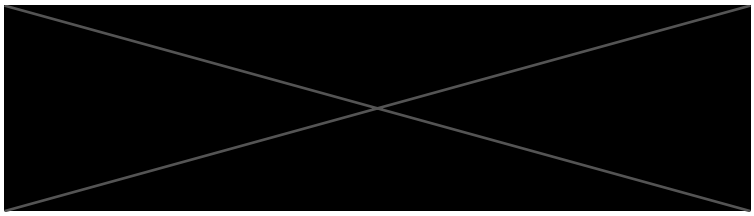
Philosophy of Language



Course description: We possess a peculiar ability to string noises and letters together in such a way that (miraculously!) others understand what we're getting at. Oftentimes, these strings are completely novel; I'm guessing no one has ever *exactly* reproduced the previous sentence. We use these strings to talk about the weather; about sports; religion; mathematics; we can use them to talk about anything, really. What's more, we don't always use these strings to talk *about* anything in particular – sometimes, we deploy them to have others do our bidding, or to make people feel a certain way. In this course, we'll investigate how this strange phenomenon – language – works. In virtue of what do linguistic expressions *refer* to things in the world? What does it mean for sentences to *mean* something-or-other? How can we so readily *understand* what others mean when they make such utterances? And how does language figure into our lives as a distinctively *social* practice? As it turns out, these questions place us headfirst into some of the most principal and perplexing philosophical debates of the past century.

Course texts

Required texts: Throughout the course, we'll primarily read papers/book chapters: you can find all these readings in PDF form under the "Files" tab in Canvas.

Additionally, we'll supplement these readings with chapters from William Lycan's *Philosophy of Language: A Contemporary Introduction (3rd ed)*. You can freely access this Ebook in Virgo.

I'd recommend reading the Lycan first for any given week. Lycan's a clear writer, so it'll help you understand what you should pay attention to in the primary readings.

Assignments and grading

Your grade will be determined by the following items: **two short writing assignments, one longer writing assignment, one test, an online journal, and your class participation.**

***Writing assignments*:** You'll have two shorter writing assignments (3-4 pages), and one longer writing assignment (5-7 pages).

***Short writing assignments*:** In your **first** short writing assignment, I'll ask you to reconstruct an argument from one of our primary readings. In your **second** short writing assignment, I'll ask you to critically engage with an objection to one of our primary readings.

I'll provide more detailed instructions and talk over the prompts in class.

Long writing assignment: Your longer assignment will build on your shorter assignments, but you'll take it one step further. You'll first explain an author's argument. Then, you'll outline an objection and explain why it's an objection. If you think that a particular objection is successful, **you'll critically evaluate a reply on behalf of the view you're arguing against.** If you think that a particular objection is unsuccessful, **you'll critically evaluate a reply on behalf of the objector you're arguing against.**

- I'll provide you with some topics to choose from for each of these assignments, but you can run ideas by me if you want to pick your own topic.
- You can pick any reading from the course to write your paper about, but you can't write on the same topic as the one we cover in our short assignments.

If this doesn't yet make perfect sense, don't worry: we'll talk about the longer paper in class.

Writing philosophy is quite different from any other writing you've done in academia. I encourage you to reach out via email or stop by my office hours if you have any questions, want to discuss paper structures, etc.

Mid-term: A mix of multiple choice and short answer questions. The mid-term will cover the first half of the course material.

Online journal**: ONCE** a week, I'll provide you a prompt related to the that week's reading and you'll respond with a 100-200 word journal entry. **Your posts are due by Thursdays at 11:59 PM.** Late journal entries will not be accepted.

The guiding questions will vary. They'll sometimes ask you about your own view on a subject; other times, they'll ask you to consider the merits and demerits of a particular argument: and so on. However, answering them will be key to active classroom participation, and we'll talk about the questions in class.

