

WESTERN UNIVERSITY
Department of Philosophy
Undergraduate Course Outline 2026-27

PHILOSOP 2041
Artificial Intelligence: Past and Present

INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION

Information including instructor contact details and course location can be found on the course Owl BrightSpace: <https://westernu.brightspace.com/>

PREREQUISITE CHECKING

There are no prerequisites for this course.

Unless you have either the requisites for this course or written special permission from your Dean to enrol in it, you may be removed from this course, and it will be deleted from your record. This decision may not be appealed. You will receive no adjustment to your fees in the event that you are dropped from a course for failing to have the necessary prerequisites.

[Student Responsibility for Course Selection](#)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course traces the evolution of artificial intelligence from early symbolic systems through to modern generative AI and agentic AI systems. From the perspective of contemporary philosophy of AI, students examine the ideas, values, and motivations that have shaped AI's development and continue to influence its trajectory.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Define and articulate the difference between key types of AI (e.g., symbolic AI, machine learning, deep learning, generative AI, and agentic AI) as well as their significance within the broader history of AI development.
2. Describe the ideas, values, and motivations that have driven AI research and development from its origins to the present day.
3. Assess how changing societal needs and perceptions of AI impacted the ideas, values, and motivations shaping AI development both positively and negatively.
4. Explain how philosophy has contributed to the development of AI, including its influence on key concepts like intelligence and research motivations, such as artificial general intelligence.
5. Apply philosophical concepts and frameworks to analyze contemporary AI systems and evaluate their significance in relation to earlier approaches.
6. Critically assess possible futures of AI development, drawing on historical patterns and philosophical perspectives to evaluate the forces likely to shape AI's ongoing trajectory.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1: Course Introduction (September 10)

1. No assigned reading.
2. Exit activity 1 (completed in class September 10)

Week 2: Origins of the Very Idea (September 15 & 17)

1. Assigned reading (complete prior to September 15)
2. Exit activity 2 (completed in class September 17)

Week 3: The Birth of AI (September 22 & 24)

1. Assigned reading (complete prior to September 22)
2. Exit activity 3 (completed in class September 24)

Week 4: Good Old-Fashioned Artificial Intelligence (September 29 & October 1)

1. Assigned reading (complete prior to September 29)
2. Exit activity 4 (completed in class October 1)

Week 5: The First AI Winter (October 6 & 8)

1. Assigned reading (complete prior to October 6)
2. Exit activity 5 (completed in class October 8)

Reading Week**Week 6: A Change in Mission (October 20 & 22)**

1. Assigned reading (complete prior to October 20)
2. Glossary Part 1 (due 11:59pm on October 20)
3. Exit activity 6 (completed in class October 22)

Week 7: Learning Machines (October 27 & 29)

1. Assigned reading (complete prior to October 27)
2. Exit activity 7 (completed in class October 29)

Week 8: Applications of Machine Learning (November 3 & 5)

1. Assigned reading (complete prior to November 3)
2. Exit activity 8 (completed in class November 5)

Week 9: Philosophers Against “The Algorithm” (November 10 & 12)

1. Assigned reading (complete prior to November 10)
2. Exit activity 9 (completed in class November 12)

Week 10: The Re-Birth of Artificial Intelligence (November 17 & 19)

1. Assigned reading (complete prior to November 17)
2. Exit activity 10 (completed in class November 19)

Week 11: Is this Chatbot Conscious? (November 24 & 26)

1. Assigned reading (complete prior to November 24)
2. Exit activity 11 (completed in class November 26)

Week 12: Revenge of the Philosophy Student (December 1 & 3)

1. Assigned reading (complete prior to December 1)
2. Exit activity 12 (completed in class December 3)

Week 13: Course Summary (December 8)

1. No assigned reading.
2. Exam review in class.
3. Exit Activity 13 (completed in class December 8).
4. Glossary Part 2 (due 11:59pm, December 8).

TEXTS

All course materials will be available for free on course Brightspace:

<https://westernu.brightspace.com/>

Students are responsible for checking the course OWL site (<https://westernu.brightspace.com/>) regularly for news and updates. This is the primary method by which information will be disseminated to all students in the class.

If students need assistance with the course OWL site, they can seek support on the OWL Brightspace Help page. Alternatively, they can contact the Western Technology Services Helpdesk. They can be contacted by phone at 519-661-3800 or ext. 83800.

Technical Requirement

This course requires you to have a reliable high-speed internet connection and a computer that meets the technical requirements for writing online timed assessments.

Electronic Devices

Students may require a laptop for in-class assessments.

