

# On Lying and Deception

CORE 2500 – Exploratory Core, Section 09

Fall 2025

Furman 209

TR 9:30–10:45am

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## Course Description

This course responds to the ongoing erosion of civil discourse and prevalence of lying as a political strategy by studying the many faces of lies and other forms of deceit. Through a combination of philosophical and literary texts, we will explore the ethical, political, aesthetic, and linguistic dynamics of lying. We will attempt to gain a new perspective upon the many and diverse scenes of human life in which deceit can play a central role, from its early manifestations in childhood to its later role in coping with the burdens and horrors of adult existence; from its abuses within the intimacies of the family to its function in political propaganda and the public sphere; from the creation of art and literary worldmaking to the nature of language itself. Surveying a range of canonical meditations on lying in philosophy and literature from late antiquity to our contemporary condition, our course aims to use the study of deception as a means of introducing you to the philosophy of language, the ethics and politics of deceit, and literary theories of the fabulating subject.

The class will also provide serve as an opportunity to reflect upon the relationship between your co-instructors' two primary disciplines—philosophy and literary studies—which find common purpose in theories of language and the status of truth claims. Over the course of the semester we will not only toggle between readings in philosophy and literature but will seek to highlight areas of shared inquiry and interpretation, whether around speech act theory, questions of ethics and character, or the risks inherent in the willful suspension of disbelief. Class discussions and written assignments will encourage you to reflect upon the perspectives that a multidisciplinary approach can open up when studying a complex and rich humanistic topic such as lying.

## Required Texts

The following texts have been ordered to the Vanderbilt Bookstore and are required for the course:

1. J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*. Second Edition. Ed. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Harvard University Press, 1975).
2. Elena Ferrante, *The Lying Life of Adults*. Trans. Ann Goldstein (Europa, 2020).
3. Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (Vintage Books, 1988).

Other assigned readings will be made available as PDFs on Brightspace.

## **Course Requirements**

Below are the major assignments you will complete in this course. More details about each assignment will be distributed later, but here is an overview:

### *Response Posts:*

One of your principal week-to-week commitments this semester will be in the form of response posts. Beginning in Week 2, we'll set up weekly forums on Brightspace under the 'Discussions' menu. Eight times during the semester (and at least four times by Fall Break) you are required to post roughly 200 words on that week's materials. You can post more than the required eight times for extra credit (see Specification Grading policy, below). You can post anytime during the week, but the week "closes" at 5 p.m. on Saturdays. We will send out specifications for discussion posts during the first week of class.

### *Paper #1: Philosophy-Forward Essay:*

The first formal writing assignment for our course will prioritize the philosophical texts from the first third of the semester (Augustine, Aquinas, Bonhoeffer, Grotius, Kant, Austin). We call this assignment "philosophy-forward" because your essay should devote most, if not all its argument to an analysis of your chosen work of philosophy. You are allowed to introduce evidence from literary works to exemplify, refine, or test your argument, but the weight of your analysis should fall on advancing a thesis about the work of philosophy in question. We will provide additional guidelines for this assignment in the weeks ahead. This paper is due Monday, Sept. 29 by 5 p.m.

### *Paper #2: Literature-Forward Essay:*

The second writing assignment for our course will prioritize one of the literary texts from the middle portion of our semester (James, Ferrante). We call this assignment "literature-forward" because your essay should devote most, if not all its argument to an analysis of your chosen work of literature. You are allowed to introduce concepts from our philosophical texts to exemplify, refine, or test your argument, but the weight of your analysis should fall on advancing a thesis about the work of literature in question. We will provide additional guidelines for this assignment in the weeks ahead. This paper is due Friday, Oct. 31 by 5 p.m.

### *Paper #3: Integrative Essay:*

The final writing assignment for our course requires that you integrate philosophical and literary studies methods in a comparative analysis of one of the remaining philosophical texts (Beauvoir, Frankfurt, Arendt) and our final work of literature (Ishiguro). We will provide additional guidelines for this assignment in the weeks ahead. This paper is due Tuesday, Dec. 9 by 5 p.m.

## **Specification Grading**

This course aims to inspire deep engagement with readings, assignments, and discussions without over-emphasizing grades. As a result, your work on major assignments will be evaluated as "meets expectations" or "does not yet meet expectations." Assignments will not receive letter grades

(A/B/C/etc.), although you will receive a final letter grade at the end of the semester (see the table below).

