

24.93 The search for meaning – Syllabus – Fall 2022

Kai von Fintel

“We create islands of meaning in the sea of information” (Freeman Dyson). In this subject, we will explore a central feature of human nature: we are meaning-seeking engines. There are many ways of encoding and extracting meaning. We will talk about smoke signals, talking drums, alphabets, Universal Grammar, artificial languages, the problem of first contact, code breaking, Sherlock Holmes, the genetic code, and much more. We will bring in ideas from information theory, cryptography, linguistics, logic, psychology, anthropology, computer science, philosophy, and literature. Includes some reading and thinking outside class, but no problem sets or papers. Subject can count toward the 9-unit discovery-focused credit limit for first year students.

Logistics

- Thursdays 7:30pm-8:30pm
- Room 4-270
- 2 units: 1 hour lecture + 1 hour of reading/thinking

Calendar (12 lectures)

- 9/8 First class
- 11/3 No class (away at workshop)
- 11/24 No class (thanksgiving vacation)
- 12/8 Last Class

Website (including Piazza)

- <https://canvas.mit.edu/courses/16333>

Instructor

- Kai von Fintel, fintel@mit.edu
- Email me with any questions (or preferably use Piazza)
- I respond to email within 24 hours (but not on weekends)
- You can also make an appointment:
 - <https://fantastical.app/fintelkai/30min-meeting>
- Office: Room 32-D882, Stata Center, 8th floor

Requirements

To receive a Passing grade, I expect you to

- attend class every week
- email me in advance for excused absences
- participate in class discussions
- read & think as needed and assigned