

Philosophy 23: Information on Grades and Essay Assignments

Comments on your grade for the course: In order to dispense with the anxiety of in class exams and to focus on more fully engaging the course material in written form, you will be required to write a folio of essays without strict deadlines. However, in order to get comments on them, you must turn them in at the requested time. Otherwise, they get graded at the end of the semester. Because writing greatly improves your clarity of thought and is the key to success at the university level, you will be required to write 9-12 essays. Not all will be graded, but you will have the opportunity to make sure that the essay that you think is your best will be included. For borderline grades, I will grade additional essays. I will accept rewritten essays that receive grades of less than C, but I will not make comments on them a second time. Do your best work.

Directions for writing essays:

1. Type your essay.
2. Follow basic rules for clear, succinct and effective writing. For example, make sure all sentences are grammatical and not too long. Paragraphs should not be a collage of disconnected ideas. Each paragraph should advance your argument and either connect the previous and next paragraph or introduce and carry through on a new issue within the context of what the essay is driving at. Put yourself in the place of the reader. Would YOU understand this (sentence, paragraph, undefined term, essay) if you had not written it? Do you understand it having written it?
3. Pay close attention to the question you are answering and make sure you have actually answered it.
4. Do not attempt to write your essay without careful reading of assigned material.
5. Support what you say with reasoning and examples that make your point more than mere assertion. Don't try to discuss anything without a sufficient grasp of the issues. Go back to the text or use some other sources to get a handle on what you are dealing with, then present it clearly.
6. Compose an informal outline before you write the essay. Outline your essay again *after* it is written, and make certain that every sentence in it fits comfortably into the outline. Revise as required.
7. Arrange the components of the essay in a logical sequence. This is just common sense. Make a point before you clarify it, for example, not the other way around. Place support for item B next to item B, not next to item G or H.
8. Get right to the point and use a few powerful examples, rather than trying to list a great deal of information. Imagine that you are trying to answer these questions for someone quite intelligent but uninformed about them and you are trying to give them a firm grasp of the issues in a relatively short space. This means you will have to quickly identify the most important general issues and then support them specific information, arguments and/or with a few well-chosen examples.
9. Stick to the issue. All points you make in an essay should be connected to the issue under discussion and should always either (a) support, illustrate, explain, clarify, elaborate on, or emphasize your position on the issue or (b) serve as responses to anticipated objections. Rid the essay of irrelevancies and dangling thoughts.
10. In an argumentative essay, the most natural and common organizational pattern is to state what you

are trying to establish and then proceed to establish it by setting forth the considerations that support your position, adding explanations, illustrations, or other elaboration as needed. If any of this secondary material requires its own further support or elaboration, bring in whatever is required in such a way that the reader knows what you are doing. The rule to follow is this: Make sure your readers can tell at all times where they are in the essay. They should be able to discern the relationship between any given sentence and your ultimate objective, and they should be able to move from sentence to sentence and from paragraph to paragraph without becoming lost or confused. If a reader cannot outline your essay with ease, you have not properly sequenced your material.

11. Define or explain all philosophical or other terms upon which the essay depends.
12. Connect the philosophical issues you deal with to their human context and common sense.
13. Be complete. You don't have to be exhaustive in your treatment of the issue, because many issues are much too large to be treated exhaustively in any single essay. However, do accomplish what you set out to accomplish, support fully and adequately whatever position you take on the issue, and anticipate and respond to possible objections. Also, be sure that there is closure at every level. Sentences should be complete, paragraphs should be unified wholes (and usually each should stick to a single point), and the essay should reach a conclusion. Reaching a conclusion and summarizing are not the same. Short essays do not require summaries.
14. Reread the essay several times, once to detect problems in spelling, punctuation, and grammar; once for clarity; and once for organization. Revise as required.
15. Have someone else read your essay and offer criticisms of it. Revise as required.
16. Read your essay out loud. This is a good way to detect problems that your eyes may have missed. Revise as required.

Avoid the following:

The Windy Preamble: Writers of this type of essay avoid getting to the issue and instead go on at length with introductory remarks, often about how important the issue is, how it has troubled thinkers for centuries, how opinions on the issue are many and various, and so on—and on.

The Stream-of-Consciousness Ramble This type of essay results when writers make no attempt to organize their thinking on the issue and instead simply list thoughts more or less in the order they come to mind.

The Knee-Jerk Reaction: In this type of essay, writers record their first reaction to an issue without considering the issue in any depth or detail.

The Glancing Blow: Writers of this type of essay address the issue obliquely rather than straight on. If they are supposed to evaluate the health benefits of exercise, they will discuss the health benefits of using exercise equipment. If they are supposed to consider the health benefits of using exercise equipment, they will discuss the benefits of bicycling.

Let the Reader Do the Work: Writers of this type of essay expect the reader to follow them through non sequiturs and abrupt shifts in direction and over huge gaps in argumentation.