

**BUSINESS STRATEGY II**  
**BUSINESS 9771**  
Winter 2026  
Thursday 09:00-12:00, Room 3102

**Professor**  
Name: Lee Watkiss  
Office: 2355  
Email: [lwatkiss@ivey.ca](mailto:lwatkiss@ivey.ca)  
Phone: +1 (404) 543-4651

**Assistant**  
Paige Cunningham  
3350-2  
[pcunningham@ivey.ca](mailto:pcunningham@ivey.ca)

**Professor**  
Name: Mark Zbaracki  
Office: 4364  
Email: [mzbaracki@ivey.ca](mailto:mzbaracki@ivey.ca)  
Phone: +1 (519) 661-4270

**Assistant**  
Gina Luciani  
3350-1  
[gluciani@ivey.ca](mailto:gluciani@ivey.ca)  
+1 (519) 661-2111 (X8-6805)

---

**COURSE OVERVIEW & OBJECTIVES**

Business Strategy II is an introduction to the major theoretical approaches and ongoing debates within the field of business strategy. It complements Business Strategy I (Bus 9770) and Organizational Behaviour: Special Field Seminar in Organizational Theory (Bus 9826). This course draws on disciplinary roots in (alphabetically) political science, psychology, and sociology to explain the nature of competition and relative performance. Questions to be covered include:

1. Why do competitors sometimes conform to prevailing models and sometimes seek to differentiate?
2. What factors explain when ideas and practices spread across competitors?
3. How and under what circumstances do competitors achieving lasting competitive advantage?
4. What are the cognitive factors that explain firm behavior and performance?
5. To what extent can a firm's "identity," "categorization" and/or "status" serve as a basis for competitive advantage, and affect its behavior?
6. What is the role of social networks in structuring firm behavior and competitive outcomes?
7. What are the structural, cultural and institutional factors that influence firm practices and performance?
8. What are the boundaries of the firm or its practices?
9. What is the role of intentionality in firm practices and performance?

We will read some of the classic statements of the major approaches and trace the history of ideas as the field has developed up to the present. Disparate roots imply disparate approaches to explanation, and thus there are many lively debates within the field that provide some of the frisson of current research.

The aim of the course will be to examine a number of perspectives, consider the strengths and weaknesses of each, and to look at the comparative ability of these models to explain a variety of organizational phenomena. Given that we only have one semester together, the course is necessarily limited, so we will touch lightly on some topics and neglect others completely. We are happy to suggest other readings if you would like.

The course objective is to develop your ability to assess strategic theory and research both critically and comprehensively. By the conclusion of the course, you should (a) be familiar with important sources and references on fundamental issues in strategy, (b) have a grasp of advanced theory and research on a breadth of topics, (c) have a better understanding of the process of developing theoretical articles, and (d) develop your ability to evaluate the contributions of various research streams to the field of strategy. With this roadmap in hand, you should be well prepared to generate original research ideas that advance the discourse in your chosen area.

## **COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

### ***PARTICIPATION***

Each class member is expected to participate **ACTIVELY** in every class. You are expected to be prepared to discuss and comment on all of the required readings for each session. Pre-class preparation involves reading the material as well as reflecting upon the discussion questions assigned for that session.

As you do the readings, consider not only what the author did wrong—the usual stock-in-trade of graduate seminars—but what the author did right. What are the interesting ideas in the paper? If you disagree with an argument, what would it take to convince you? What are the scope conditions—under what circumstances is the argument meant to apply (e.g., only to U.S. non-profits; only to family businesses in Canada; etc.)? What modifications would be necessary to extend the argument? Are there critical differences between this author's arguments and those of others we have read? Can these differences be resolved through empirical test? What would a study look like that did this?

*Your enthusiastic involvement is essential to the course. We want to develop an open, inviting, inclusive, but penetrating culture of discourse. That is what makes for a great seminar!*

### ***REACTION MEMOS***

In addition to the weekly response points, you will also write six 2-page 'reaction memos.' You can choose the six class discussions for which you wish to write a reaction memo. Each memo is due by 11:59 pm the day after, i.e., Friday, the class discussion. Your reaction memo should include some kind of thought, criticism, argument, idea or application in response to the class discussion of the readings. It should not be a summary of the readings and it should incorporate what we discussed in class and then meaningfully develop your lessons from the class.

