

Bad Language: Swears, Slurs, & Bullshit

DAMIEN STOREY | SPRING 2024 | VERSION 0.9

CONTENTS

Course particulars	2
Course description	2
Student responsibilities	2
Assessment	2
Course policies	3
General Reading	4
Essay	5
Option 1: essay on slurs	5
Option 2: essay on your chosen topic	5
Lecture outline	6
Part 1: Pragmatics	6
Part 2: Swear words and slurs	6
Part 3: Bullshit	7
Essay & writing advice	9
Writing philosophy	9
Some basics of typography	10
Plagiarism	11

COURSE PARTICULARS

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course looks at two kinds of ‘bad’ language. The first is words or phrases that are found offensive in certain contexts: swears and slurs. The second is a use of language that is distinct from lying, but still shows a disregard for meaningfulness or truth: bullshit.

We’ll approach these topics from a variety of theoretical directions, including linguistics, psychology, and philosophy, and we’ll make heavy use of *pragmatics*, which is the study of linguistic utterances in the contexts in which they are performed. Pragmatics examines the ways in which speakers use sentences to convey something different from or in addition to what their words literally mean.

Some examples of the questions we’ll ask are: What function do swear words play in a language? Is it wrong to swear and if so why or why not? Is the derogatory content of a slur part of the word’s meaning or is it a result of other pragmatic features? Can we give a univocal account of bullshit? How does bullshit behave in specific domains like advertising, news, politics, art, and academia? If bullshit frequently involves speech that is literally meaningless, how is it so successful at persuading people?

Note: all participants in this class will be required to pay careful attention to the difference between *using* offensive words (‘Damien is a drunken paddy’) and *mentioning* offensive words (‘Paddy’ is a slur for an Irish person’).

The learning outcomes of this course include an understanding of:

- pragmatics and how it is applied to common questions in the philosophy of language.
- what philosophers and linguists have said about swear words and slurs.
- how bullshit is defined and examined by several different academic disciplines.

STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES

Your most important responsibility is to *do the assigned reading* before the lecture. In addition, in lectures, students are expected to take an active role: asking questions and engaging in discussion with each other and with me.

ASSESSMENT

The course is assessed by:

1. (40%) Five lecture tasks. These are short in-class tasks on the reading you’ve prepared for that week. Assessment: letter grade, F to A+.
2. (30%) Take-home exam: essay. An essay of no more than 2000 words (four single-spaced pages). This will be due near the end of the course. You’ll be given a choice of essay questions. Assessment: letter grade, F to A+.

3. (25%) In-class exam on the course readings. A mostly multiple-choice exam at the end of the course, usually in the last class of the semester. Assessment: letter grade, F to A+.
4. (5%) A short test to make sure you have read and understood the 'Course Particulars' and 'Plagiarism' sections of the syllabus, in the second or third week. Pass or fail.

Your grades will always be given to you as one of the following letter grades.

A+	—	Exceptional / Almost publishable
A	4.00	Superior
A-	3.70	Above Average
B+	3.30	Above Average
B	3.00	Average
B-	2.70	Average
C+	2.30	Below Average
C	2.00	Below Average
C-	1.70	Borderline
D+	1.30	Deficient
D	1.00	Deficient
F	0.00	Failing

Marking criteria. For many of you, philosophy is a new subject and you might be wondering about how written work in philosophy is graded. The best way to understand this is to look carefully at the section below on [writing philosophy](#) and at the links to other resources at the bottom of that section.

Oral component. I will sometimes add an in-person interview on a submitted task as an additional assessment criterion.

COURSE POLICIES

Course material. All required reading will be on Blackboard at least a week prior to the relevant lecture. Optional reading will not usually be on BB, but both the library and the internet exist.

Extensions and exemptions. Extensions and exemptions for take-home work or in-class tasks are possible (though not guaranteed) if *both* of two conditions are met: (a) it is for a sound academic, medical, or emergency reason and (b) I am made aware of the request *before* the due date. There are no exceptions to these rules, even for tragedies or traumas.

