**Philosophy 305**

**Unit assignment structure**

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

All of this is experimental so I reserve the right to change the logistics or point values in the middle of the semester. I will not do so without consulting the class first.

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.

There will also be an ungraded discussion forum for each unit. You may use the forum to ask for help, bounce ideas off other students, discuss things related to the essay topic more broadly than the prompt allows, cetera. Participation in the forum is encouraged but not required.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **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 | 2 | 1 |
| 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. Do not discuss things the prompt doesn’t ask you to discuss.

## 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.

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. Similarly, 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. That said, if you are substantially under 1,000 words, make absolutely sure that you aren’t missing something. It’s pretty rare for people to do everything and be way under this guideline.

## 1.2 Grade

Each essay is worth up to 7 points. That translates to more than half a letter grade in the course, e.g., losing 7 points would take you from an A to a B+.

You will receive 1 point for just turning in something which appears to have been a genuine effort at answering the prompt.

The remaining 6 points will be determined by your peer reviewer and me. I will award up to 3 points. The other 3 points will be assigned by the other student through the peer review process. If your reviewer never turns in the review, you will automatically receive all 3 points.

## 1.3 Due dates

Each unit will have due dates for the essay. The point of the due date is to encourage you to keep up with the class. However, there is no penalty for late submissions. As long as you turn the essay before the end of the semester, you can potentially receive full credit. That said, the further you get from the original due date, the longer you may have to wait to get someone else’s essay to review. Because of this, you may begin to receive reminders messages from me once the due date has passed.

## 1.4 Academic integrity

I will police all essays for violations of academic integrity. I will refer all violations to the Dean of Students.

The Syllabus contains the full details and links resources regarding academic integrity. That said, let me say a little about academic integrity and these particular assignments. The point of these essays is to help you learn to synthesize other people’s ideas. Thus every essay is expected to use other people’s ideas and sometimes their words. All you have to do to stay out of trouble is give others credit through citations whenever you use their ideas or words.

## 2. Peer review

The point of the peer review is to help you (the reviewer) think through the material from a different perspective; and to help you (the author) get an outside perspective on your thinking / writing.

In addition to answering specific questions about the essay you are reviewing, you will give the author 0-3 points for the essay ⎯almost half of their essay grade. The feedback you provide will be the main feedback the author receives, though I will occasionally send individual comments.

Please take the reviewing task seriously. Spend a decent amount of time doing the review. Be thoughtful in your feedback; it will help both you and the author.

## 2.1 Logistics

Once you have turned in the essay for a unit, you will receive a message from me containing:

(a) Someone else’s essay; and

(b) The access code for completing the peer review assignment.

Unfortunately, because of limitations in Canvas I have to manually run the program which makes the sends these messages. I will try to do it multiple times a day, especially near the due date of a unit’s essay. Please be aware that you may have to wait to receive someone’s essay to review. The longer it has been since the essay was due, the longer the wait will be.

## 2.2 Grade

The grade for your peer review will be determined mostly (2 points) by the author. I will determine the rest (1 point). Though I reserve the right to override the points given by the author in very rare cases. There are no points for merely completing the review.

## 2.3 Due dates

The reviews will be most helpful to you and to the author if they are done while the material is fresh in your minds. Thus it’s best to do the review as soon as you receive the message containing the author’s essay.

As with the essays, there will be a due date for the peer review portion of the unit but there will be no penalty for late submissions, as long as it are completed by the end of the semester. That said, please remember that someone else is waiting anxiously for feedback and a score from you. Don’t be a jerk.

## 2.4 Who reviews whom?

My program assigns peer reviewers in groups of 3. This means that the author you are reviewing is not the person reviewing you. For example, suppose Scarlet, Indigo, and Violet have each turned in the essay. Scarlet reviews Indigo; Indigo reviews Violet; and Violet reviews Scarlet. This removes the incentives favoring the lazy (though game theoretically sound) strategy of giving the other person full credit in exchange for them doing the same.

## 3. Metareview

The final part of the assignment will be feedback from the author to the reviewer. The point of this assignment is to give you an incentive to do a good job reviewing.

For lack of a better name, I’m calling this the metareview since it is a review-of-a-review. I’m sure this terminology will be a bit confusing, so apologies in advance.

## 3.1 Logistics

Once the person reviewing your essay submits their review, you will receive a message from me containing:

(a) Their reviewer’s feedback on your essay; and

(b) The access code to complete the metareview.

The metareview assignment will ask you (the author) to give feedback on the quality of their review. As part of this, you will assign a portion of the points they receive for the peer review.

Since I am sneaky, you will not know how many points the reviewer has given you when you do the metareview. This will hopefully motivate you to focus on the quality of the feedback you have received.

## 3.2 Grade

You will automatically receive 1 point for submitting the metareview assignment.

If your reviewer is a jerk and never turns in their review, you will not be able to do the metareview. If that happens, you will receive full-credit.

## 4. Background

I think it’s important for teachers (managers, leaders) to be transparent about why they are asking others to do things. This tries to explain my motivations. If you’re not interested, feel free to stop reading here.

Awhile back, while talking to a colleague, I 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. But every time I’ve tried peer review ⎯and this is peer review on steroids⎯ in the past, I’ve never found it very helpful. There are 3 big problems:

(1) Since the students are both learning the martial, how do they know what’s right?[[1]](#footnote-1)

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

(3) How to 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 (hopefully clearly defined) tasks and questions. I think if I can do this well, authors and reviewers will make progress on bite-sized pieces without having to see the whole picture.

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 the program behind this, it’s part of the repository: https://github.com/AdamSwenson/CanvasHacks

1. This is a problem that goes back to Plato’s Meno: If you don’t know a subject, you won’t know what to learn about. But if you already know what to learn about, then you’ve already learnt it. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)