

ESSAY ASSIGNMENT

PHILO 36400 | Fall 2020 | Daniel Harris (danielwharris@gmail.com)

Options for what kind of paper to write

Option 1: Research Paper

Take a deeper dive into one of the issues or ideas that we discussed this term. You should read some things beyond the required readings, and explain in some detail either a debate about some question in the philosophy of language or a theory of some phenomenon. Here are some directions in which you could go:

- Explain a specific criticism of one of the ideas we've studied.
- Explain how one or more later philosophers have developed an idea that we've studied.
- Explain a specific way in which something we read should be understood as a response to previous philosophical work.

If you choose this option, the main evaluation criterion is that you demonstrate a depth of understanding of your topic that goes beyond what we attempted in the course. This means that you have to read the most important parts of the relevant literature. It will also be important that you choose a specific and narrow enough topic that you can adequately explain it in this brief paper. One of the biggest pitfalls in a paper like this would be trying to do too much.

Option 2: Argument Paper

Explain a debate that we have encountered in class and take a side on it by giving an argument for a specific thesis. This works best if you have your own argument that you want to explain, or a variation on one in the literature that you've already encountered.

If you choose this option, the main evaluation criterion will be that you make a convincing case for your thesis. Of course, you can't do that if you try to argue for too much in one paper, so again I recommend that you work on choosing a relatively specific and narrow topic. It is also important that you show that you understand the debate into which you're intervening, and so this option will probably require some additional research.

Option 3: Application Paper

Carefully explain one of the theories that we've studied in this course, and then show how it can be used to illuminate some case study from ordinary life, political discourse, or the media. For example: use Elizabeth Camp's theory of metaphor to explain how the use of a metaphor in a literary work or an ordinary conversation that you were a part of, how Harry Frankfurt's theory of bullshit can be used to understand the strategy of a certain politician, or how generative grammar helps to explain some aspect of how a child you know is learning language. (There are many other potential topics in this genre.)

My main grading criteria here will be your understanding of the theory that you apply, and the creativity and of your application, and your use of the case study and the theory to better understand each other. Your application should genuinely illuminate the phenomenon that is your case study—it should help us to better understand something that might otherwise be confusing or difficult to understand. And if the theory doesn't quite fit the case study in some ways, you should explain why, and say whether and how this poses a problem for the theory.

Steps in the writing process

1. Abstract | 5% of Course Grade | due 25 November

First you will create a brief **abstract** in which you'll explain your plan for writing the paper. You'll submit this abstract through this google form, which is similar to the ones that you use to submit assignments. There will be three questions for you to answer:

• What kind of paper will you be writing

A research paper, an argument paper, or an application paper?

• What will you be doing in the paper?

If you will defend a thesis, what will it be? If you will be doing a research paper in which you explain a criticism, what is the criticism? If you will be applying a theory, what will your case study be?

• Give a brief outline of your paper

It's okay if this part isn't entirely fleshed out yet, but it should have a rough plan that you can explain in a few sentences. It should be an outline of your argument or of how you p

• What primary sources will you rely on?

Depending on what sort of paper you're writing, you may have to find and research some sources outside of what we've read in class. These should be the most relevant things that have been written on the debate that you choose. You should give me enough information about these works that I can find them for myself. A good idea would be to do this section as an annotated bibliography, with a short explanation of how each source fits into the debate. Note that even if you're doing an application paper, it would almost certainly be a good idea to look further into the theory with which you're working.

You should submit your abstract to me in a direct message on Slack. By default, I will reply to you in writing. But if you prefer, I can meet with you on a video call to discuss your plan. Just let me know when you submit and we'll set up a time.

2. Penultimate Draft | 15% of Grade | due 6 Dec.

This should not be a rough and sloppy first draft. You should have already spent time editing and revising it by this stage. The draft

should be about 1500 words. You should submit it to me by uploading it (preferably as a PDF) in a private message on Slack.

It is very important that you hand in this draft on time. If your penultimate draft is late, you forfeit your ability to participate in the peer-feedback assignment (and so automatically lose 5% from your final grade in the course, in addition to the penalty for being late with the assignment).