AI and writing tools. Using AI tools, such as ChatGPT, for literally any purpose whatsoever—even for research for written work—is forbidden and in most cases is considered plagiarism. Moreover, using *any* tool to help you write other than a word processor like MS Word or LaTeX—even tools like Grammarly, Google Translate, or the various paraphrasing tools—is forbidden and results in failure of that component.

English coherence rule. From your first day as a fresher, you are expected to be able to write in English, even if it is bad English. Language errors do not effect your grade, except if they make your writing imprecise or unclear. However, if your English is highly unusual, so that it appears

not to have arisen from a normal process of writing—i.e. not to have arisen from you using what English you have to try to say what you mean—there will be a significant marking penalty. Examples include the confused sentences sometimes produced by using Google Translate or paraphrasing with a thesaurus; a preponderance of rare or unusual word choices that are not part of a normal vocabulary; or writing that is of a much higher standard than a student could plausibly have written themselves (e.g. in comparison with previous written work).

GENERAL READING

While there is no book that will cover all the content of the course, either or both of the following introductions, designed for undergraduates, would be great preparation for the course:

- Herman Cappelen and Josh Dever (2019) *Bad Language* (OUP)
- William G. Lycan *Philosophy of Language: A Contemporary Introduction*, 2nd edition, (Routledge: Oxford, 2008)

ESSAY

For the essay—which is a take home essay of *less than* 2000 words including footnotes but excluding bibliography, for 30% of your grade—you have two options:

OPTION 1: ESSAY ON SLURS

For this essay, you need to do the following:

1. Critically compare the position of two authors who disagree about the nature of slurs. The positions you discuss must come from *original papers by these authors* (i.e. not from summaries in other articles or sources online)—if there is not clear, explicit, and plentiful evidence of this you won't pass this essay. You can find papers in, for example, the collection D Sosa (ed) *Bad words* (OUP) or among the articles mentioned in Leopold Hess (2022) 'Slurs: Semantic and Pragmatic Theories of Meaning' (week 6 reading). The Hess article is also a good starting point for understanding the various positions that are currently popular.
2. The vast majority of the essay should consist of (a) accurate and clear expositions of the positions of the two authors and (b) detailed and relevant arguments: either expositions of arguments the author's make for their positions or arguments you make for or against them. The *only* thing that will be graded will be (a) and (b); anything else will be *completely ignored* for grading purposes.
3. The bibliography should cite, and the essay should make use of, at least three papers or books.
4. Please carefully read the essay advice in this syllabus (section 'essay & writing advice' below) and look at the guides linked there.

OPTION 2: ESSAY ON YOUR CHOSEN TOPIC

For this essay, you can propose your own essay topic. It must be on one of the central topics of this course: prejorative language (swears and/or slurs) or bullshit. *Before the end of the spring break*, you need to send me an essay proposal of about one page that (a) proposes a question you'll explore or thesis you'll defend and (b) lists at least three papers or books that will be the core research for the essay.

LECTURE OUTLINE

PART 1: PRAGMATICS

Illocutionary acts

Week 1: Lecture 1 & 2

- J.L. Austin 'Performative Utterances' in Austin *Philosophical Papers* (OUP: Oxford, 1961) [Also widely available online]
- William G. Lycan, *Philosophy of Language: A Contemporary Introduction*, 2nd edition, (Routledge: Oxford, 2008), chapters 11–12

Conversational implicature

Week 2: Lecture 3 & 4

- Grice 'Logic and Conversation' in Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Harvard University Press: Harvard, 1967) [Also widely available online]
- William G. Lycan, *op. cit.*, chapter 13

Metaphor

Week 3: Lecture 5 & 6

- William G. Lycan, *op. cit.*, chapters 14
- Donald Davidson 'What Metaphors Mean' *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978) 31–47
- Optional: Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber 'Explaining Irony' in Wilson and Sperber *Meaning and Relevance* (CUP: Cambridge, 2012) pp. 123–145

PART 2: SWEAR WORDS AND SLURS

Swearing (two weeks)