*Regular writing is a fundamental means of intellectual growth! You should treat both your response points and your reaction memos as a grounding for your future research.*

### ***TERM PAPER***

You are required to submit a term paper that focuses on the content of this course. The orienting theme of the course is the future of strategy as seen from the standpoint of political science, psychology, and sociology. Your term paper should follow that theme by considering a topic that would shape the direction of strategy. Your task is to develop that topic by considering the state of the literature and where the literature needs to go in order to establish a better direction for future research. To aid you in this quest, we offer below a few examples of the kinds of questions you could ask (note that there is a strong correlation between these potential questions and past or possible future comprehensive exam questions):

1. Suppose you were given the authority to determine the theories people could use in publishing a strategy article. Pick one theoretical point of view that you think people should NEVER be allowed to publish on again and explain why.
2. Strategy has historically focused on the competitive advantage of the firm as an orienting principle. However, recent events have blurred the boundaries between citizens and employees and between corporate interests and the common good. This has created causal interdependences that cut across social, technical, political as well as disciplinary boundaries. What would be the implications of dropping competitive advantage as the orienting principle of strategic management?
3. After decades of research in stakeholder theory, strategy scholars have turned to arguments about how firms can strategically engage stakeholders—which has been termed the “new stakeholder theory.” The central argument is that firm strategy must explain both how value is created and how that value is appropriated by the various stakeholders. Advocates argue that the new stakeholder theory allows for a stakeholder theory built strictly on efficiency arguments and economic value: for firms to generate sustained economic profits they must share rents with stakeholders. Enthusiasts claim that the idea neatly sustains the economic turn in strategy while allowing for recent attention to stakeholders instead of shareholders. Based on what you know about firm strategy, assess how effective the new stakeholder theory is in addressing the concerns of stakeholders?
4. Strategy research has long assumed that firms should construct strategies that pursue fixed ends and that those ends should be evaluated in terms of superior financial performance. This has led to a highly paradigmatic field in which scholars study how some firms are able to achieve superior performance relative to others. Suppose we were to drop the assumption that the ends of a firm’s strategy are necessarily fixed and instead assumed that the ends were determined during the practice of doing strategy. Choose one existing approach to strategy. How would our basic understandings, assumptions, and definitions need to change (if at all) to take account of the revised assumption? Drawing on what you know of contemporary strategy research, what needs to be incorporated so that the ends of strategy (e.g., purpose or performance) can be included in the process of doing strategy in a firm? Would your revised approach still really be strategy? Why or why not?

The paper should be theoretical or conceptual (i.e., no data), based on a topic within the domain of the course. It should incorporate ideas from readings in the course but also draw on additional work from pertinent literatures. The paper will provide you with the opportunity to integrate and utilize

the knowledge you have gained from the seminar by applying them to a substantive issue, core question, or long-standing debate related to the field of strategy. You should pay particular attention to reimagining the social relationships and structures in which a firm's strategy is embedded. We want you to demonstrate your knowledge of the literature and the potential for future research directions rather than to construct a study in which you create and test hypotheses.

This paper must be original work. You should not submit a paper used to satisfy the requirements of another course or a research relationship with another faculty. These papers should be 15 to 20 pages, double-spaced, excluding references and any appendices, tables, and/or figures.

In addition to submitting the written paper, you will complete a 30-minute oral examination on your term paper. The oral exam will focus on your paper's core argument, its theoretical foundations, its contributions and limitations, and how it relates to themes discussed in the course. You should be prepared to explain, reflect on, and extend the choices you made in developing the paper. You should also be prepared to discuss the implications of your ideas for future strategy research.

## EVALUATION

Your grade will be based on the following:

Weekly Seminar Contribution	30%
Reaction Memos (6)	25%
Term Paper	45%
Total	100%

## ATTENDANCE

Attendance in all sessions of this course is mandatory. If you miss a class, you will not receive any contribution credit for that class; there is no way to "make up" for a missed day. A grade of zero will be assigned to those classes (the notification requirements must be met: see below). If absenteeism has reached 25 percent (3 or more classes), you will not be eligible to write the final exam, and you will fail the course ([https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/exam/attendance.pdf](https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/exam/attendance.pdf)).

