

Goal: To write a short (4 page, double spaced, standard font) philosophy paper on a topic of your choice in consultation with the instructor. You will be graded on clarity of thought and the ability to illustrate an understanding of the topics and themes of one(or some) of the major authors we've covered in class. A crucial element of this understanding will be the appropriate use of **textual support**. That is, the use of quotations from the primary texts, and the ability to assimilate that information in your own words, with your own examples. I do **NOT** want to see merely regurgitated lecture notes.

Some notes about philosophy papers: Students often find philosophy papers difficult to write since the expectations are very different from those in other disciplines, even from those of other disciplines in the humanities. What follows is some general advice about how to go about writing short (4 - 5 page) philosophy papers

Before starting to write: Make sure that you have read all of the relevant texts very carefully. Even though you have probably read these texts previously, it is a good idea to reread them in light of the question you plan to answer.

How to conceive of and write your paper: Philosophy papers usually involve both *exposition* and *evaluation*. In the expository part of the paper, your task is to explain the view or argument under consideration. Make sure that your explanation is as explicit as possible. The evaluation part of the paper is your chance to do some philosophy of your own. It is not enough merely to state whether you agree or disagree with the philosopher's conclusion. You should engage with her reasoning. Some questions you might consider: does her argument succeed in getting to the desired conclusion? Which premises are the weakest points of the argument? What objections might be raised to these premises? Are there any ways that her argument could be bolstered to defend against such objections?

As you write, think about your intended audience. You should write your paper as if you imagine your audience as someone who is intelligent and interested in the subject but has not studied it. (Think of yourself, before taking this class, or perhaps of your roommate.)

When you use an unfamiliar or "technical" term (i.e. a term that we have given some specific meaning in this class) be sure to define it.

You should include textual references. Whenever you make a claim about what is said in the text, it is appropriate to provide a specific reference to back up your claim. Do not make claims like "Socrates believes that ..." without supporting them. For short papers using class texts, footnotes are not necessary; it is sufficient to make parenthetical references, such as (*Republic* 77b).

Write until you have said what you need to say, not until you hit the page limit. (Incidentally, if you find that you don't have enough to say to reach the word limit, you're probably missing something. The problem should be to confine your paper to the page limit, not to stretch out your paper to the minimum required.) You may end up with a first draft that is too long, but at a later stage you can go back through your work and see whether there are sentences or paragraphs that are not really necessary or that can be made more concise. The point is that you will be better able to evaluate what is truly important if you have included everything on your first draft.

Finally, do not try to compose your paper, from start to finish, in one session – especially not the night before it is due. Make sure that you have the chance to write a first draft and then let it percolate for a while. Very few people are able to dash off a good paper in one sitting!

How to write an introduction: Don't begin with a very general opening statement: "Plato was one of the world's greatest philosophers..." or "The definition of virtue is something that philosophers have debated for centuries..."

Do briefly tell your reader what your paper is about and what your main thesis is. Notice that there is a difference between telling your reader what you are going to talk about and telling your reader what you will **argue**. Compare:

In the *Meno*, Meno presents Socrates with a paradox about inquiry. There is no way to inquire into something that you don't know, since you don't know how to begin, but there is also no way to inquire into something that you already know, since you already have the knowledge in question. Thus, we reach the paradoxical conclusion that inquiry is impossible. Socrates attempts to unravel Meno's paradox by presenting his theory of recollection. In what follows, I will discuss Meno's paradox and Socrates' criticism of it.

In the *Meno*, Meno presents Socrates with a paradox about inquiry. There is no way to inquire into something that you don't know, since you don't know how to begin, but there is also no way to inquire into something that you already know, since you already have the knowledge in question. Thus, we reach the paradoxical conclusion that inquiry is impossible. Socrates attempts to unravel Meno's paradox by presenting his theory of recollection. In what follows, I will argue that Socrates does not adequately defend his theory of recollection. However, I will also suggest that even if we were to accept the theory of recollection, this would not provide an adequate answer to Meno's paradox.

The second of these introductions is superior to the first. Notice that only the second presents an **actual** thesis statement.

Sometimes you will be in a better position to write an introduction after you have written the main body of your paper, for you will then have a better idea of what your argument really is.

How to write a conclusion: Don't end with a hedged claim like "Though Socrates' argument is strong, his opponents also have good points." Also try to avoid the temptation to end with an empty prediction about continued debate: "Though Meno's definition of virtue is a good one, the philosophical debate over what it means to be virtuous will no doubt continue."

Do find some nice way of wrapping up your essay. This does not mean that you should claim that every facet of the issue has been addressed. Sometimes a conclusion sets out problems that still remain. There is nothing wrong with defending a qualified conclusion, such as "Socrates' theory of recollection can be defended against this criticism," rather than an unqualified conclusion, such as "Socrates' theory of recollection is entirely correct." In fact, you will probably not have argued for the latter conclusion in your paper, since it requires that you have shown not only that some criticisms fail, but also that there are not any other criticisms that might succeed against Socrates' theory. Make sure that you do not claim that you have shown more than have actually shown in your paper. (It is especially tempting to exaggerate your accomplishments in a grand-finale-style concluding paragraph; resist this temptation.)

For example, here is a conclusion that avoids exaggeration:

As Socrates' discussion with the slave suggests, it is plausible to suppose that someone can discover, without being taught, a geometrical claim that they did not already know. However, as I have argued, we cannot generalize from the case of geometrical knowledge to knowledge of other sorts of facts. Thus, Socrates fails to provide an adequate reason to believe his claim that all learning is recollection.

