit scanned annotations/notes through a single PDF for each of the articles. Every student will submit individual PDFs for each article assigned in the module.
- **Second Week**
 - Sunday, 11:59PM: Summary Lead will upload summary/overview presentation with voiceover to cover all readings to stimulate discussion for their respective group.
 - Wednesday, 11:59PM: Theoretician, Methodologist, Practitioner, and Innovator will upload their perspective lens videos with voiceover to demonstrate proficiency with the content and stimulate discussion for their respective group.

- Students in the group will be able to engage in discussion via video and commentary throughout week (until the “end” Sunday).

Topic 1: Perception & Legal Literacy. How the public, media, and actors perceive the law, their rights, and constructs of justice in society.

Topic 2: Access to Justice. The dual court system, realities of indigent defense, public defender caseloads, and systemic inequalities.

Topic 3: Key Actors in the Process. The courtroom workgroup: realities, politics, and constraints of prosecutors, defense attorneys, and judges. (*Midterm Check-in*)

Topic 4: Discretion & Decision-Making. Charging decisions, plea bargaining dynamics, the trial penalty, and extralegal factors influencing outcomes.

Topic 5: Process & Phases of a Case. Tracing a case from arrest, pretrial proceedings, and bail reform through trial, sentencing, and appellate review.

Topic 6: Sanction Types & Interventions. Sentencing structures, problem-solving/specialty courts, capital punishment, and the collateral consequences of punishment.

Phase 3: Capstone Synthesis

- **Week 15 (Nov 30 – Dec 4):** Final Project Workshopping.
- **Week 16 (Dec 7 – Dec 11):** Final Policy/Program Proposal Due. Reflection Bookend Form Due