METHOD OF EVALUATION

In class exit activities: 40% (Best 10 of 13)

Format: Each Thursday, the final 25 minutes will be devoted to a short in-class exit activity connected to that week's material. The format will vary from week to week and may include: a short-written reflection, a small-group discussion with a one-paragraph summary, a concept-mapping exercise, reflection questions, or a short, applied exercise (e.g., testing a claim from the reading against a real AI tool). The specific format for each week will be announced in class.

Purpose: These activities are exploratory, not evaluative of understanding. They are designed to get you actively engaging with the week's ideas by testing them, applying them, or discussing them with peers.

Submission: Completed and submitted in class on the day assigned, via BrightSpace. Activities cannot be submitted after class ends, in keeping with the "exit" format.

Grading: Each activity is graded out of 4 points. A rubric will be provided on BrightSpace.

Free Passes: Your final grade for this component is calculated from your best 10 of 13 scores. This means you may miss or skip up to three exit activities with no explanation or documentation required. Treat these as built-in flexibility for illness, scheduling conflicts, or an off day. *Please note, because not all elements of this assessment are required in the calculation of the final course grade, the instructor reserves the right to deny academic consideration for these missed elements.*

Glossary Part 1: 15%

Task: Individually complete 5 glossary entries on key concepts or terms from Weeks 1–5 (Course Introduction through The First AI Winter). Terms are set by the instructor, there is no choice of term. The list of 5 assigned terms will be posted to Brightspace.

Format: 150-250 words per entry, complete with definition, context, and an example.

Purpose: This assignment builds precision with the course's core vocabulary early in the term before that vocabulary gets put to more demanding use in the second half of the course (and in Glossary Part 2).

Submission: Submitted as a single document (Word or PDF) via Brightspace. Entries should appear in the order the terms were assigned and be clearly headed with the term in bold.

Grading: Each entry is worth 3 points, for 15 points total (scaled to 15% of final grade). A detailed rubric will be posted to Brightspace at the start of term.

Due: 11:59pm, October 20.

Late policy: 2-day grace period, after that, 5% per day up to 20%.

Academic consideration: Standard university academic consideration policies apply to this assignment.

Academic integrity note: Entries must be written in your own words. Direct quotations from source material are permitted only if short, clearly quoted, and cited. The glossary is meant to demonstrate your own understanding, not compiled definitions from other sources (including AI tools).

Glossary Part 2: 15%

Task: Individually complete 3 glossary entries on key concepts from Weeks 6–12 (A Change in

Mission through Revenge of the Philosophy Student). Terms are set by the instructor, there is no choice of term. The list of 3 assigned terms will be posted to Brightspace.

Format: 350-450 words per entry complete with definition, context, philosophical significance, and an example.

Purpose: Part 2 builds on the definitional precision established in Part 1 by asking you to place a term within the course's larger philosophical conversation, connecting it backward to earlier weeks and forward to the questions the course closes on (consciousness, the limits of "the algorithm," what's left for philosophy to do).

Submission: Same as Part 1, single document via Brightspace dropbox, terms in the order assigned, terms in bold.

Grading: Each entry is worth 5 points (1 definition, 2 context, 1 example, 1 significance), for 15 points total (scaled to 15% of final grade). A detailed rubric will be posted to Brightspace.

Due: 11:59pm, December 8.

Late policy: 2-day grace period, after that, 5% per day up to 20

Academic consideration: Standard university academic consideration policies apply to this assignment.

Academic integrity note: Entries must be written in your own words. Direct quotations from source material are permitted only if short, clearly quoted, and cited. The glossary is meant to demonstrate your own understanding, not compiled definitions from other sources (including AI tools).

Final exam: 30%

Format: In-class, 2 hours, written exam consisting of multiple choice and short answer.

Coverage: Cumulative across all 13 weeks. Examinable material includes readings, lecture content and concepts and terms covered in Glossary Parts 1 and 2.

Review: An in-class review session will be held during Week 13 (December 8), covering exam format and a study guide distributed in advance.

Materials permitted: This is a closed book exam.

Academic consideration: Standard university academic consideration policies apply to the exam.

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY POLICIES

The Department of Philosophy policies that govern the conduct, standards, and expectations for student participation in Philosophy courses are available in the Undergraduate section of

the Department of Philosophy website <http://uwo.ca/philosophy/undergraduate/policies.html> . It is your responsibility to understand the policies set out by the Senate and the Department of Philosophy, and thus ignorance of these policies cannot be used as grounds of appeal.

AUDIT

Students wishing to audit the course should consult with the instructor prior to or during the first week of classes.

ELECTRONIC DEVICES

No aids are permitted for this exam. Electronic devices of any kind (including calculators, cell phones and smart watches) are not permitted.

