

Phil 111: Freshman Seminar in Philosophy

Fall 2009 Syllabus

Instructor: Dr. Anthony Beavers

Office: Olmstead Hall 342

Email: tb2@evansville.edu

Hours: M & F 1:00-1:50; Tu 5:00-5:50

Office Phone: 488-2682 / **Cell:** 455-0186

W 12:00-1:50 & 3:00-4:50

Website: <http://faculty.evansville.edu/tb2>

Course Info: MWF 11:00-11:50 SB 272

Peer Tutor: Jesse Miller (jm351@evansville.edu)

Course Description

This course develops and enhances critical thinking skills through the analysis and discussion of perennial philosophical problems. It emphasizes developing critical reading and discussion skills, writing expository and evaluative analysis of extended argument prose and constructing argumentative essays. Prerequisite: Freshman or sophomore standing (closed to junior and senior students).

The specific topic for the freshman seminar is determined by each individual instructor. For this semester, we will take a close look at Kantian Ethics with a primary focus on his short, though difficult, text, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Our first priority in this class is to come to an understanding of this text and learn how to address the implications that follow from it. More distant, though no less important, goals include learning to read a difficult text carefully and practicing the art of thinking clearly.

Methodology

Individual class sessions will take a variety of forms. Sometimes they will involve further elucidation of key material in the reading assignment for the day. In these cases, I will pick one or two topics and add detail that is not covered in the book. On other occasions, I will present material that is not covered in the book at all. Mostly, however, we will be engaged in a line by line reading of the texts in class and in an online discussion forum.

Required Texts

Kant, I. (1785/1997). *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Cambridge. 978-0-521-62695-8.

Guyer, P. (2007). *Kant's Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Continuum. 978-0-8264-8454-3.

Wood, A. (2008). *Kantian Ethics*. Cambridge. 978-0-521-67114-9.

Assignments

Each student will be required to take two exams during the semester, a mid-term exam and a comprehensive, final exam. In addition, each student will submit a five-page thought paper (details to be discussed later in class, but see Peter Vranas's guide to writing philosophy papers below) and participate in weekly interaction in an online discussion forum as stipulated below.

Grading

15% - Discussion Forum Participation and Interaction

15% - Mid-Term Exam

25% - Final Exam
25% - Paper
20% - Overall Class Participation

Discussion Forum Participation and Interaction

The class will be divided into two groups, an A group and a B group. Each Monday, I will post a passage from one of the course texts and ask members of one group to offer a grounded and thoughtful interpretation of what the passage means. Each member of the group will then offer a 250-word interpretation/elucidation of the passage by Wednesday of that week. Then members of the other group will write a 250-word response/correction to one of the student's interpretation/elucidation by Friday of that week. The roles of writing interpretations and responses will alternate between group A and group B for each subsequent week. Students will be evaluated on the quality of their interpretations insofar as they engage the text and their online interactions with other students in the class. Additional details will follow shortly.

Policies and "Rules"

It would be a wonderful world, if classrooms could run without rules, but experience has repeatedly taught me that they are necessary. The following stem primarily, but not exclusively, from two sources. The first is a matter of maintaining respect for honest students with a genuine desire to know. Being fair makes it imperative that they have every opportunity to learn and that they are not lost among the students who take a class only to meet a requirement and who, as a consequence, may only be looking for the highest grade in exchange for the least amount of learning.

The second is to help me maintain my concentration in the classroom. Most of my difficulty with this latter issue derives from the fact that class lecture is a form of conversation. Once I perceive that my interlocutor is no longer listening, my priority automatically shifts from delivering a message to re-establishing contact, and I lose my train of thought. One student in a class can easily throw me off.

It is my hope that the following will respond adequately to these issues and that we will be able to conduct class at a level befitting an institution of higher learning. (In other words, we're not in high school anymore!)

Academic Honesty

All work submitted in this course must be prepared by the student expressly for this course. A student who submits work that is plagiarized, bought, borrowed from the archives of a fraternity, copied from another student, etc., *will fail the course*. (If you don't believe me, ask around.) I fully support the University's Academic Honor Code. To avoid confusion, students should keep in mind that plagiarism occurs not only when someone copies an author word for word, but also when someone uses another's ideas without giving credit, even if the ideas are paraphrased. Always document your sources!

