

Grading Rubric for Philosophy Papers

It is a common and worthwhile question for philosophy students to ask - how are written assignments graded? After all, there is rarely an “answer key” (outside of areas in formal logic) and it might seem that it is “all a matter of opinion.” This is unduly pessimistic. Philosophy has clear, and objective, standards for critical thinking and argumentation. I will expect your papers to strive for, and hopefully achieve, these standards.

The purpose of this document is to lay out how these standards are applied to papers you write in the courses I teach. For a fuller explanation of how to write philosophy essays, with additional information on my evaluation of your written work, please see the document Writing Philosophy Essays. Below you will find some of the standard questions I ask while evaluating your written work. You will also find a rubric spelling out some of those standards according to widely used evaluation stages. We may use more specific rubrics in Canvas for evaluating some student writing.

I encourage you to use this rubric to help construct your argument, and not just to evaluate your own writing.

1. Thesis

- (a) Does the paper have a clear thesis?
- (b) Is the thesis presented in the introduction?
- (c) Is there a roadmap outlining how the author will establish the thesis?

2. Analyzing Arguments

- (a) Explaining the arguments of others
 - i. Are the arguments of other thinkers clearly and charitably stated? This includes not only stating the premises and conclusion, but showing how the conclusion follows and providing any necessary arguments for the truth of the premises themselves.
 - ii. Are the technical terms used in the argument explained?
- (b) Evaluating the arguments of others
 - i. Is the argument evaluated for cogency? Are the premises acceptable? Do the premises provide sufficient grounds for the conclusion?
 - ii. If objecting, is the objection clearly stated and clearly argued for? In order to do this, you should not only provide good reasons for believing your objection applies, but you should explain precisely how it applies to the opposing argument, and what the consequences for that argument are.

3. Making Arguments

- (a) Are the premises of the argument clearly spelled out?
 - i. Are the premises supported by appropriate evidence?
- (b) Are all empirical claims backed up with supporting evidence?
- (c) Are the inferences leading from premises to conclusion cogent?

- (d) Does the conclusion claim more than the argument shows? For example, be wary of making a bold or controversial claim that goes beyond your evidence. It is good to be bold, but only if you have the argument to support it!
- (e) Does the paper consider and respond to potential objections?

4. Document Structure

- (a) Does the paper have an introduction which spells out what the paper will argue for?
- (b) Does the paper have a conclusion which summarizes what has been established?
- (c) Does the paper relate the central arguments back to the thesis?

5. Style

- (a) Is the prose clear and to the point? This includes avoiding flowery language which does not help you establish your argument. More often than not, this will simply introduce additional confusions to your argument.
- (b) Does the paper employ proper spelling and grammar? I do not expect perfect grade school grammar. Rather, what I expect is that the grammar is clear and avoids introducing unnecessary confusions and is (at the least!) syntactically correct.
- (c) Is the language used specific rather than vague? Vague language usually indicates vague and confused thoughts! If your language is vague, ask yourself what you really mean. If you are not sure, then work out that aspect of your argument in more detail!
- (d) Are all claims based on outside sources cited?

	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Approaches Expectations	Below Expectations
I. Argument				
(1) Thesis: This is the thesis of the essay as well as the main conclusion for your core argument. It should address the main issue of the writing scenario and is generally clearly presented in the introduction of the essay.	The thesis is a clear statement that responds to the appropriate issue defined in the writing scenario. It takes a clear and unambiguous position. It is clearly presented in the introduction of the essay.	The thesis addresses the appropriate issue but is not as unequivocal or unambiguous as it could be. It discusses the relevant issue but without making a direct statement. It is presented in the introduction of the essay	The essay has a thesis statement but it is not appropriate to the writing assignment. It may not be explicitly stated in the introduction of the essay or it may be buried in the body of the essay.	There is no clear thesis.
(2) Claims: These are the main premises or reasons that you offer in support of your thesis and core argument. Your claims	The essay introduces a series of reasonable and relevant claims in support of the thesis. Claims are either acceptable at face value or are	Most of the claims are as described in the column to the left. BUT: One or, at most, two claims are	Most or all of the claims are unacceptable at face value or are not supported with cogent subarguments. A reasonable person	There are few if any claims offered in support of the thesis. The author often begs the question, simply reiterating the thesis

