

# Syllabus

## Ling 390a: Controlling the Discourse

UMass Amherst, Fall 2007

MWF 10:11 – 11:00, Dickinson 112

Course website: <http://courses.umass.edu/ling394a/>

Chris Potts  
potts@linguist.umass.edu  
South College 131  
Office hours: by appointment

Florian Schwarz (half-time TA)  
florian@linguist.umass.edu  
Office hours: by appointment

### Course description

The question “Why did you commit the murder?” is likely to be met with a sustained objection if asked in a courtroom. Why? “Who on earth would listen to polka?” sounds more like an assertion than a question. Why? Under what circumstances do speakers choose “Bagels, I like” over “I like bagels”? These are questions about how speakers use language to structure and control discourses. We’ll look to current linguistic theory to find answers to them. You will pick up skills that are vital to understanding how to structure effective arguments. You will discover why information structure can be a matter of life or death (politically, socially, literally). Intuitional, corpus, and experimental data will be used to examine issues in pragmatics and discourse processing.

### Course materials

There is no required textbook. Handouts, assignments, and readings will be given out in class and made available at the course website. If you miss a class, you should check the website to see if new materials have appeared there. We will not send you materials by email.

### Requirements and grading

- 3 essays, some with early and final drafts, and one of them related to an experiment you conduct (60%). The third and most extensive paper is due December 21; there is no final exam for the course.
- 5 homeworks (20%).
- Short quizzes, always announced at least two classes in advance (10%).
- Class participation, including work in small peer groups (10%).

**All work must be turned in by the start of class on the day that it is due.** Electronic submissions are not permitted. Late assignments will be graded as usual, but the grade assigned will be *halved* for each non-holiday weekday that the assignment is late.

**Extra credit.** We will drop your lowest homework grade if you participate in an experiment run by the Linguistics Department. These experiments are open to everyone. They typically involve reading or listening and last about an hour. You can find out about and sign up for experiments at the Experimental Sign-up Database:

<http://wwwx.oit.umass.edu/~linguist/esdb/>

Be sure to obtain evidence of your participation from the experimenter. At most one of your homework grades can be waived in this fashion. No paper grade can be waived this way (or any other way).

**Missed quizzes cannot be made up for any reason.** However, up to two quiz grades (including 0s) can be replaced by comparable grades on extra credit assignments of the following form: you find a post on Language Log and relate it to one of the topics of the course, in a short (one- or two-paragraph) essay, to be turned in within one non-holiday weekday of the quiz it replaces.

**Class participation is essential.** We won't take attendance, but you will often have group members counting on you to be present, so absences will be glaringly obvious.

## Course policies

### Academic honesty

The University's academic honesty policy is in full effect for this course:

[http://umass.edu/dean\\_students/code\\_conduct/acad\\_honest.htm](http://umass.edu/dean_students/code_conduct/acad_honest.htm)

Some specific notes about this course:

- Your work must be entirely your own. No collaboration is permitted without written permission from Chris. (There will be an email exchange that lays out the terms of the collaboration.)
- You are free to do as much research as you would like for your homework assignments and papers.
- Section III.A of the academic honesty policy refers to plagiarism. These clauses are particularly important for this course, which involves mostly writing assignments. In this class, the consequences for plagiarism are as follows: the first incident results in an F on the assignment in question, and the second is referred to the UMass Amherst Ombudsman (see [http://www.umass.edu/dean\\_students/code\\_conduct/dispute\\_res.htm](http://www.umass.edu/dean_students/code_conduct/dispute_res.htm)).

If anything about the above policies is unclear, let Chris know.

### Homework formatting

You need not type your assignments, though you are encouraged to do so, and there is no use avoiding the fact that the professional look of a neatly typed document can positively influence its evaluator. You might find it hard to type some assignments because they involve drawing diagrams and using special symbols. It is worth figuring out how to make a computer produce these things, but, as noted, it is not required.