Missed classes, with the exception of religious holidays with advance notice or extended absences approved by the program office, will be included in the overall calculation for contribution.

## NOTICE OF ABSENCE

We recognize that circumstances may arise that make it impossible for you to attend. For example, if you are unable to attend class for health reasons or religious holidays, we expect you to send me an email in advance with the reason for your absence. As a rule, there will be no way to make up your contributions for a missed class, even though you may be asked to complete an additional assignment to ensure you are keeping up with the assigned work.

We will accommodate medical illness for work worth less than 10% of the total course grade by assigning additional course work. Medical documentation for such accommodation will be required

to be submitted by the student directly to the appropriate PhD program office and not to the instructor. The PhD program office that will determine if accommodation is warranted.

### **USE OF GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)**

The goal of the course is for you to learn to think critically about contemporary strategy research. To achieve that goal the class sessions and the course requirements have been designed to develop your analytical skill. Students in the past have clearly demonstrated the ability to succeed in the course without using Generative AI.

If you choose to use Generative AI, you must describe how you use it and explain how it contributed either positively or negatively to your assignment. Generative AI tools can produce inaccurate, biased and/or outdated information. You are responsible for verifying the accuracy of any work you submit and for properly including the appropriate citations in that work.

### **ENROLLMENT RESTRICTIONS**

Enrollment in this course is restricted to graduate students in the Ivey PhD Program, as well as any student that has obtained special permission to enroll in this course from the course instructor as well as the Graduate Chair (or equivalent) from the student's home program.

### **ACADEMIC OFFENCES: PLAGIARISM AND ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at [http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/appeals/scholastic\\_discipline\\_grad.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf).

All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism-detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com (<http://www.turnitin.com>).

### **GENDER-BASED SEXUAL VIOLENCE SUPPORT**

Western is committed to reducing incidents of gender-based and sexual violence (GBSV) and providing compassionate support to anyone who is going through or has gone through these traumatic events. If you are experiencing or have experienced GBSV (either recently or in the past), you will find information about support services for survivors, including emergency contacts at the following website: [https://www.uwo.ca/health/student\\_support/survivor\\_support/get-help.html](https://www.uwo.ca/health/student_support/survivor_support/get-help.html). To connect with a case manager or set up an appointment, please contact [support@uwo.ca](mailto:support@uwo.ca).

### **HEALTH AND WELLNESS SERVICES**

As part of a successful graduate student experience at Western, we encourage students to make their health and wellness a priority. Western provides several on campus health-related services to help

you achieve optimum health and engage in healthy living while pursuing your graduate degree. See <https://www.uwo.ca/health>.

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health Support at <https://www.uwo.ca/health/psych/index.html> for a complete list of options about how to obtain help. Additionally, students seeking help regarding mental health concerns are advised to speak to someone they feel comfortable confiding in, such as their faculty supervisor, their program director or program coordinator.

### **ACCESSIBLE EDUCATION WESTERN**

Western is committed to achieving barrier-free accessibility for all its members, including graduate students. As part of this commitment, Western provides a variety of services devoted to promoting, advocating, and accommodating persons with disabilities in their respective graduate program.

Graduate students with disabilities (for example, chronic illnesses, mental health conditions, mobility impairments) are strongly encouraged to register with [Accessible Education Western \(AEW\)](#), a confidential service designed to support graduate and undergraduate students through their academic program. With the appropriate documentation, the student will work with both AEW and their graduate programs (normally their Graduate Chair and/or Course instructor) to ensure that appropriate academic accommodations to program requirements are arranged. These accommodations include individual counselling, alternative formatted literature, accessible campus transportation, learning strategy instruction, writing exams and assistive technology instruction.

