

## PHIL 489 Senior Seminar

Instructor: Prof. Bixin Bell Guo

Classroom: Old Main 011

Office: Old Main 113

Office hours: Tue. 4:30-5:30PM & Wed. 1:00-2:00PM and by appointment

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Course website: <https://bixinguo.github.io/seniorseminar.html>

**Objectives:** The main purpose of the senior seminar is to help you write your capstone paper. We aim to facilitate an intellectually engaging, collaborative and supportive context for thinking, reading, writing, sharing, and rewriting (and re-writing). At the end of the semester, on Philosophy Senior Day (TBD), you will give a formal presentation of this paper.

With a few exceptions, the focus in this class will be entirely on work-in-progress. You will write, write, write, throw out what you wrote, write some more, revise, throw everything out again, write, write, write, revise, revise, and finally be done. You won't develop your work alone: you will discuss your ideas with others, and help your fellow senior philosophy majors to develop their work as well. A secondary goal of the seminar is thus to build a philosophical community among the seminar participants, and to promote philosophical discussion both inside and outside the classroom. To that end, we expect seminar participants to participate in the life of the department, by attending philosophy colloquia and other departmental events. In *Culture and Value* Wittgenstein wrote that "work on philosophy" was "really more work on oneself ..... On how one sees things. (And what one expects from them.)" An informal and implicit purpose of this course is to offer you a space to reflect on how you see your study of philosophy continuing to shape yourself and your future upon your graduation from Macalester College.

**The main assignment:** You will write a philosophical essay of approximately 4500-6000 words (15-20 pages). The essay may be a little longer if necessary, but probably not much shorter. The overarching goal of the essay is to contribute something interesting to a philosophical conversation that you care about. You will seek to say something interesting and new, in a way that relates to other interesting things other people have said. The most common way to do

this is to clearly state a controversial thesis, explain how that thesis relates to things others have said, and use your paper to try to convince the reader that your thesis is true. Often, an interesting undergraduate paper is one that shows that something someone else said is wrong, or one that argues that some view looks wrong, confused, etc., but then goes on to defend it in an original way. There are of course many ways to be philosophically interesting; most involve finding and articulating some problem or question, explaining why it is important, and attempting to solve or answer it.

Along the way, we hope that this writing this essay will give you the opportunity to:

- Closely analyze, explain, and critically philosophical texts.
- Develop the skill of giving a rigorous argument for your ideas--that is, an argument that can convince a skeptical reader that your ideas are correct.
- Practice putting another philosopher's ideas in your own words, and explaining them to someone else in a way that they can understand.
- Learn to put your own original ideas in conversation with what others have said, thus demonstrating their context and importance.
- Formulate and execute a novel intellectual project. You will set for yourself an intellectual goal (such as defending a theory, or convincing the reader of a controversial thesis), and your essay will seek to accomplish that goal.
- Enjoy participation in a lively, welcoming, and challenging intellectual community.

### **Determination of Final Grades:**

Participation: 20%

Thesis proposal: 1%

Abstract and outline: 3%

Work-in-progress presentation: 8%

First draft: 15%

Second draft: 10%

Paper comments: 6%

Writing reflection: 2%

Capstone presentation on Senior Day: 20%

Final paper: 15%

## Course Policies

**Accommodations policy:** It is important to us that this course works for everyone. To be granted an official disability accommodation, you must work through the Disability Services office: [disabilityservices@macalester.edu](mailto:disabilityservices@macalester.edu). DS then contacts us, after which we work together to determine an appropriate accommodation. It is important to set up accommodations sooner rather than later. You are also more than welcome to contact us at any time (after class, via email, in office hours, etc.) to chat about how the course is going and to let us know if there is anything we can do to make the course more accessible for you. However, we can only grant requests for systemic accommodations if they are made officially through DS. It is important to us that this course works for everyone.

**Academic Integrity Policy:** We follow Macalester's policy on academic integrity. The policy is super easy to follow: (a) whenever you state something in your paper that wasn't your idea to begin with, include a footnote explaining whose idea it was; and (b) whenever you use more than two words in a row that originated in someone else's book or article, enclose them in quotation marks and include a footnote citing the source and page you borrowed it from. This applies to ideas from our in class readings, ideas from articles you found online, and ideas from a 2:00am conversation with your roommate. You will never be penalized for including an unnecessary citation; failing to cite appropriately can lead to failing the course or even being expelled. Macalester's official policy is that the penalty for a first instance of plagiarism is to receive a grade of zero on the assignment. Note that it is a violation of Macalester's academic integrity policy if your paper contains even a *single sentence* (or a large portion of a long sentence) that you took from another source.

**Wellness:** Make your well-being a priority throughout this semester (and throughout your life). Besides a student, you are (probably) a sentient animal with your own experiences, thoughts, emotions, and identities. Recognize any stresses you face, which could be emotional, physical, financial, existential, *ad infinitum*. Remember: you have a body with needs. If you feel anxious or uncomfortable during class, feel free to quietly step out without excuse (I know I will). Outside of the classroom: sleep, exercise, and connect with others (not just virtually). Seriously, if you are ever struggling with your well-being, please contact us and/or find support and resources through the Laurie Hamre Center for Health & Wellness. Leonard Center

Room 53, 651-696-6275 (call to make an appointment). Follow *macalesterhwc* on Instagram (whatever that is) or go the site: [www.macalester.edu/healthandwellness/](http://www.macalester.edu/healthandwellness/)

**Important philosophy resources:**

A [blog post](#) from David W. Concepción on ten tips to do philosophy, and his [full-length paper](#) about it

[Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)

[PhilPapers](#) (a searchable database of philosophical publications)

[Philosophy Compass](#) (a journal that publishes overviews on various topics)