They shouldn't consist merely in a summary of the reading – they require critical engagement. That is, they should ideally go beyond the course readings. What does it mean to 'go beyond what was said in the course readings'? This will vary from prompt to prompt, but the basic idea is that you should ask your own questions of the material, or raise your own objections to a view, and so on. These replies don't have to be wholly original, but they must show that you've thought through the issues on your own terms.

Participation/classtime: Participation is an integral component of this course. As such, you must first and foremost attend all class meetings in order to complete the course objectives. Your participation grade will be determined by your attendance, your engagement in discussion, and your engagement in in-class activities.

You're allowed ***two*** unexcused absences. After that, you should contact me and let me know about any extenuating circumstances. Each further unnotified absence will result in a **1/3rd of a letter grade** being deducted from your participation grade.

Grading scheme:

Short writing assignment 1 (**due 2/25**): 15%
Short writing assignment 2 (**due 4/7**): 20%
Longer writing assignment (**due 5/5**): 25%
Mid-term (**in-class 3/13**): 20%
Online journal: 10%
Participation: 10%%

Class Policies

Late papers: Papers turned in late will be penalized 1/3rd of a letter grade for every day they are late. For instance, a paper that's turned in a week late will lose $2\frac{1}{3}$ letter grades. This means that I will grade it starting at a C+.

Communication: If you send me an email, you can expect a reply from me within 24 hours (except for weekends; I'll reply first thing Monday morning).

Reading/Assignment Schedule

Week 1: January 17 (NOT MEETING THIS WEEK)

Part 1: History

Week 2: January 22, 24 (Definite descriptions)

- **Read:** Bertrand Russell, "On Denoting"
- **Read:** William Lycan, *Philosophy of Language* (ch. 2)

Part 2: Theories of reference

Week 3: January 29, 31 (Reference of proper names: description theory)

- **Read:** John Searle, "Proper Names"
- **Read:** Lycan (ch. 3)

Week 4: February 5, 7 (Reference of proper names: causal theory)

- **Read:** Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (selection on Canvas)
- **Read:** Lycan (ch. 4)

Part 3: Theories of meaning

Week 5: February 12, 14 ('Use' theory of meaning)

- **Read:** Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (selection on Canvas)
- **Read:** Lycan (ch. 6)

Week 6: February 19, 21 (Verificationist theory of meaning)

- **Read:** W.V.O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism"
- **Read:** Lycan (ch. 8)

FIRST SHORT WRITING ASSIGNMENT DUE BY MIDNIGHT ON SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 25

Week 7: February 26, 28 (Truth-conditional theory of meaning)

- **Read:** Donald Davidson, "Semantics for Natural Languages"
- **Read:** Lycan (ch. 10)

Week 8: March 4, 6

- SPRING BREAK: NO CLASS

Part 4: Weaponized language

Week 9: March 11, 13 (Review)

- 3/11: Review day
- 3/13: Test 1

Week 10: March 18, 20 (Conversational implicature)

- **Read:** Paul Grice, "Logic and Conversation"
- **Read:** Lycan (ch. 13)

Week 11: March 25, 27 (Speech acts)

- **Read:** J.L. Austin, "Performative Utterances"
- **Read:** Lycan (ch. 12)

Week 12: April 1, 3 (Expressive Language)

- **Read:** Elisabeth Camp, "Slurring Perspectives"
- **Read:** Lycan (ch. 14)

SECOND SHORT WRITING ASSIGNMENT DUE BY MIDNIGHT ON SUNDAY, APRIL 7

Week 13: April 8, 10 (Metaphor)

- **Read:** Ernest Lepore & Matthew Stone, "Against Metaphorical Meaning"
- **Read:** Lycan (ch. 15)

Part 5: Skeptical worries

Week 14: April 15, 17 (Radical interpretation)

- **Read:** David Lewis, "Putnam's Paradox"

Week 15: April 22, 24 (Skepticism about meaning)

- **Read:** Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (selection on Canvas)

Week 16: April 29 (Papers)

- Paper workshop

FINAL PAPERS DUE BY MIDNIGHT ON SUNDAY, MAY 5