[Notice that the conclusion does not say that Socrates' claim is shown to be false, but only that Socrates has not adequately defended it.]

Once you have a draft: The principal virtue in philosophical writing is clarity. As you reread each sentence of your draft, ask yourself: "Is this point expressed clearly?" Your prose should be simple, direct, and to the point.

As you re-read your paper, think about whether it is organized in the best way. Would it be more effective if this paragraph went here, and that one went there? Very often, our first efforts need a rather serious structural overhaul. Also, look for opportunities to improve your paper, such as adding an example here, rewriting an awkward sentence there, and so on...

Proofread your paper carefully. Spelling mistakes and grammatical errors can distract a reader and divert her attention from your argument. It may also give her the impression – a false one, perhaps – that you simply don't care enough about your work to run it through a spell-check program.

Very often, what distinguishes an excellent paper from a merely decent paper is the depth and quality of the **explanations**. The decent paper may not make any obvious mistakes or omit anything crucial; it often just does not communicate its message as clearly and effectively as the excellent paper does. Thus, always try to find ways of strengthening your explanations. Examples will help here. Almost all philosophy relies on the use of examples, both for illustrative and persuasive purposes.

Grades: Remember that the grade that you get on the paper represents my judgment of the quality of *the results* – not what you *meant* to say, but what you actually said.

ANOTHER NOTE: DO NOT GET A PAPER OFF THE INTERNET. I TAKE PLAGERISM VERY SERIOUSLY AND WILL FOLLOW THROUGH WITH INVESTIGATING ANY SUSPICIOUS WRITING.

Possible topics: Again, please do not feel limited to these topics. You are encouraged to write on what interests you that is related to the books we've read.

Test

Lisa Newton offers a view on strong forms of affirmative action or what she calls reverse discrimination. **Evaluate** in detail her arguments including both the theoretical and practical problems she raises. Keep in mind that evaluating an argument is to analyze the strengths and weaknesses with reasons and evidence.

Test

Discuss Robert Fullinwider's article and thoughts on the issue of Affirmative Action. What does he think the real issue with discrimination is? How does he support the notion that quotas might be necessary? Are his arguments satisfactory? Why or why not?

— Discuss the legacy of segregation. What attempts have been made to integrate? Why or why not have these attempts been successful? What efforts would or could be successful and why?

— Discuss and **critically evaluate** van den Haag's retentionist argument. Be sure to include the Kantian and Utilitarian elements and the tension that his approach faces. How consistent is his theory?

Discuss at least two of Thomson's major themes and **explain** HOW her analogies illustrate those themes. Are these examples successful in arguing for her thesis? Why or why not?

Consider Nietzsche's critiques of Christianity and Plato and their efforts to establish morality. What is the main concern Nietzsche raises to these theories? Further, evaluate what is the value of value itself.

Discuss the theme of alienation and self-identity as it relates to the definition of manhood in the Hip Hop documentary film we watched in class. **OR** Discuss the theme of becoming desensitized to violence and sexism as it relates to the portrayal of women in the film.

Does music reflect on a culture or contribute to the culture?

Suppose you have a lucrative contract with a company in the field of your dreams. You have worked hard at your career and have earned the respect of your peers and others outside of your industry look up to and admire you. You have long heard rumors about the principal owner of the company, but just recently it was revealed that he said some very derogatory remarks that have become public that have deeply hurt many people including yourself. Many are morally condemning the owner's behavior and find his attitudes reprehensible and feel they should not be tolerated. What should you do? Do you have a moral responsibility to do anything? If you don't quit are you giving your implied consent to the owner's behavior? Does the fact that so many people look up to you and see you as a role model play a role in how you decide what to do? Discuss the possible responses and the moral implications of those choices.

Suppose you sit on the admissions review committee of a very exclusive club. Members of this club host events around the country that thousands of people attend and that generates millions of dollars in revenue, part of which goes back to club members. A prospective member of this club is thought to have deeply embedded racist attitudes and has exhibited a pattern of poor judgment and mistreatment of individuals. However; he also has a large checkbook and can pay all the membership dues and has offered to host club events in a highly coveted market that should generate even more revenue for other club members. How would you handle this person's request for joining the club? Why? Discuss the reasoning and implications of your choice and other alternative choices.

Do role models or people of power or influence have any moral obligation to those they influence? Discuss at least one person of influence that has "done the right thing" in your mind that as a result, has perhaps had a damaging effect on their image or persona in some circles. What did this person do, and why do you think they "did the right thing"? (This topic can be modified in a variety of ways to fit your interests while still maintaining a discussion of the central question)

Is Affirmative Action justified? Discuss the arguments for and/or against affirmative action policies? Which approach do you think is more reasonable and why?

Is the Death Penalty morally justified? Why or why not? EXPLAIN your position clearly and consider the other side carefully.

Is it permissible to pay foreign nations or Native American reservations to use their land for disposing of hazardous substances?

What obligations, if any, do we have regarding environmental preservation?

Discuss the impact of role models as it relates to music (or some other related field) What messages do current mainstream acts promote and detail how this is problematic?

Select a topic from the first paper assignment handout that you have not already written on.

Select a topic related to any section from the book, even if it is not a topic that has been discussed in class as to date.

Develop a topic of your own, perhaps similar to or even identical with the topic of your project and write an **argumentative** essay that explores and defends some moral issue within that topic.