Week 4: Lecture 7 & 8 and Week 5: Lecture 9 & 10

- Jay, T & Janschewitz, K (2008) 'The pragmatics of swearing' *Journal of Politeness Research Language Behaviour Culture* 4(2): 267–88
- (Optional): Stapleton, *et al.* (2022) 'The power of swearing: What we know and what we don't' *Lingua* 277: 1–14 [Overview of studies primarily on 'annoyance' uses of swearing (e.g. crying 'fuck!' when you stub your toe)]
- (Optional): Stapleton, Karyn (2010) 'Swearing' in Miriam *et al.* (eds) *Interpersonal Pragmatics* (De Gruyter) 289–306 [Overview of studies on the social/communicative uses of swearing]

Slurs

Week 6: Lecture 11 & 12

- Leopold Hess (2022) 'Slurs: Semantic and Pragmatic Theories of Meaning' in Stalmaszczyk (ed) *The Cambridge Handbook of the Philosophy of Language* (OUP)
- Optional: Geoffrey K. Pullum (2016) 'Slurs and Obscenities: Lexicography, Semantics, and Philosophy' in D Sosa (ed.) *Bad words* (OUP) [A broad-ranging, entertaining, and opinionated take on the nature of pejorative language and slurs]

- *Optional*: Cappelen and Dever (2019) *Bad Language* (OUP), chapters 6 and 7

The ethics of slurs and swearing

Week 7: Lecture 13 & 14

- Shoemaker, D. (2000) ‘Dirty words’ and the offense principle’ *Law and Philosophy* 19: 545–584
- *Optional*: Bouke de Vries (2023) ‘Is swearing morally innocent?’ *Ratio* 36: 159–68
- *Optional*: Carmen M. Cusack (2014) ‘Use of the Word ‘Fuck’ in Pedagogy and Higher Learning’ *Journal of Law & Social Deviance* 8: 133–68

PART 3: BULLSHIT

Lying vs. bullshit

Week 8: Lecture 15 & 16

- **TASK**: try to define (i.e. find necessary and sufficient conditions for) lying.
- Harry Frankfurt *On Bullshit* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2005) [This is a 5000-word ‘book’—and widely available online]
- The following website has many useful resources, including a helpful bibliography: callingbullshit.org

Ramazan break

Week 9: Lecture 17 & 18

Spring break

Week 10: Lecture 19 & 20

Frankfurt vs. Cohen’s account of bullshit

Week 11: Lecture 21 & 22

- G. A. Cohen (2012) ‘Complete Bullshit’, in *Finding Oneself in the Other* (Princeton University Press)
- *Optional*: Thomas L. Carson (2016) ‘Frankfurt and Cohen on bullshit, bullshiting, deception, lying, and concern with the truth of what one says’ *Pragmatics & Cognition* 23, 53–67 [critical assessment of both Frankfurt and Cohen’s accounts]

Bullshit in art and academia

Week 12: Lecture 23 & 24

- [International art English](#) [An online essay on the language used by artists and galleries]
- Alan Sokal (1996) ‘A physicist experiments with cultural studies’, *Lingua Franca* 6:62-64 [Sokal’s report on his deliberately bullshit paper that was accepted in a respected cultural studies journal]
- G. A. Cohen (2012) ‘Complete Bullshit’ [Focus this time on the section ‘Why one kind of bullshit flourishes in France’]

The psychology of bullshit reception (two weeks)

Week 13: Lecture 25 & 26 and Week 14: Lecture 27 & 28

- Gordon Pennycook, *et al.* (2015) ‘On the reception and detection of pseudo-profound bullshit’ *Judgment and Decision Making* 10: 549–63
- *Optional*: Littrell, Risko, and Fugelsang (2021) “You can’t bullshit a bullshitter’ (or can you?): Bullshitting frequency predicts receptivity to various types of misleading information’ *Social Psychology*: 1484–505

AI and bullshit

Week 15: Lecture 29 & 30

- Carl T. Bergstrom & C. Brandon Ogbunu (2023)
‘Opinion: ChatGPT Isn’t ‘Hallucinating.’ It’s Bullshitting.’

ESSAY & WRITING ADVICE

WRITING PHILOSOPHY

Please pay close attention to the following advice, especially 1 and 2. They try to cater for the most common and most easily solved problems I find in students' writing. Please take them seriously.

