

PHILO 26800: MIND, LANGUAGE, AND COGNITION

Hunter College | Fall 2024 | Taught by Daniel Harris (danielwharris@gmail.com)

Course website: danielwharris.com/teaching/268/

Username and password for readings: 'minds' and 'brains'

About the Course

What is it to be an intelligent being who can think and use language? What makes human thought and communication unique among natural phenomena? These have been central philosophical questions for millennia. Since the 1950's, they have become the focus of cognitive science, which is an interdisciplinary research program drawing on philosophy, psychology, linguistics, computer science, cognitive neuroscience, anthropology, and other neighboring disciplines. In this course, we'll cover some of the most exciting ideas to come out of this research program.

Website and Readings

All of the readings and assignments will be posted on the course website:

<http://danielwharris.com/teaching/268/>

To access some of the readings, you may need to use the following username and password:

username: minds

password: brains

We will read several chapters of Steven Pinker's book, *The Language Instinct* (1994, William Morrow; reissued in 2007 by Harper). There is a PDF on the course website, but if you prefer to read a physical copy, you may want to buy that. It is widely and inexpensively available both used and new. For example, you can currently buy a used copy [on Amazon](#) for about \$2 plus shipping, or a new copy for \$9.50.

Our Discord Server

I have created a Discord server for our class, which you can get to by clicking on this link:

<https://discord.gg/EtvjizeFaF>

I recommend installing the Discord app on your computer and turning on notifications for our server.

Discord is a free tool for group communication. We will use it as a place where you will submit assignments and communicate with me and other members of the class. You must have access to Discord in order to participate in the course.

Grade Breakdown

Daily Critical-Feedback Assignments: 40% (~2% each)

Class Participation: 10%

Four assignments: 50% (5%, 10%, 15%, 20% respectively)

Reading Requirements

Each class focuses on one or two required readings. I expect everyone to read these texts carefully and critically before completing the critical-feedback assignments, and in order to prepare for class. When I say that you should read the assignments critically, I mean that you should ideally take your time, and frequently stop to ask yourself whether you understand and find convincing what you're reading.

Critical-Feedback Assignments

You will be expected to submit a critical-feedback assignment by 7pm on the night before each class (except special classes in which we will be discussing skills and assignments). You will submit it via Discord, in the appropriate channel for that day. For example, for the class on September 5th, you should post it by 7pm on September 4th in the #Sept5 channel in our Discord server.

Your critical feedback should take the form of a paragraph in which you engage critically with the required reading. This could mean several things: you could pose a detailed question about something that confused you or that you found intellectually unsatisfying in the reading. You could raise an objection to something that you read. Or you could find and link to a piece of research that undermines or adds a further source of support to something in the reading, and explain what you take to be the connection. In general, I will evaluate these assignments by looking for evidence that you have carefully read and thought about the required readings, including what is confusing or unconvincing about them.

If you have submitted a critical-feedback assignment on time and it meets the required standards, I will mark it with a checkbox (✓) to indicate that you have completed the assignment and received full points. (If your assignment is below the standard to receive credit, I will let you know why privately.) I will sometimes respond

with written comments, but the main venue in which you should seek responses to your critical feedback is during class discussion.

Part of the purpose of the critical-feedback assignments is to encourage you to read in a critical way, frequently stopping to ask yourself whether you understand and are convinced by what you are reading, and to articulate whatever skepticism and criticisms you might have of it. It would be a good idea to take notes as you go. A second purpose of the assignment is to encourage you to show up to class prepared to raise questions about and criticisms of the reading. You should raise them in class, and if you don't do that on your own, I may call on you to do so.

There will be approximately 23 of these assignments in total. Each one is worth ~2% of your overall grade in the course. However, I will drop your lowest three grades, so you can miss or fail three before this will affect your grade in the course. In total, these critical-feedback assignments will make up 40% of your grade in the course.

Participation Grade

Your participation grade is 10% of your final grade. This will be based primarily on your participation in class, but you can also help your participation grade by participating in general discussion of course content on Discord. In general, I will evaluate your contributions on the basis of whether they seem aimed at deepening either your or other students' understanding of the ideas and issues that we study in the class.

Writing Assignments

There will be four writing assignments, each aimed at developing your research skills as well as your writing skills, and each of which will be accompanied by a day of class in which we focus on developing new research skills that you will need to complete the assignment.

Blackboard?

We won't be using blackboard for this course.

How to contact me

To find the schedule and get the readings, check the course website (and check back, as things can change). To submit critical feedback assignments, put them in the Discord. To submit longer assignments, you'll send me emails. If you would like to contact me for other reasons, you can either send me a DM on Discord or email me. You can also visit my office hours (Mondays 3–5, or by appointment.)

It is important that you can regularly receive emails from me. When I email you, I will use whichever email address is listed for you in CUNYfirst. So it is very impor-

tant that the email listed there is one that you regularly check. If you would like to change the email listed for you in CUNYfirst, it is easy to do so. Just click this link and follow the steps described there:

http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/cunyfirst/repository/files/CUNYfirst_Email_Address.pdf

This is your responsibility. If you are late with an assignment because an email from me went to the wrong address, you will not receive credit for the assignment.