Attendance Policy

I do not have an attendance policy *per se*. However, this course is structured in such a way that students who do not show up regularly may (will?) have trouble passing it. After all, it is difficult to participate if you're not present, and I frequently test on material that is not in the reading. (Since I do not have an attendance policy, there is no reason to send excuses for missing class, whether by email or by phone. Your reasons for missing class are private and do not concern me. Please, in other words, keep them to yourselves.)

Course Participation

Course participation grades are not automatic. They are based on oral contributions to the collective learning experience of the class as a whole in terms of asking pertinent questions, answering questions correctly or, at least, provocatively, making insightful observations, and offering other meaningful expressions of interest in the material that help encourage learning. I begin by assuming a C for each student's course participation grade and move from there. Students should realize that *it is possible to talk a lot in class and receive a low grade for course participation.*

Electronic Technology in the Classroom (Cell Phones, Laptops, Etc.)

The use of laptops, cell phones, gaming devices and other electronic contraptions is not permitted in class. Students caught using them will be asked to leave. (You can wear a watch, if you must, but please don't sit staring at it during my lectures.)

Email / Office Hours

I do not read my UE email at home and, as a consequence, I will only answer student email during my scheduled office hours. Even then, I am not apt to sustain long, academic dialogues in this forum. (For extended discussion, please come visit me in person. Office hours are posted above.) Furthermore, during office hours, I will defer to students who show up in person, and this means that I may not be able to answer your email in the short term. In addition to the office hours listed above, I am available by appointment, either in person or by Skype.

Food in the Classroom

No eating in class.

Packing Up to Go

Often the most critical minutes in a class session are the last five, where conclusions are drawn and assignments are made. Please do not start to pack up your belongings before the end of class.

Stay at Home Policy

I easily lose focus when students aren't paying attention, whether because they are talking to each other, passing notes, studying for another class, etc. If you do not wish to pay attention, please take advantage of my lack of an attendance policy and stay at home. After all, you get nothing for just showing up without paying attention, and I'm probably going to dock your participation grade just the same as if you had stayed at home.

Some Electronic Resources

- 1) *Noesis: Philosophical Research Online* also indexes a fair amount of philosophy relating to the many issues discussed in the text. See <http://noesis.evansville.edu>.
- 2) For detailed background of key philosophical concepts relating to the course, see the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, available at <http://plato.stanford.edu>.

Course Calendar

Because this is the first time I've taught this class using this arrangement of texts, I cannot anticipate the speed with which we will progress through them. Thus, I'm not offering a course calen-

dar for this semester. Reading assignments will be made at the end of each class. (If I forget, someone remind me please!). The Midterm Exam will be held during class on **October 14th**, the paper will be due on **November 23rd**, and the final exam will be held during the regularly scheduled final exam period, **Thursday, December 10th and 8 a.m.**

How to Write a Philosophy Paper

Peter B. M. Vranas

0. INTRODUCTION

1. **Keep in mind two main goals:**
 - a. To *think deeply* about a philosophical issue (preferably an issue that you find interesting, important, and puzzling), *reaching a (tentative) conclusion* that leaves you to a large degree satisfied.
 - Philosophy is not sophistry: you should only defend conclusions in which you believe. You should be open, however, to the possibility that your views will change while you are thinking or writing about an issue: you may start with the intention of defending a particular conclusion and end up defending an opposite conclusion.
 - Even if philosophical questions have no unique right answer, they do have *better* and *worse* answers; if you believe that anything goes, then you are not in a proper frame of mind for writing a philosophy paper.
 - b. To *write down your thoughts* in a clear, precise, concise, and organized way.
2. **How to choose a paper topic**
 - a. Choose a topic that you find *important* and *exciting*: it's better if working on the paper feels worthwhile and fun.
 - b. Choose a topic on which you have something *new* to say: if you agree with everything the readings or your instructor said on a particular issue, then you have no paper topic (related to that issue).
 - c. Especially for short papers, choose a very *narrow* topic and examine it in detail: *depth* is much more important than *breadth*. (E.g., don't try to defend—or attack—relativism in general; choose a specific version of relativism.)
3. **The content of a philosophy paper**
 - a. When writing about an issue, start with what other people have said about the issue: don't reinvent the wheel.
 - b. But other people's views should be only a starting point: the bulk of the paper should consist of your own views, not of exposition.
 - c. And your own views should be not just stated, but should be supported by arguments.
 - d. Rather than passing over in silence objections to your views, you should consider the most plausible objections you can think of, you should reply to these objections, you should consider plausible rejoinders to your replies, and you should respond to these rejoinders. It's like a dialogue; the longer it gets, the better, provided that the participants keep making new points rather than repeating themselves. (Note that one might object to an argument in *three* ways: by objecting to the argument's *premises*, to its *reasoning*, or to its *conclusion*.)