1. *Justify*. Assume that for every claim you make, the reader is asking 'why on earth should I believe that?' In a philosophy essay, there should always be an excellent answer to this question. You should consider this to be, above all else, your aim when writing an essay. The worst thing you can do is to make bold assertions without defending them, and the second worst is to make bold assertions and defend them weakly. Note that this includes interpretive claims: if you write 'Plato believes that p', you need to show your reader, perhaps by giving a supporting quote, that this is indeed something Plato believes.
2. *Explain*. In short: explain *everything*. It should be possible for an intelligent peer who hasn't studied philosophy to fully understand your essay without needing to read the authors you're writing about. For example: if you use a technical term, or discuss an argument or position, you must clearly and fully explain it to your reader. This is partly because good academic writing should be explicit and easily understood, but it is also because your ability to explain the ideas you're discussing—clearly, precisely, and succinctly—is what you're being assessed on. Your readers, including your grader, know that you understand something only if, and to the extent that, you've successfully explained it. You might well know, for example, what a categorical imperative is, but you need to *show* that you know it and how precisely you know it. Explaining even small, simple ideas well is a lot harder than you might think; don't underestimate how important it is, and how much work it takes.

A bad essay: 'p!'

A good essay: 'For reasons x, y, and z, it seems that p.'

An excellent essay: 'Reasons x, y, and z give us good grounds for thinking that p, although someone might offer an objection along the following lines ... However, I think there is a promising response to this objection ...'

3. *Use headings*. Before you start writing, sketch a structure for your essay. When writing, use headings that reflect this structure. A typical essay might have 2–4 headings.
4. *Ensure your conclusions reflect your arguments*. You might have been taught that strong, persuasive prose requires confident assertions, rather than hesitant, qualified ones. But in philosophy your assertions should reflect the actual degree of confidence that is warranted by the evidence you've provided. Decisive arguments are rare—even rarer are decisive arguments in just a few lines of a student's essay. So be careful not to mistake considerations that give us a good reason for believing that p for an argument that shows conclusively that p. A good essay is likely to have a large range of (appropriate) qualifying phrases: 'this shows decisively that p'; 'this is a strong reason to believe that p'; 'this suggests that p'; 'this makes it less implausible that p'; and so forth. Be especially careful with strong success verbs like 'refutes', 'proves', or 'shows'.

5. *Show independence of thought rather than originality.* You might think that in philosophy you ought to express your own unique opinions, different from those of the authors you read. But originality—the simply fact that an idea is new—has little value by itself and should not be your aim. After all, an idea can be both highly original and obviously false. What *has* value is independence of thought. For example, if you agree with the conclusions of a certain author because you fully understand them, have thought critically about their arguments, and have carefully considered alternative possibilities, then you believe nothing original, but you are showing admirable independence of thought.
6. *Be sufficiently detailed.* The topics you'll consider are large. People write books about them, but you only have a few pages. This presents a challenge: on the one hand, you want to show that you're familiar with the whole topic; on the other hand, you want to do more than simply scratch the surface, never looking at any one issue in detail. This can be a difficult balance to achieve, but in general it is much better to *err on the side of detail*. One approach might be to devote about the first third of your essay to a more general introduction of the topic and then use the last two-thirds to examine one or two smaller points in much greater detail—you might, for example, focus on *one* argument, premise, or objection that you think is especially important or interesting.
7. *Use quotes correctly.* Especially in historical subjects, including quotes from relevant primary texts can be an excellent way to illustrate, justify, and give some focus to your discussion. One way (of many) to use a quote is the following: make a claim; present a quote that supports the claim; and then explain and interpret the text of the quote in order to *show* that and why it supports your claim. But a caution: never use a quote as a way of *saying* something—rather, a quote should be presented as evidence *about which* you have something to say.

For more guides to essay writing, see Jim Pryor, [Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Essay](#), or this [guide from the Harvard writing center](#).

SOME BASICS OF TYPOGRAPHY

The following are a few typographic conventions worth learning.

