Plato’s *Gorgias*

There are two sets of questions. The first is meant to help guide you some towards the main traditional ideas and themes of the work. These are questions you might want to pose to yourself before or after your reading. The second group is narrower in focus, tailored to the specific problems of how the work can help us think about the aims of this course and to the themes or ideas with which we continue to grapple.

Those interested in basic questions about the ethical aspects of the work can consult:

<http://praxeology.net/sqgorgias.htm>

General points of emphasis for reading:

1. What is the main point of view or argument about rhetoric presented by each of Socrates’ interlocutors?
2. How does Socrates argue against each main position?
3. What are the attitudes towards rhetoric expressed by Socrates?
4. What are the attitudes towards philosophy expressed by the other interlocutors (think in particular of 485-486)?
5. How significant is—and in what ways—that Socrates fails to persuade the other interlocutors? In particular, how does this bear on arguments that he makes in the *Gorgias*?

General Questions and Topics for discussion in-class:

1. The *Gorgias*, like the *Phaedrus*, touches on the problem of private opinion versus public opinion. How do you suppose that Plato might imagine the creation or influencing of public opinion?
2. What is all this business about being in harmony or agreement with oneself (482 b-c)? What conception of the individual underlies Socrates’ claims, and, more importantly, what conception of rhetoric *as it defines individuals*?
3. Callicles offers an argument, commonly heard today, about the rights of those who have more power (consider, e.g. his distinction of nature and convention (483 a-484 d)). How valid do you find his argument? What are some versions of that argument today?
4. Rather than getting away with committing injustice? Why does Socrates think it’s better to be punished rather than to punish?
5. At 508a Socrates mentions “geometry”, claiming that Callicles needs to work at it more. What other arguments in the text might he be referring to (think of the earlier exchange over “proportionalities” around 465)? What are the similarities and differences between the two sections of the text? Can they be reconciled to one another, and if so, how?
6. At 485-486 (see the question above), how does the reference to a play, the *Zethus* by Euripides, “inform” the argument that is presented? What conception of human engagement with the world is being argued about here? How might we map the opposition there onto ideas about participation in the public sphere?