1. FIRST STEP: PREPARATION

1. Start working as *early* as possible. Don't expect to produce a decent paper if you start on the eve of the due date.
2. Consulting extra sources is often helpful but is *not* necessary: it's far more important to study carefully the required readings and to *think* deeply about your topic.
3. Before you start writing the paper, make an *outline* that lists in an organized way the points you want to make.

2. SECOND STEP: WRITING

1. **Organization**
 - a. The paper should have a concise and informative *title*. ('First paper' is *not* an acceptable title.) The title should make clear the *topic* of the paper (e.g.: 'The death penalty') or, even better, the *thesis* you are going to defend (e.g.: 'Against the death penalty'). Avoid 'journalistic' or 'literary' titles (e.g.: 'Death of a penalty') whose point the reader cannot understand before reading the paper itself.
 - b. The *introductory paragraph* is very important and you should do three things in it. (i) State briefly the *topic* of the paper. (Avoid banal openings like 'Topic X has been a great mystery and source of controversy since the dawn of humanity'.) (ii) Take a stand on the topic: formulate your *thesis* as precisely as it's possible at this early stage. (iii) Announce the *plan* of the paper; namely, what you will do in the remainder (or in each section) of the paper.
 - c. It's advisable to divide the paper into numbered and titled sections. Start each section by saying what you will do in the section. End each longer section by summarizing what you have done in the section.
2. **Reasoning**: Make sure that your arguments are either deductively valid or inductively strong, and that they contain no irrelevant or redundant premises. It helps to lay out the arguments in standard premise/conclusion form.
3. **Justification**
 - a. Every statement in the paper must be justified, except for uncontroversial statements ('The Earth is round'). Avoid uncontroversial statements that just express your personal opinion ('I feel that the death penalty prevents many murders').
 - b. One way to justify a statement is to provide a reference ('Jones (1996: 437) concluded that the death penalty prevents many murders'). References should be precise so that they can be checked: *include page numbers*. Keep quotations to a minimum: paraphrasing usually demonstrates better your grasp of the material.
 - c. It's not justified to ridicule people or views. Remember that the authors of most readings are intelligent people: try to present the most plausible understanding of their views ('*Principle of Charity*') rather than presenting these views in a way that makes them appear to be obviously false.
 - d. Acknowledge your debts: presenting other people's ideas as if they were your own is called 'plagiarism' and is a serious violation of ethical conduct. (Example of acknowledging debts: this handout is partly based on handouts by David Brink, Edwin Curley, Jeanine Diller, Mika Manty, and Katie McShane, and feedback from Elizabeth Anderson.)
4. **Originality** consists in producing new ideas. A minimal degree of originality, which consists in going beyond the readings, is required; originality exceeding this minimal degree is highly desirable.
5. **Clarity** is probably the most important virtue that philosophical writing must have.
 - a. Don't presuppose that your reader is familiar with the texts to which you are referring: your intended audience should not be the instructor, but should rather be an intelligent philosopher possibly unfamiliar with the texts.
 - b. If your instructor doesn't understand what you want to say by a sentence, then the sentence is probably not sufficiently clear. To see if your instructor finds your writing sufficiently clear, give to your instructor a draft of the paper.
 - c. It's *not* OK to write *first* an obscure sentence and *then* to explain what you meant.
 - d. To promote clarity: (i) use short sentences; (ii) prefer active to passive voice and affirmative to negative constructions; (iii) avoid pretentious words and jargon; (iv) define the technical terms that you use.
 - e. It is very important for clarity to use *transition phrases* indicating (i) that you are moving to a new step in the reasoning (e.g., to a new objection, or from an objection to a reply to that objection) and (ii) whether what you are saying is supposed to support *your* view or the view of an *opponent*. Examples: 'I turn now to my argument for the second premise';