should provide reasonable and relevant support for your thesis and core argument.	supported with subarguments. Claims employ clear and unambiguous terms that is not emotionally charged.	described in the column to the right.	would not accept the claim without further evidence and no evidence is given. Claims employ vague and ambiguous language or are overly emotionally charged. Claims are only minimally relevant to the thesis.	statement in slightly different terms.
(3) Support: Taken collectively your claims should provide sufficient support for your thesis to persuade a reasonable and informed person that your thesis is acceptable.	The essay offers a series of claims that provide strong support for the thesis. The arguments are well developed and internally consistent. The essay anticipates possible objections and counterarguments.	The essay offers a series of claims that provide adequate support for the thesis. Claims are presented in a logical order and establish a clear chain of reasoning, but there are missing links or otherwise under-developed arguments. The essay doesn't anticipate possible objections and counterarguments.	The essay has only weak support for the thesis. Arguments are poorly developed, with many missing links or logical failures. The author may argue from largely anecdotal evidence. Obvious objections and/or counterarguments are ignored.	The essay offers little or no support for the thesis. Claims are presented in a seemingly random order. There is no apparent order establishing a logical argument. Serious errors of reasoning are made. There are obvious objections and/or counterarguments that are not addressed.
II. Theoretical Framework Philosophical arguments generally reflect a commitment to a coherent, developed, and reasonable theoretical framework. Your core argument and any subarguments or claims introduced should reflect such a commitment.	The arguments and claims collectively reflect a single, well established coherent theoretical framework. The framework is relevant to the main issue of the writing assignment. The author demonstrates a command of the relevant philosophical concepts and arguments.	The arguments and claims collectively do not reflect a single, well established coherent theoretical framework. Inconsistent claims and arguments are presented drawing on divergent theoretical frameworks. The author fails to demonstrate a command of the relevant philosophical concepts and arguments.	The author relies on a weak or conceptually flawed theoretical framework. The author fails to demonstrate a command of the relevant philosophical theories. The framework relied upon has obvious deficiencies not addressed in the essay.	There is no coherent, well established theoretical framework in the essay. The author relies upon loosely related claims and/or an idiosyncratic framework that is unacceptable. The essay mostly summarizes key facts of the writing scenario and engages in little or no analysis.
III. Organization A good philosophy essay will have an introduction that states the thesis and briefly provides an	The essay has a clear concise introduction that establishes the thesis and briefly reviews the core argument. The body of the essay presents	The essay has a concise introduction that establishes the thesis. The direction of the core argument is not clear. The body	The essay has an introduction that rehearses relevant details of the assigned issue. The direction of reasoning in the	The essay has an overly long introduction that doesn't clearly introduce the thesis and doesn't indicate the direction of

overview of the argument, a body that logically develops the key arguments, and a conclusion that ties everything together.	a linked series of claims supporting the thesis and introduced in a reasonable manner. The conclusion ties things together and addresses any relevant remaining points.	presents a series of linked claims supporting the thesis but the order of claims and direction of reasoning is not clear. The conclusion largely reiterates relevant points from the introduction.	essay is not apparent and it is not clear how the author transitions from one paragraph to another. There is no conclusion or it simply repeats points made in the introduction.	argument. The body presents ideas in an unorganized fashion. The conclusion repeats statements from the introduction.
IV. Style You should strive to present your ideas clearly and concisely, avoiding vague and ambiguous language and using well-defined terms and examples.	Ideas are presented clearly, concisely, and precisely. Avoids language that is vague, ambiguous, or emotionally charged. Key terms and examples are well-defined. No irrelevant content is included.	Ideas are presented clearly but could be more concise. Language is occasionally vague, ambiguous, or emotionally charged. Key terms and counterexamples are left undefined. Irrelevant content is included.	Ideas are not presented clearly and concisely. There is much content that can be condensed. Language is often vague, ambiguous, or emotionally charged. Key terms are poorly or wrongly defined. Irrelevant content is included. Word choice is often poor.	Ideas are presented poorly, are neither clear nor precise. There is repetition of ideas and many passages that could be condensed. Much of the language is vague and ambiguous. Much of the content is irrelevant.
V. Mechanics Your essay should be virtually free of problems related to spelling, punctuation, grammar, and syntax.	There are no errors of spelling, punctuation, and grammar. The author employs standard, college-level sentence structure.	There are minimal errors of spelling, punctuation, and grammar. The author mostly employs standard, college-level sentence structure.	There are a few errors of spelling, punctuation, and grammar. The author employs simple sentence structure.	There are several errors of spelling, punctuation, and grammar. The author employs minimally basic sentence structure.