

Teaching Handbook

**Advice from Philosophy Graduate Student TAs
to Philosophy Graduate Student TAs**

Acknowledgements

This handbook was originally created by Dana Goswick at UC Davis in 2005. Thanks to Connie Rosati for a grant which enabled me to pursue my interest in TA development and for supplying the University of Michigan's TA handbook, parts of which appear in this handbook. Thanks to G.J. Matthey for coordinating the TA training session and for editing and posting this handbook. Thanks to Nick Diehl, Brook Roberts, and Ben Whiting for allowing me to videotape one of their discussion sessions. Finally, thanks to everyone who contributed by attending one of the TA lunches and/or responding to my e-mail queries.

In 2016, Dana Goswick gave UC San Diego permission to make a modified version of this handbook available to UCSD philosophy graduate students. The preface to the UCSD version was written by Cory Davia and updated by Kathryn Joyce.

Guide to Using the Teaching Handbook

The teaching handbook contains advice from philosophy graduate students about how to TA for philosophy classes. It includes samples of the sorts of handouts you might want to use, ideas for running discussion sections, and providing feedback.

Preface to UC Davis Handbook

Introduction

Below, you'll find a handbook put together by graduate students at UC Davis with advice for new TAs. It contains a lot of useful information about how to establish classroom norms and manage your time as a TA, as well as providing effective strategies for how to use discussion section to review and clarify points from lecture. While this kind of review is important, it's not the only thing that makes for a good discussion section, so this preface is meant to put that handbook into a larger context. It will identify some other goals you might have for your discussion sections, and provide some examples of things you can do in class to promote those goals.

More specifically, this preface has three parts. The first part is more abstract; it explains some of the different things you might want students to get out of a discussion section. The second and third parts make that discussion more concrete by suggesting some uses of group work and strategies for running discussion that you can go to when deciding how to use class time.

It's worth noting, though, that neither the UC Davis Handbook nor this supplement to it is the final word on any of these matters. Not every TA has the same classroom persona, both because different TAs have different skills and because the way students receive these practices can be complicated by their gender and racial biases. Don't be afraid to try things and to settle on what works for you, and don't hesitate to ask for help. If you'd like to learn more, there are many resources available, including:

- Your fellow TAs. The spreadsheet available at the following link lists TAs who have taught various UCSD courses before. You can reach out to them about how they approached grading a particular assignment, cool ideas for lessons they had, how they framed a difficult topic, etc. There's a lot of expertise in our department, so you needn't feel obligated to reinvent the wheel.

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1UeC8IbvGoMNtgRU9eh6QtjnePmg-MbbtttRM3MLcBb0/edit#gid=0>

- Another way to benefit from your fellow TAs is to have them sit in on your discussion sections and talk about what they notice, or to sit in on theirs to get a sense of how they do things. To set up something like this, contact Kathryn Joyce (kejoyce@ucsd.edu).
- The Center for Engaged Teaching. UCSD's official teaching support office offers courses, workshops, and professional development opportunities. Details can be found on their website, here: <http://commons.ucsd.edu/educators/index.html>

For more information about any of the above resources, other questions, or suggestions about what kinds of teaching support would be helpful, you can also contact your Head TA, Kathryn Joyce (kejoyce@ucsd.edu).

Part 1: Goals for Discussion Section

Many undergraduates think of discussion sections as akin to review sessions, where the primary goal is to clarify what happened in lecture. Because of these expectations, it can be tempting to spend most of your time as a TA fielding clarification questions or rehashing lecture. While helping get students on the same page is one purpose discussion section can serve, there are others that are worthy of your attention. This section will identify three such goals. When you prepare to teach, it can be useful to ask yourself how much time you're spending on things done in the service of each of your goals.

First, discussion section can help *put the content from lecture into context*. There's only so much time in lecture, and it's hard to know what to assume students will already know and what they won't. So, one role for discussion section is to talk with students about what's happening in lecture and how it fits in with things they're already

familiar with. In general, the more students are able to think about what they're doing and why, the better they are at transferring what they learn to new contexts. For example, many lower level philosophy classes begin with a primer on methodology: they'll introduce students to what arguments are, maybe a bit of logical terminology, and how philosophers use arguments to try to answer philosophical questions. Many students find this approach unfamiliar, so one role discussion section can play is to help them see what they're doing and why they're doing it. You might ask students how thinking like a philosopher is like and unlike the way they normally think, what the costs and benefits of this kind of thinking are, or whether there are other areas of their lives where philosophical thinking might be useful.