- 'One might object to the first premise that ...'; 'My reply to this objection is ...'; 'One might rejoinder that ...'; 'I reply ...'.
6. **Conciseness** consists in saying many things in few words.
 - a. Think of the *maximum* length of the paper as a limit within which you are trying to cram as much thought as you can (*not* as a number of pages you have to fill by multiplying the number of words you use to make your points). But don't let the quest for conciseness result in obscurity: *clarity* is paramount.
 - b. To promote conciseness, *avoid*: (a) wordiness; (b) digressions; (c) banalities; (d) too long quotations; (e) unnecessary repetitions. (It is not *unnecessary* repetition to summarize at the end of a section what you have done in the section.)
 7. **Precision** is almost as important as clarity. General rule: be *meticulous*, even nit-picking, in saying *exactly* what you mean and in avoiding ambiguity. Achieving precision requires thinking about every single word.
 - a. Avoid ambiguous pronouns (like 'this', 'that', 'it', 'he', 'his'): repeat nouns. 'John used Bill's gun to kill his dog' should be 'John used Bill's gun to kill John's dog' or 'John killed his dog by using Bill's gun'.
 - b. Avoid extreme words (like 'completely', 'absolutely', 'always'). Replace 'It is always wrong to X' with 'It is usually wrong to X' or 'It is almost always wrong to X' (except if you show in the paper that it's really *always* wrong to X).
 - c. Avoid immodest expressions. 'In this paper I will prove conclusively that X' should be something like 'In this paper I will argue that X' or 'In this paper I will give reason to believe that X'. Avoid words like 'proof' or 'demonstration'.
 - d. Avoid category mistakes. Incorrect: 'the likelihood of this situation is quite improbable'. A *likelihood* is a *number* and thus can be *high* or *low* but not *probable* or *improbable*; it's a *situation* that can be probable or improbable. Correct: 'the likelihood of this situation is quite low'; or: 'this situation is quite improbable'.
 - e. Avoid unnecessary variation (which is encouraged in literature papers). If you are making three points, don't say 'The first argument ... The second remark ... The third point'; choose the most accurate word and repeat it.
 - f. Give names to theses (arguments, etc) for ease of reference. It's much easier and clearer to refer to a thesis as 'conclusion C3' rather than as 'the conclusion of the first argument in this section'.
 8. **Language**
 - a. A philosophy paper differs from a literature paper. The style should be factual: avoid excessive use of metaphors. *It's OK to use 'I'; it's even advisable*, because it facilitates the use of the active voice.
 - b. The style need not be excessively formal, but the paper should not be a transcript of how you talk: avoid slang.
 - c. Plural of 'phenomenon': 'phenomena'. Similarly: criterion/criteria; thesis/theses; hypothesis/hypotheses. Avoid confusing: then/than; their/there; principal/principle; adapt/adopt; affect/effect; complementary/complimentary; its/it's.
 9. **Other matters**
 - a. Don't spend too much time on the concluding paragraph: it can be as short as a single sentence that repeats your thesis. On the other hand, the concluding paragraph is a good place at which to mention possible extensions of your argument or problems that you were unable to address.
 - b. The format of the paper (e.g., font size and type, margins, single- vs double-spaced, title page or not, footnotes vs endnotes, references in footnotes or in a list of references) does not matter except if your instructor indicates otherwise. But it's a good idea to *number the pages* so that the instructor's comments can refer to specific page numbers.
 - c. There is no minimum length requirement, but keep close to the *maximum* length unless you write very concisely.

3. THIRD STEP: REVISING

1. Write the paper in (at least) two drafts. After writing the first draft, set it aside for a while, then read it through and make handwritten changes and corrections before typing the second draft.
2. It's a very good idea to give a draft to your instructor for comments. The more complete your draft is, the more you should benefit from this process. But *don't expect your instructor to catch every problem*.
3. Spell-check the final draft and *proofread* it carefully for spelling, grammar, punctuation, and coherence of argument. Check also that you in fact do in the paper what you promise in the introductory paragraph that you will do.