The wording of the categories “meets expectations” and “does not yet meet expectations” is intentional. This course aims to cultivate a learning environment in which you feel comfortable taking risks and see learning as an incremental process. Expectations will be high because you are capable of meeting high expectations with appropriate support and effort.

Do not take “does not yet meet expectations” as a sign of failure. It’s not equivalent to an “F”! It means that there is potential for you to take instructor feedback and revise your work, thereby meeting expectations at a school like Vanderbilt. Indeed, this is the point of all your college classes—not to be perfect from the beginning but to engage in, even struggle with, the work of the course and to improve along the way.

By the end of the semester, you will have earned a final letter grade, which will be based on the following factors:

	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>
<b>Response Posts</b>	8 meet expectations	7 meet expectations	6 meet expectations	5 meet expectations
<b>Three Major Papers*</b>	3 meet expectations	2 meet expectations	1 meets expectations	None meet expectations
<b>Participation</b>	Meets expectations by the end of the semester	Meets expectations by the end of the semester	Does not meet expectations by the end of the semester	Does not meet expectations by the end of the semester

\* Three major papers: Philosophy-Forward Essay, Literature-Forward Essay, and Interdisciplinary Essay. All three assignments must be submitted in order to receive a passing grade, regardless of whether the assignment “meets expectations.”

#### *Additional Notes on Specification Grading Policy*

1. Each grade bundle (the columns on the table above) is jointly required to receive a grade in that range. All specifications in a bundle must be met in order to earn that grade. In other words, the lowest level you complete in each category sets the ceiling for your grade. For example, if you earn 2 “meets expectations” out of three on your major papers, you cannot earn more than a B+ in the course, even if you have otherwise completed most of the A bundle.
2. Students may earn a “plus” on a letter grade by demonstrating exceptional growth, engagement, exceeding expectations on assignments, or showing special commitment to the course, including by writing extra Response Posts or revising an essay that already received a “Meets Expectations.” A student may earn a “minus” on a letter grade by consistently meeting only the basic requirements of coursework, by showing little evidence of growth over the semester, submitting late work, or repeated violations of classroom policies.
3. Participation includes being clearly prepared for and engaging in class discussions and seizing opportunities to learn, collaborate, and find support. It requires (but goes far beyond) attendance. Excessive absences (see the policy below) can result in failure in the

course, regardless of performance in other grade categories. Participation will be evaluated at the end of each unit, at the same time that your major papers are returned to you with comments. Students who do not meet expectations on participation must meet with their instructor to revise their participation goals and be re-evaluated later in the term. Particularly excellent or particularly poor engagement in the course can earn a plus or minus on the letter grade at the end of the semester.

## **Revisions Policy**

As you can see from the grading policy above, your assignments will fall into one of two categories: “meets expectations” or “does not yet meet expectations.” Any assignment that falls into the second category can (and should) be revised so that it meets expectations. Note that the deadline for revising any major assignment is *two weeks* after you receive feedback from your instructor and *one week* after receiving feedback for response posts. That will help you remain focused on the continuous work of the class instead of playing catch-up at the end of the semester.

An exception is Paper #3, the Integrative Essay. Because of the essay’s late due date at the end of the semester, there will not be time to submit a revised version before final grades are due. In lieu of the opportunity to revise, we will make a special effort to recognize student effort on the front end of the paper writing process (including, but not limited to, speaking with us in office hours about the paper writing process), and take this into account in our evaluation of this final assignment.

## **Classroom Policies**

*Attendance.* Attendance is essential for doing well in this course, and your instructors will take attendance every class. However, because conflicts sometimes arise, you may miss two class periods (equivalent to one week of class) without question and without negatively affecting your final grade. After two absences, your contributions to class will be considered below “meets expectations,” unless you have a legitimate, instructor-accepted excuse. Especially excessive absences can result in failure in the course, regardless of performance in other grade categories. Whether you are present or not, you are responsible for all materials covered in class.

*Reading Assignments.* You should have the reading assignment for each day finished by the time our class meeting begins. Always bring the assigned reading and your notes to class, since we will often spend significant portions of our discussion working through important passages, and it will be imperative that you have the material in front of you.

*Food and Drink.* Please do not eat in class. Drinks are fine.

*Laptops, Phones, and other Electronic Devices.* Please silence and store out of sight all such devices during our class sessions. An exception will be on days when our longer readings (specifically, James, Nietzsche, and Beauvoir) are on the course Brightspace site.