3. Peer Feedback | 5% of Grade | due 13 December

Once I have received the drafts, I will distribute each one to two other students. Each of you will be responsible for providing peer feedback on two other students' drafts.

The goal of providing your fellow students with feedback is to improve their papers through collaboration. (I won't grade on a curve, so you can't harm your own grade by improving someone else's.) Good writing is almost always a collaborative endeavor, and most good philosophy papers will have been read, and commented-upon, by many of the author's colleagues and acquaintances before it is published. This assignment is our attempt to reproduce that process, if only in miniature. In addition to making all of the term papers better, this should also help you to get better at providing useful feedback to others.

Each comment should begin with a 200-word summary of the essay's argument. What is the essay's main point? How does the author try to establish this point? After summarizing the paper, spend about 300 words offering constructive criticism. Which parts were hard to follow? Which aspects of the argument were unconvincing? Could you think of any counterexamples to the author's conclusions? Where would an extra example or two have been helpful? In general: what changes or additions would make this a better essay? It's okay to be critical in your comments; pointing out a flaw can help the author to fix it in the next draft. And there's not much point in merely giving out compliments, since that likely won't lead to improvement. But you should also be respectful.

My main grading criterion will be helpfulness. Are your comments likely to help the author to improve their paper? You will lose points if you make an inadequate effort to understand the author's argument, if your suggestions are unhelpful, if you are disrespectful, or if you seem not to have put much effort into the whole thing.

4. Final Draft | 25% of Grade | due 20 December

Your final draft should be a polished, carefully edited, and proof-read finished product. It should show evidence that you have taken into account the feedback that you received from me and from your peers.

The final draft should be about 2000–2500 words. You should send it to me (preferably as a PDF) in a direct message on Slack, by midnight on December 20th, 2020. (And please that there is very little room to be late on this, as I must submit grades shortly thereafter.)

Advice on Choosing a Topic

Choosing a topic is one of the most important and difficult parts of writing any paper. Perhaps the biggest challenge is to choose a top-

ic that has the right size scope. In practice, I have found that students almost never choose a topic whose scope is too small, but they very often try to do too much in a paper. For example, a student might try to defend an entirely new theory of linguistic meaning. That's a project that it would be hard to fit into a PhD thesis, and is way too big for a 2500-word essay!

In practice, it is best to choose as narrow and specific a thesis as you can, and give a more comprehensive defense of it. When choosing between a narrower and a broader thesis, you may worry that you won't have enough to say about the narrower one to fill 2000–2500 words. But in practice, I don't think that this is likely—particularly once you've properly explained the issue and made your contribution.

How to find sources

The sources that you cite should be primary sources. This means journal articles or monographs, not encyclopedia articles or survey articles that summarize primary sources. However, encyclopedia articles can be a very useful place to find information about primary sources. This includes Wikipedia, the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and *Oxford Bibliographies Online*. I would also recommend using the PhilPapers website to find articles. And I would suggest using google scholar to see which papers cite the ones that you're reading. And of course, if you're discussing a debate that is covered in one of our textbooks, you should check out the suggestions for further reading at the end of the chapter.

Finally, of course, you can talk to me! I may not have what you're looking for at my fingertips, but I will do my best to help you find it.

How to get help

I am happy to help you in a variety of ways. You can reach out to me on slack (either publicly or privately). If you would prefer to talk, we can do so electronically (on zoom, or google hangouts, or using Slack's video-call feature, or whatever works).

There are also a couple of other resources available:

- Hunter's Writing Center is offering both live online and asynchronous tutoring sessions. See [this link](#) for more information.
- Hunter's philosophy department has several in-house writing tutors who specialize in philosophical writing. To get in touch with them, you should send an email to philosophy.tutor.hunter@gmail.com

Some Frequently Asked Questions

How should the penultimate and final drafts be formatted?

I don't care about whether they are single- or double-spaced, or how big the margins are, as long as they are easy to read.

What kind of citation style should I use?

It doesn't matter, as long as it is consistent and I can tell what sources you're using. APA, MLA, and Chicago are all fine, for example.

Can I write about a topic that not covered in the required readings?

Maybe. You should check with me. But I want to keep the subject matter of these papers connected to the course somehow.

Can I get feedback on a draft before the penultimate draft?

Yes! Definitely!