Late Assignment Policy

Assignments will lose 10% of their value for every day that they are late.

AI Policy

Using ChatGPT or other generative AI to write assignments for you counts as a form of plagiarism for the purposes of this course.

Academic Dishonesty

Hunter College regards acts of academic dishonesty (e.g., plagiarism, cheating on examinations, obtaining unfair advantage, and falsification of records and official documents) as serious offenses against the values of intellectual honesty. The College is committed to enforcing the CUNY Policy on Academic Integrity and will pursue cases of academic dishonesty according to the Hunter College Academic Integrity Procedures.

ADA Statement

In compliance with the ADA and with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, Hunter College is committed to ensuring educational access and accommodations for all its registered students. Hunter College's students with disabilities and medical conditions are encouraged to register with the Office of AccessABILITY for assistance and accommodation. For information and appointment contact the Office of AccessABILITY located in Room E1214 or call (212) 772-4857 /or VRS (646) 755-3129.

Policy on Sexual Misconduct

In compliance with the CUNY Policy on Sexual Misconduct, Hunter College reaffirms the prohibition of any sexual misconduct, which includes sexual violence, sexual harassment, and gender-based harassment retaliation against students, employees, or visitors, as well as certain intimate relationships. Students who have experienced any form of sexual violence on or off campus (including CUNY-sponsored trips and events) are entitled to the rights outlined in the Bill of Rights for Hunter College.

Sexual Violence: Students are strongly encouraged to immediately report the incident by calling 911, contacting NYPD Special Victims Division Hotline (646-610-7272) or their local police precinct, or contacting the College's Public Safety Office (212-772-4444).

All Other Forms of Sexual Misconduct: Students are also encouraged to contact the College's Title IX Campus Coordinator, Dean John Rose (jtrose@hunter.cuny.edu or 212-650-3262) or Colleen Barry (colleen.barry@hunter.cuny.edu or 212-772-4534) and seek complimentary services through the Counseling and Wellness Services Office, Hunter East 1123.

CUNY Policy on Sexual Misconduct Link: <http://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/la/Policy-on-Sexual-Misconduct-12-1-14-with-links.pdf>

Mondays	Thursdays
	August 29 Introduction (No required readings)
September 2 NO CLASS	September 5 Empiricism Hume: Enquiry concerning Human Understanding (excerpt)
September 9 Rationalism Plato: Meno (excerpt) Descartes: Meditations 1+2	September 12 The Language Instinct Pinker, The Language Instinct, chs.1-2
September 16 Basic Research Skills Handout on basic research skills <i>First assignment due on ???</i>	September 19 Which Knowledge is Innate? Elizabeth Spelke: Core Knowledge
September 23 Does "Innateness" Make Sense? Justin Garson: Nature and Nurture	September 26 A Defense of Innateness Muhammad Ali Khalidi: Innateness...
September 30 Does language influence how we think? Benjamin Lee Whorf: The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language	October 3 NO CLASS
October 7 Against the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis Steven Pinker: The Language Instinct, Ch.3	October 10 Reading science (Three scientific articles) Handout on how to read a scientific article <i>Second Assignment due ???</i>
October 14 NO CLASS	October 17 A nuanced take on linguistic relativism Paul Bloom and Frank Keil: Thinking through language
October 21 The language of thought hypothesis Jerry Fodor: The Mind-Body Problem Steven Pinker: The Language Instinct, Ch.3 (second half)	October 24 Holism about psychological states Daniel Dennett: True Believers
October 28 Eliminative Materialism (+3rd Assignment Discussion) Paul Churchland: Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes Handout on kinds of academic texts	October 31 Nonlinguistic mental representations Elisabeth Camp: Thinking with Maps
November 4 Language processing and Computation Steven Pinker: The Language Instinct, Ch.7	November 7 Artificial intelligence Alan Turing: Computing Machinery and Intelligence
November 11 Against AI John Searle: Minds, Brains, and Programs	November 14 How do contemporary AI systems work? 3Blue1Brown: What is a Neural Network?
November 18 AI and learning 3Blue1Brown: Gradient descent, how neural networks learn	November 21 AI Sentience? David Chalmers: Could a Large Language Model be Conscious?
November 25 Animal Language? Patricia Greenfield and Emily Savage Rumbaugh - Grammatical combination in Pan paniscus	November 28 NO CLASS (Thanksgiving)
December 2 Against Animal Language Steven Pinker: The Language Instinct, Ch.11	December 5 Syntax and Semantics in Animal Signals James Hurford: The Origins of Grammar (excerpt)
December 9 Great Ape Gestural Communication Visit from Kirsty Graham (reading tbd)	December 12 Language of thought in animals Camp: A Language of Baboon Thought?

Please note: this schedule of reading is *tentative*, and will almost certainly change during the semester. Always check the course website for the current schedule.