*AI, Plagiarism, and the Honor Code.* Turning to AI text-generation tools can all too easily degrade the quality of a student's learning experience in thinking through the material for themselves and creating their own work. It also tends to result in subpar writing, at least for the sort of writing you will be asked to do in this class. As such, use of generative AI is not permitted for the writing in this class. This prohibition includes not only the creation of paper drafts, but also its use in the planning stages of writing (such as constructing an outline) and in the editing stages (if you need a second set of eyes on your paper to go over your style, grammar, or spelling, swap drafts with a friend, a classmate, roommate, etc., rather than running your paper through AI).

Beyond that, all students are expected to complete the course requirements while fulfilling the Vanderbilt Honor System. Information on the Honor System can be found here: [www.vanderbilt.edu/student\\_handbook/the-honor-system/](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/student_handbook/the-honor-system/). All cases of plagiarism or cheating will be handled through the Undergraduate Honor Council, and depending on severity may result in failure of the assignment, failure of the course, suspension, or expulsion.

*Accommodations and Accessibility.* We encourage any students with accommodations needs to submit requests for accommodations in accordance with the guidelines set out by Vanderbilt's Center for Student Access Services. Information, including the "Reasonable Accommodations Request Process," can be found here: <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/student-access/>.

*Religious Holidays.* Students who expect to miss classes or any other assignments as a consequence of their religious observance should provide us with notice of the dates of religious holidays on which they will be absent in the first two weeks of the semester.

## Reading Schedule

Date	Topic	Readings & Assignments
R 8/21	Beginning to Lie	Introduction to the Course; Shirley Jackson, "Charles"
T 8/26	Lying to Overcome the Friction of the World	Willa Cather, "Paul's Case"
R 8/28	Is Mendacity a Sin?	Augustine, Selections from: "On Lying" and "Against Lying"  Aquinas, Selections from: "Whether Lies are Sufficiently Divided into Officious, Jocular, and Mischievous Lies" and "Whether Every Lie is a Mortal Sin?"

T 9/2	The Credulous Subject	Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Gimpel the Fool"  Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "What is Meant by 'Telling the Truth'?"
R 9/4	Lying and the Moral Universe	Immanuel Kant, "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motives"  Hugo Grotius, "The Character of Falsehood"
T 9/9	Existentialism I: Lying in Extremity	Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Wall"
R 9/11	Abusing Language: Austin's Theory of Speech Acts	J.L. Austin, <i>How to Do Things With Words</i> , Lectures I & II
T 9/16		J.L. Austin, <i>How to Do Things With Words</i> , Lectures VIII & IX
R 9/18		J.L. Austin, <i>How to Do Things With Words</i> , Lecture XI  Some class time today will be devoted to discussing how to write Paper #1.
T 9/23		J.L. Austin, <i>How to Do Things With Words</i> , Lecture XII
R 9/25	<b>No Class Today</b>	<b>Paper #1 Due: 9/29</b>
T 9/30	Metaphors and the Unknown World	Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Nonmoral Sense"
R 10/2	The Aesthetics of Falsehood	Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Nonmoral Sense"  Henry James, "The Liar"
T 10/7		Henry James, "The Liar"

R 10/9	<b>Fall Break – No Class</b>	
T 10/14	Failures of Trust; or, Adulthood	Elena Ferrante, <i>The Lying Life of Adults</i>
R 10/16		Elena Ferrante, <i>The Lying Life of Adults</i>
T 10/21		Elena Ferrante, <i>The Lying Life of Adults</i>
R 10/23		Elena Ferrante, <i>The Lying Life of Adults</i>
T 10/28	Existentialism II: Dishonesty as the Refusal of Freedom	Simone de Beauvoir, <i>The Ethics of Ambiguity</i> , I
R 10/30		Simone de Beauvoir, <i>The Ethics of Ambiguity</i> , II <b>Paper #2 Due: 10/31</b>
T 11/4	On Complicity, Self-Deception, and Historical Blindness	Kazuo Ishiguro, <i>Remains of the Day</i>
R 11/6		Kazuo Ishiguro, <i>Remains of the Day</i>
T 11/11		Kazuo Ishiguro, <i>Remains of the Day</i>
R 11/13		Kazuo Ishiguro, <i>Remains of the Day</i>
T 11/18	Can There Be Truth in Politics?	Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics”
R 11/20		Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics”  Some class time today will be devoted to discussing how to write Paper #3.
11/24–28	<b>Thanksgiving Break</b>	
T 12/2	What If It’s All Bullshit?	Harry Frankfurt, “On Bullshit”
R 12/4		Floating Day <b>Paper #3 Due: 12/9</b>