Second, discussion section can *deepen work done in lecture*. What's said in lecture is rarely the last word on a philosophical topic. There are often further objections to consider, terms that need clarifying, other positions to explore, etc. So, another role for discussion section is exposing students to some of this other material by choosing one part of lecture to follow up on more deeply. Presenting students with some of these complexities gives them an opportunity to check their understanding of the original material, gives them a model for what philosophical thinking looks like, and helps them see philosophy as an ongoing conversation they can contribute to rather than as a set of claims to studied like a textbook. For example, many introductory ethics courses cover the demandingness objection to standard act utilitarianism. Maybe you think that some kinds of demandingness are more objectionable than others, or that whether this objection has teeth depends on the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theory, or that this objection depends on metaethical assumptions about whether we have reason to be moral. If so, you can present these further issues as continuous with things done in lecture, e.g. by introducing them as ways of objecting to an argument considered in lecture, as questions about how to understand terminology students are learning, etc.

Third (and perhaps most importantly), discussion section can *give students an opportunity to practice philosophical skills for themselves*. We want students to leave philosophy classes knowing some content (like what some key questions in a particular subfield are, or about the history of some idea, or about a particular position and the main arguments for and against it), but we also want students to get better at reasoning like philosophers. For example, we hope that after taking our classes they'll be better at identifying the logical structure of arguments, defining terms clearly, anticipating and considering objections to their ideas, representing others' ideas clearly even when they disagree with them, etc. Because discussion section is more interactive than lecture, it provides a unique opportunity for students to practice doing these things, rather than just watching their instructors do them. One upshot of this is that it means students can be doing something valuable even if you're not saying much after you set up an activity: they can be making up new arguments, brainstorming objections to arguments they've encountered before, responding to arguments their classmates have made, etc.

The rest of this supplement suggests some ways of using group work and whole-class discussions to accomplish these things.

Part 2: Group Work

When you prepare for class, it's tempting to focus primarily on what you will say. Often, however, it's also helpful to think in terms of what your students will be *doing* during class. It's hard to focus for an entire class period if you're only doing one thing, so having a variety of activities that ask students to do different things can help keep them engaged.

This section lists some different kinds of things students can do in groups. But first, a general caveat: if you're going to ask students to do group work, it's a good idea to first make sure they know how to do what you're asking. For example, if you want them to come up with an argument against some step in another argument, give them an example of an argument challenging a different step. Or if you want them to figure out how a philosopher is using a term, first talk with them about what makes a good definition.

1. Group work can help students practice particular philosophical skills.

Group work can take a big, intimidating task of the form “discuss this argument” and break it down into more tractable tasks students know how to do. For example, you might provide students with an argument and ask them to come up with the best objections they can to it. Or, you might provide students with an argument and ask them to represent it in formal logic, or to come up with new arguments that support a controversial premise, or to say how they think an unclear term should be defined.

You can also use the results of group work as a basis for further conversation. For example, if two groups formalize an argument differently, you can ask why and have a conversation as a whole class about the different strategies each group used. Or, after groups come up with objections to an argument, the class can think about how one might respond to those objections.

2. Group work can help students get ready for whole-class discussions.

When students are reluctant to speak up during a discussion, sometimes it's just because they haven't had time to think about what you're asking them. In these moments, it can help to pause and let them brainstorm together before continuing. This allows them a chance to collect their thoughts, to try them out without worry about speaking in front of the rest of the class, and to build on what their peers say. You can use this technique at the start of a discussion, or to re-start conversation when it starts to stall. It also provides you with a way of cold-calling without the awkwardness of putting students on the spot entirely: you can always ask them what their group talked about, or what was challenging about talking about it. Hearing the results of these “think-pair-share” activities (by walking around while they happen, or by hearing students report on them) can also help you get a sense of what students are interested in talking more about, or where they're most confused.

3. Group work can help students reflect on previous discussions.

Many students have a hard time tracking the structure of discussions; it feels to them like they're talking in circles even when you can see how the conversation was productive. For example, what you see as distinguishing different objections to an argument might feel to them like a bunch of disconnected thoughts. Group work provides a way of setting aside time to make sense of what just happened. You can ask students to identify things like: What topics were discussed and what was set aside? What were the most important points made? What questions are still left open? Can they use any of ideas that came up today in papers they'll be writing? Are they more or less sure of their position in light of the conversation? Setting aside time for students to talk about this can help the previous discussion stick, and can help them get a clearer sense of what they're doing and why. This can also help direct students' attention toward each other's ideas and away from trying to guess or memorize what their TA thinks.

Part 3: Whole-Class Discussions

Group work has a lot of advantages, but sometimes you'll want to talk about things as a whole class. This section offers some advice on how to do that in a way that promotes the above goals for discussion section.