1. *Indent paragraphs.* But do not indent the opening paragraph of the document or the first paragraph after a section heading. You may instead—not in addition—separate paragraphs with a blank line, although this is better suited to list-like texts, such as legal documents, than continuous prose.
 2. *Use single line spacing.* It's easier to read. Double spacing is only necessary when a printed copy of your work will be annotated.
 3. *A footnote mark is always placed after punctuation.*¹ It is almost always best to place a footnote at the end of the sentence, after the sentence-ending full stop. Avoid consecutive footnotes; instead, place all information in one footnote if possible.
1. This includes full stops, commas, colons, semi-colons, and quotations marks.

4. *Correctly indicate titles.* The titles of books and journals should be italicised; the title of articles or papers should be in inverted quotes.
5. *Indicate quotes with either quotation marks or by using a block quote.* Extra flourishes, such as italicising, are unnecessary. And never place a block quote within quotation marks.
6. *Learn the difference between a hyphen (-), en-dash (–), and em-dash (—).* Use an en-dash like ‘to’ in ranges of dates or numbers (e.g. 87–142) and to express certain relationships between words: for example, an ‘on–off switch’ or ‘Irish–American relations’. Either an en- or em-dash can be used to indicate a parenthetical phrase. If you use an en-dash, add a space either side – like so – but em-dashes are always unspaced—like so.
7. *Make ellipses with three full stops separated by spaces.* Like this . . . , with a space either side. You will most commonly use an ellipsis to indicate portions of text that you’ve omitted from quotes. Don’t omit any sentence-ending full stops that precede an ellipsis (i.e. together they make four stops). For example:

[P]articular care needs to be exercised when eliding text to ensure that the sense of the original is not lost . . . A deletion must not result in a statement alien to the original material. . . . Accuracy of sense and emphasis must accompany accuracy of transcription. (CMS, 16th, 13.49)

8. *Use a single space after full-stops.* A double space, once common, is now recognised as unnecessary.

PLAGIARISM

Koç University does not tolerate plagiarism of any kind or degree, whether deliberate or accidental.

Definition

Plagiarism is the inclusion in your work of something that is not your own—such as another author’s ideas or phrases, or AI generated text—without acknowledgement, so that it is presented as your own original contribution. It is entirely *your* responsibility to learn what plagiarism is and how to avoid it.

Degree of plagiarism

No amount of plagiarism is acceptable: a single plagiarised line in an essay will result in failure, and could result in disciplinary procedures.

Quotation marks

Quotations need to be in quotation marks; otherwise, it is plagiarism, whether or not you cite the author.

Accidental vs. deliberate

Students accused of plagiarism invariably claim it was accidental. That’s irrelevant: the problem is the plagiarism itself, not the motivation behind it. The consequences of allegedly accidental plagiarism are no different from deliberate plagiarism. Frankly, if you are unable to avoid plagiarism even while sincerely trying, you should not be in a university, just as you should be allowed to drive if you accidentally run people over.

If you are worried that you might be plagiarising, you can always ask me before you submit your work.

Paraphrasing

Read this section very very carefully.

Paraphrasing an author is repeating what they say, but in your own words. Some forms of paraphrasing are acceptable, others are not. One reason to paraphrase is simply to state the author's ideas in your essay, perhaps to support your argument: if you genuinely use your own words and reference the author, this is acceptable. But if you paraphrase because you are unable to describe what they say by yourself—since you do not trust your English, for example, or fully understand them—then you are plagiarising, *even if you cite the author*.

The crucial point is that you should never use paraphrasing as a *writing* tool. Directly using an author's words to construct your own sentences or paragraphs—looking back and forth at what they wrote as you type—will almost certainly result in plagiarism, even if you try to change the words. What should guide you when you are writing is not the author's words, but your understanding of what they mean. As a rule of thumb, ask yourself 'could I have written what I wrote even if I had entirely forgotten the original author's words?' If your answer is no, then you are plagiarising their writing, since a genuine understanding of their ideas will be independent of the words and phrases they use to express them.

Will it help if I tell you I loved your course or beg or cry?

No. I will just fail you harder.