**Philosophy 305**

**Unit assignment structure**

This document attempts to explain the structure of the assignments comprising each unit.

Each unit is worth 11% of your total course grade. To make things a bit clearer, I’ll talk about this in terms of points: 1 point = 1% of your course grade

Each unit contains 3 assignments: a medium length essay, a structured peer review of someone else’s essay, and a review of the peer review.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **SKAA Component** | **Point basis** | **Points possible** | **Reviewer assigned points** | **Instructor assigned points** |
| Essay | completion | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Essay | graded | 6 | 3 | 3 |
| Peer review | completion | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Peer review | graded | 3 | 1 | 2 |
| Metareview | completion | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Total** |  | **11** |  |  |

## 1. Essay

Each essay prompt will give you a set of extremely specific instructions. Make sure that you read the prompt carefully and do everything that it asks you to do.

## 1.1 Length

How long should your essay be? Here’s my official answer: Your essay should be exactly as long as is required to fully do everything requested by the prompt and no longer. I don’t care about length per se. I care about whether you completed the task. Some people are admirably concise writers; others need more words.

That said, in general, I try to set up each prompt so that I think the average student will need about 1,000 words to answer it.

Wait! I know most of you just thought “1,000 words. Got it”. But, please, understand that this is a guideline. Don’t hit submit as soon as the word count crosses 1,000. If you’re sure you’ve done everything required and are under 1,000 words, please do not waste precious minutes of your reviewer and my lives by adding extra words.

## 1.2 Grade

Each essay is worth up to 6 points (which translates to approximately half a letter grade, e.g., losing 6 points would take you from an A to a B+).

Half of your grade of each essay will be assigned by another student through the peer review process. I will assign the other half.

## 1.3 Academic integrity

I will police for violations of academic integrity and refer all violations to the Dean of Students. The point of assigning you essays is to help you learn to synthesize other people’s ideas. Thus every essay is going to use other people’s ideas and sometimes their words. All you have to do to stay out of trouble is give others credit whenever you use their ideas or words.

## 2. Peer review

I have written a program that assigns peer reviewers in groups of 3 so that no 2 people are reviewing each other. For example, suppose Scarlet, Indigo, and Violet have each turned in an essay. Scarlet would review Indigo; Indigo would review Violet; and Violet would review Scarlet. This removes the lazy (though game theoretically sound) strategy of giving the other person full credit in exchange for them doing the same.

In addition to answering specific questions about the essay you are reviewing, you will also assign half of the grade for the essay. The feedback you provide will be the main feedback the author receives (I will occasionally send individual comments). Thus it is imperative that you take the reviewing task seriously.

The grade for your peer review will be determined in part by the author and in part by me. Though the majority of the points will be assigned by me to reduce the incentive to give a good grade on the essay in exchange for a good grade on the review.

## 3. Metareview

The final part of the assignment will be feedback from the author to the reviewer. For lack of a better name, I’m calling this the metareview since this is a review-of-a-review. I’m sure this terminology will be a bit confusing, so apologies in advance.

## 4. Background

I think it’s really important for teachers (managers, leaders) to be transparent about why they are asking other people to do things. Feel free to stop reading here if you’re not interested.

Awhile back I was talking with a colleague and said something like “Whenever I teach a new class, I feel like I don’t fully master the stuff I’m teaching until I’ve graded an assignment on it.” That’s because when you grade an essay, everyone is going to explain the same thing in different ways and emphasize different points. That forces you to see the topic from different angles and really figure out what’s important. In other words, grading can be an intense learning experience.

The more I thought about it, the more I wondered whether I could share that learning experience with my students. Obviously, there’s nothing new about peer review. But I’ve never really found just telling students to review someone else’s paper very effective. There are 3 big problems:

(1) Since the students are both learning the thing in question, how do they know what’s right?

(2) How do you set up the incentives so that reviewers do a good and honest job which helps them and the author learn.

(3) How do you manage the logistics of assigning reviewers, distributing feedback, keeping track of grades, et cetera?

These assignments are an experiment in answering these challenges. I address (1) by breaking both the essay and review into a series of tasks. Done right, that creates specific questions which are easier to answer.

My attempts to address (2) can be seen in the point distributions described above. You can probably work out the game theoretic models behind them if you’re so inclined.

I had hoped Canvas’ peer review functionality would enable (3). It doesn’t. Fortunately, I have mad programming skillz. If you’re curious about how this works, here’s the main repository: https://github.com/AdamSwenson/CanvasHacks