STATEMENT ON THE USE OF GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

Given this is a course on artificial intelligence, exploration of the technology is encouraged. If a student wishes to use AI for any aspect of the course including information gathering and writing, the student must obtain permission from the course instructor. At the start of the term the student may submit a request to the instructor outlining how they intend to use AI. Instructions on how to do so will be provided at the start of the course. If students do not obtain permission from the instructor and or use of AI beyond what the student and the instructor agreed is suspected, the following policy applies:

If AI use without permission is suspected, the instructor will ask for research notes, rough drafts, essay outlines, and other materials used in preparing assignments. Students are expected to retain these materials until after final grades have been entered. In the unlikely event of concerns being raised about the authenticity of any assignment, students may be asked to produce these materials; an inability to do so may weigh heavily against them.

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATION AND ACCESSIBLE EDUCATION

Academic Accommodation is “a means of adjusting the academic activities associated with a course or program of student in order to permit students with disabilities to participate in those activities at the University and to fulfill the essential requirements of a course or program.”

<https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academicpolicies/appeals/Academic%20Accommodationdisabilities.pdf>. Students with disabilities are encouraged to register with Accessible Education at the earliest opportunity. “Accessible Education plays a central role in Western's efforts to ensure that its academic programs are accessible for all students”
https://academicsupport.uwo.ca/accessible_education/index.html

SPECIAL EXAMINATIONS

A Special Examination is any examination other than the regular examination, and it may be offered only with the permission of the Dean of the Faculty in which the student is registered, in consultation with the instructor and Department Chair. Permission to write a Special Examination may be given on the basis of compassionate or medical grounds with appropriate supporting documents. To provide an opportunity for students to recover from the circumstances resulting in a Special Examination, the University has implemented Special

Examinations dates. These dates as well as other important information about examinations and academic standing can be found [here](#).

ACADEMIC CONSIDERATION

Students may request academic consideration in cases of extenuating circumstances – that is, personal circumstances beyond the student’s control that have a substantial but temporary impact on the student’s ability to meet essential academic requirements.

1. Requests for academic consideration are made to the Academic Advising office of Faculty in which the student is registered.
2. Requests for academic consideration include the following components:
 - a. Self-attestation signed by the student;
 - b. Indication of the course(s) and assessment(s) relevant to the request;
 - c. Supporting documentation as relevant

Requests without supporting documentation are limited to one per term per course.

Documentation for medical illness, when required, includes the completion of a [Western Student Medical Certificate \(SMC\)](#) or, where that is not possible, equivalent documentation, by a health care practitioner. Requests linked to examinations scheduled by the Office of the Registrar during official examination periods as well as practice laboratory and performance tests typically scheduled in the last week of term always require formal supporting documentation.

Policy on Academic Consideration – Undergraduate Students in First Entry Programs

RELIGIOUS ACCOMMODATION

Western’s Policy on Accommodation for Religious Holidays can be found here: https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/accommodation_religious.pdf. In the case of mid-term tests, notification is to be “given in writing to the instructor as early as possible, but not later than **one week** prior to the writing of the test”.

COURSE ASSIGNMENT

The last day of scheduled classes in any course will be the last day on which course assignments will be accepted for credit in a course. Instructors will be required to return assignments to students as promptly as possible with reasonable explanations of the instructor's assessment of the assignment.

SCHOLASTIC OFFENCES

Scholastic offences are taken seriously, and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

<https://www.uwo.ca/biology/pdfs/undergraduate/rights-and->

[responsibilities/scholastic discipline .pdf](#)

Statement on the use of plagiarism-checking software

All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com (<http://www.turnitin.com>).

ACADEMIC ADVISING

Your Home Faculty's Academic Advising Office will support or refer whenever you have an issue that is affecting your studies, including information on adding/dropping courses, academic considerations for absences, appeals, exam conflicts, and many other academic related matters. Do not hesitate to reach out to them if you are struggling and unsure where to go for help. Contact info for all Faculties is here:

https://registrar.uwo.ca/faculty_academic_counselling.html

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western (<https://uwo.ca/health/>) for a complete list of options about how to obtain help. Immediate help in the event of a crisis can be had by phoning 519.661.3030 (during class hours) or 519.433.2023 after class hours and on weekends (24/7 availability).

GENDER-BASED AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Western University [is committed to reducing incidents of gender-based and sexual violence](#) (GBSV) and providing compassionate support to anyone who is going through or has gone through these traumatic events. If you are experiencing or have experienced GBSV (either recently or in the past), you will find information about support services for survivors, including emergency contacts at the following website: <https://www.uwo.ca/health/gbsv/index.html>. To connect with a case manager or set up an appointment, please contact support@uwo.ca.