## **COURSE OUTLINE: REQUIRED READINGS**

### ***JANUARY 8, 2026: STRATEGY AT A CROSSROADS (LEE & MARK)***

1. Scott, W. R. & Davis, G. F. (2007). Chapter 12: Strategy, Structure, and Performance: The Sociology of Organizational Strategy. In *Organizations and Organizing: Rational, Natural, and Open Systems* (p.310-339). Prentice Hall.
2. Powell, T. C., Lovallo, D. & Fox, C. R. (2011). Behavioral Strategy. *Strategic Management Journal*, 32: 1369-1386.
3. Leiblein, M. J., Reuer, J. J. & Zenger, T. (2018). What Makes A Decision Strategic? *Strategy Science*, 3: 558-573.
4. Barney, J. B., Mackie, T. B. & Mackie, A. (2023). Why Has It Been So Hard to Define Competitive Advantage? *Strategic Management Review*, 4: 1-13.

### ***JANUARY 15, 2026: STRATEGIC DECISION-MAKING (LEE)***

1. Cohen, M. D. (2007). Perspective—Administrative Behavior: Laying The Foundations for Cyert and March. *Organization Science*, 18, 503-506.
2. Knudsen, T., & Levinthal, D. A. (2007). Two Faces of Search: Alternative Generation and Alternative Evaluation. *Organization Science*, 18(1), 39-54.
3. Ocasio, W., Laamanen, T., & Vaara, E. (2018). Communication and Attention Dynamics: An Attention-based View of Strategic Change. *Strategic Management Journal*, 39(1), 155-167.
4. Zbaracki, M., Watkiss, L. & McAlpine, C. (2025). Regimes of Choice. Working Paper.

### ***JANUARY 22, 2026: COGNITION & STRATEGY (LEE)***

1. Porac, J., Thomas, H., Wilson, F., Paton, D. & Kanfer, A. (1995). Rivalry and the Industry Model of Scottish Knitwear Producers. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 40: 203-227.
2. Eggers, J. P., & Kaplan, S. (2009). Cognition and Renewal: Comparing CEO and Organizational Effects on Incumbent Adaptation to Technical Change. *Organization Science*, 20(2), 461-477.
3. Gavetti, G. (2012). Toward a Behavioral Theory of Strategy. *Organization science*, 23(1), 267-285.
4. Sandberg, J., & Tsoukas, H. (2011). Grasping the Logic of Practice: Theorizing through Practical Rationality. *Academy of Management Review*, 36(2), 338-360.

### ***JANUARY 29, 2026: PROBLEMS & SOLUTIONS (MARK)***

1. March, J. G. (1991). Exploration and Exploitation in Organizational Learning. *Organization Science*, 2: 71-87.
2. Birkinshaw, J., & Gupta, K. 2013. Clarifying the Distinctive Contribution of Ambidexterity to the Field of Organization Studies. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 27(4): 287–298.
3. Posen, H. E., Keil, T., Kim, S. & Meissner, F. D. (2018). Renewing Research on Problemistic Search—A Review and Research Agenda. *Academy of Management Annals*, 12: 208-251.
4. Felin, T. & Zenger, T. R. (2017). The Theory-based View: Economic Actors as Theorists. *Strategy Science*, 2: 258-271.

***FEBRUARY 5, 2026: CATEGORIES & MARKET POSITION (LEE)***

1. Zuckerman, E. W. (1999). The Categorical Imperative: Securities Analysts and the Illegitimacy Discount. *American Journal of Sociology*, 104, 1398–1438.
2. Zhao, E. Y., Ishihara, M., Jennings, P. D., & Lounsbury, M. (2018). Optimal Distinctiveness in The Console Video Game Industry: An Exemplar-based Model of Proto-category Evolution. *Organization Science*, 29(4), 588-611.
3. Pontikes, E. G. (2018). Category Strategy for Firm Advantage. *Strategy Science*, 3(4), 620-631.

***FEBRUARY 12, 2026: AGENCY IN STRATEGY (MARK)***

1. Emirbayer, M. & Mische, A. (1998). What Is Agency? *American Journal of Sociology*, 103: 962-1023.
2. Gavetti, G. & Levinthal, D. (2000). Looking Forward and Looking Backward: Cognitive and Experiential Search. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 45: 113-137.
3. Chia, R., & Holt, R. (2023). Strategy, Intentionality and Success: Four Logics for Explaining Strategic Action. *Organization Theory*, 4(3), 1-25.

