

PHILO 38080: WITTGENSTEIN | FALL 2025

FIRST PAPER ASSIGNMENT

WHAT LANGUAGE GAME ARE YOU PLAYING?

Your goal in this assignment is to choose a specific, actual person to whom you would like to explain one of Wittgenstein's ideas, and then write an explanation that is customized for them, given their background information and interests. The paper will have three parts:

1. A brief (approximately 100–200 word) description of your intended audience and the question that you're going to try to answer for them. Why did you choose to try to explain this idea for this audience, in particular? Explain what you know about their relevant background knowledge and interests, what they might get out of this idea in particular, but also what is challenging about explaining this part of Wittgenstein to them, specifically.
2. An approximately 700–800 word explanation of the relevant idea or passage in Wittgenstein's work. In order to be successful, this explanation should put your audience in a position to better understand Wittgenstein's idea, but also to see what was motivating him, and why this idea has been interesting to later thinkers. In other words: you should try to explain why the idea is interesting *to your audience*.
3. A brief (approximately 100–200-word) explanation of some of the specific choices that you made in writing part 2 in order to make it more intelligible and interesting to your specific audience. How did you customize it for them, specifically? Which terminology did you assume they would understand, and which did you avoid, or stop to explain in detail because they were unlikely to understand it? How did you relate it to the interests and background information that they already have? Etc.

WHO ELSE IS PLAYING?

One thing you need to decide is who your audience will be. Here are some possible candidates:

- A friend or relative (e.g. a parent) who has never studied philosophy, but who wants to know what you're learning about in philosophy class.
- A fellow philosophy major who is considering whether to take this course in the future, who has certain background knowledge about other topics in philosophy, and who would like an example of one of the interesting ideas you've been learning about.
- A child (e.g. a younger relative) who asks you what you're reading about.
- One of your professors from another course who hasn't read Wittgenstein in a long time, or who has never read it, and who asks you about a specific passage in Wittgenstein's work.

These are just suggestions. I am open to other possible audiences. If you have a possible audience in mind but aren't sure if they will be good for this assignment, just ask me, and I'll try to help.

THE OBJECT OF THE GAME

Another important decision is which of Wittgenstein's ideas to try to communicate to your audience. Again, there are many possibilities. Here, I have two pieces of advice:

- Try to choose something that might be particularly interesting to communicate to your specific audience, if you can do a good job. There's something very satisfying about communicating an idea to someone in a way that makes it particularly interesting, relevant, and useful to them.

- Choose something relatively specific and manageable. So, for example, don't try to explain the entire *Tractatus*, or Wittgenstein's understanding of logic, or his theory of how language works, or how he changed from his early to his late period, or something as big as that. Try to explain something small, specific and relatively self-contained, which you can do more justice to in a short piece of writing. Here are some questions that I can imagine one of the above-imagined audiences asking you, and that I think you could give a good, clear, interesting answer to in 750 words:
 - The one quotation from Wittgenstein I know is, "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence." What did he mean by that? Why did he say it?
 - I have heard that Wittgenstein was trying to create some kind of perfect language. Why did he want to do that?
 - What did Wittgenstein mean when he said that, "The world is the totality of facts, not of things?" Why did he say that?
 - I have heard the term "language game" before, but I don't know what Wittgenstein meant by it or why he talked about it. Can you explain?
 - Why did Wittgenstein stop thinking about the meaning of a word as what the word refers to?

SOME RULES OF THE GAME

Submit the paper to me by email no later than 11:59pm on **November 14th, 2025**.

Please write the paper in a word processor of your choice, save a copy (!), and then **copy and paste it directly into the body of the email (not as an attachment)**.

Your paper should be clear and concise, **approximately 900-1200 words total (including all parts)**. Do your best to stick to this length; it is not better to write a longer essay (after all, there are limits to how much a real audience would want to hear!).

You should cite any sources that you use, including required readings, whether you discuss them explicitly or just use them as inspiration or for background information. It is not required that you read and cite sources other than our required readings, but it might be useful depending on your topic.

You should not use ChatGPT, Claude, or any other AI to write all or part of your paper for you. There are many legitimate uses of these technologies during the thinking and writing process. For example, just like Wikipedia or the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, you could use it to help you find out which philosophers have talked about a certain idea, or to brainstorm connections between what you're interested in and other topics. If you use AI in any of these ways, you should double check that it gave you good information (just as you should if you use Wikipedia). You should also cite the AI tool that you used, and explain briefly how you used it, just like any other source. However, when it comes time to write the paper, please do it for yourself. My reason for insisting on this is that the point of this assignment is to help you to develop the skill of understanding and explaining confusing ideas to other people. That is an extremely valuable skill for anyone to have, and there will be many times in your life when you won't be able to rely on AI to help with it. But you can't develop that skill by outsourcing it to a machine.

The exact formatting/citation style don't matter, as long as it is clear and consistent.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

- Accuracy: You got Wittgenstein right, to the extent that we can tell what he meant in the relevant passages. In any case, you haven't said anything that clashes with things we've seen him saying in the same reading, for example.

- Clarity: It should be easy to understand what point is being made at all times. This means writing well, but also structuring your essay carefully so that it's obvious how each thing that you say fits with your overall aims.
- Audience appropriateness: In particular, I will try to assess how clear your paper is *to the audience you chose*, based on what you tell me about them.
- Topic appropriateness: Did you choose an appropriate idea/audience pair?