***FEBRUARY 19, 2026: IMPLEMENTING STRATEGY (MARK)***

1. Zbaracki, M. J., & Bergen, M. (2010). When Truces Collapse: A Longitudinal Study of Price-Adjustment Routines. *Organization Science*, 21, 955–972.
2. Kleinbaum, A. M. & Stuart, T. E. (2014). Inside the Black Box of The Corporate Staff: Social Networks and The Implementation of Corporate Strategy. *Strategic Management Journal*, 35: 24-47.
3. Farjoun, M. & Fiss, P. C. (2022). Thriving on Contradiction: Toward a Dialectical Alternative to Fit-based Models in Strategy (and Beyond). *Strategic Management Journal*, 43: 340-369.

***FEBRUARY 26, 2026: LEARNING & ITS LIMITS (MARK)***

1. Crossan, M. M., Lane, H. W. & White, R. E. (1999). An Organizational Learning Framework: From Intuition to Institution. *Academy of Management Review*, 24: 522-537.
2. Joseph, J. Rhee, L. & Wilson, A. (2023). Corporate Hierarchy and Organizational Learning: Member Turnover, Code Change, and Innovation in the Multiunit Firm. *Organization Science*, 34: 1332-1352.
3. Levinthal, D. A. & March, J. G. (1993) The Myopia of Learning. *Strategic Management Journal*, Vol. 14, Special Issue: Organizations, Decision Making and Strategy: 95-112.
4. Rerup, Claus and Mark J. Zbaracki. 2021. The Politics of Learning from Rare Events. *Organization Science*, 32 (6): 1391-1414.

***MARCH 5, 2026: FRAMING & IDENTITY (LEE)***

1. Kaplan, S. (2008). Framing Contests: Strategy Making Under Uncertainty. *Organization Science*, 19: 729-752.
2. Rindova, V. P., Dalpiaz, E. & Ravasi, D. (2011). A Cultural Quest: A Study of Organizational Use of New Cultural Resources in Strategy Formation. *Organization Science*, 22: 413-431.
3. Tripsas, M. (2009). Technology, Identity, and Inertia through The Lens of “The Digital Photography Company”. *Organization Science*, 20(2), 441-460.
4. Turner, B. R. (2025). Narrative Affordances: What Stories Can and Cannot Do. *Academy of Management Annals*, 19(2): 522–564.

***MARCH 12, 2026: PROCESS & PRACTICE (LEE)***

1. Tsoukas, H., & Chia, R. (2002). On Organizational Becoming: Rethinking Organizational Change. *Organization Science*, 13(5), 567-582.
2. Chia, R., & Holt, R. (2006). Strategy as Practical Coping: A Heideggerian Perspective. *Organization Studies*, 27(5), 635-655.
3. Jarzabkowski, P. & Kaplan, S. (2015). Strategy Tools-in-Use: A Framework for Understanding “Technologies of Rationality.” *Strategic Management Journal*, 36(4): 537-558.
4. Pettit, K. L. & Crossan, M. M. (2020). Strategic Renewal: Beyond The Functional Resource Role of Occupational Members. *Strategic Management Journal*, 41: 1112-1138.

***MARCH 19, 2026: JUSTICE & STRATEGY (MARK)***

1. Ocasio, W., Kraatz, M., & Chandler, D. 2023. Making Sense of Corporate Purpose. *Strategy Science*, 8(2): 123–138.
2. Zbaracki, M. J., Watkiss, L., McAlpine, C., & Barg, J. (2021). Truth, Beauty, and Justice in Models of Social Action. In *Carnegie Goes to California: Advancing and Celebrating the Work of James G. March* (pp. 159-177). Emerald Publishing Limited.
3. Reinecke, J. & Ansari, S. (2015). What Is a “Fair” Price? Ethics as Sensemaking. *Organization Science*, 26: 867-888.
4. Bergen, M., Dutta, S., & Zbaracki, M. (2024). Algorithms, Pricing, and Justice. Working Paper.

***MARCH 26, 2026: WHAT IS STRATEGY? (LEE & MARK)***

Please come prepared to present your ideas for your final paper and to discuss how they contribute to the future of strategy. In addition to presenting your own work, you should be prepared to engage substantively with the paper ideas of others in the class.

***APRIL 9, 2026: FINAL PAPER DUE AT 5PM.***