First, it's worth noting that many students don't come into discussion section already knowing what's expected of them, or what a productive philosophical conversation looks like. So, early on in class it can be a good idea to talk explicitly about what you are doing. What are the norms for conversation in your class? Giving students a voice in what's expected can also help you later when dealing with violations of these norms.

Along the same lines, it can be helpful to remind students of what you're doing and why as you move through discussion section. Are you objecting to an argument that was discussed in lecture? Are you following up on a point from last week's discussion section? Does one activity today set up the next? Helping students see these connections makes it easier for them to follow along and helps them understand what you're asking them to do and why it's worth their effort. Similarly, even when you think it's obvious, reminding students about what skills they're using (say, defining terms or considering counterarguments) and when else they might need those skills can help them see what they're doing as not idiosyncratic to your class.

Once you have students talking, you can help structure the conversation by restating their points (“it sounds like you're saying...”), disambiguate things (“you might have meant a few different things, maybe you can tell me which sounds like what you had in mind...”), show how what one student says is responsive to another (“yeah, so-and-so said X, and what you're saying supports/casts doubt on X because...”), ask them to elaborate (“can you say more about why you think X?” or “how does X relate to what so-and-so was saying?”), playing up points that haven't gotten uptake (“what about so-and-so's point that...”), or asking questions that follow-up on what's been said. This shows students that you are listening to them, and helps keep the conversation on track. Be careful, though, not to do this so often that students expect you to speak each time they do; if so, they'll wait for you rather than speaking up themselves. You can avoid this by recognizing students without jumping into the conversation, e.g. by nodding or looking to other students for a response.

When you're doing this, remember that students will get something out of the conversation (practicing philosophical skills, synthesizing what they learned in lecture) even if it has some dead ends. You can help them along, but if you're quick to point when an objection won't work, or when someone is misunderstanding, you take away an opportunity for other students to right the ship themselves. So, let students talk things through (of course, you may need to step in if misunderstanding is derailing the conversation, or if students are being disrespectful).

One obstacle to getting a discussion going is the assumptions students often make about the authority of their TA. Many, for example, will address their comments to you rather than to each other, or will try to show that they know the “right” answers rather than thinking through the arguments with their classmates. One strategy you can try if this becomes a problem is temporarily making someone else responsible for running the discussion. Moving in physical space (say, from the front of the room to the back, or sitting with students) can help sell this transfer of power. You can still help nudge the conversation as a participant, and you can take over moderating if things go off the rails. Another strategy is to make a show of organizing class around students' ideas, e.g. by focusing whole-class discussion on a line of thought that came out of earlier group work.

Finally, it's helpful to remember that students have different personalities and educational backgrounds, so participation in whole-class discussion can be easier for some than for others (this is especially true when discussion is set up like competitively like a debate, although that can be motivating for some students). One way to be more inclusive is to emphasize that there are many ways of participating, like emailing you questions to be addressed during section, coming to office hours, asking for clarification, running with other students' ideas, participating in online discussions (if your class has a forum for that), etc. Another strategy is to make a point of waiting a bit after asking a question, rather than calling on the first student to have something to say. You can also check in with quieter students privately (by email, or in office hours, or in your comments on their work) to express confidence in them and talk about ways to be more involved. Similarly, you can privately ask more talkative students to help you engage others.

Conclusion

If you're new to TAing, it can be hard to know where to start. The suggestions in this supplement, and in the handbook below, should give you some go-to-tools you can use when deciding what to do in class. Use them (or don't) as you see fit, and feel free to replace them with variants and alternatives. As you spend time in the classroom, you'll get a sense of what works for you. In the meantime, we're here to help.

Table of Contents

Hints on	4-14
Getting Started: The First Section	
Discussion: Filling the 50-Minute Slot	
Stimulating Discussion	
Strategies for Common Readings	
Difficult Students	
Preparing Students to Write Philosophy Papers	
Paper Grading	
Managing Your Time	
Sample Handouts	15-23
Discussion Plan	
Descartes' Meditations	
Logical Terminology	
Grammar Guide	
Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper	
Paper Comments	

Getting Started: The First Discussion Section

The first meeting helps to set the tone for the discussion section, to make clear your expectations, and to communicate your seriousness about the section and the about centrality of philosophical discussion in philosophy. It is important to begin establishing a good rapport with your students. Here are some suggestions for getting off to a good start:

1. Begin learning your students' names. This facilitates communication in the classroom by helping to create a community in which students know and can address one another. It also communicates your interest in them as people, and tends to enhance their interest in participating. An easy way to learn students' names is to ask them to fold a sheet of paper in half and write their name on it. Then call on students by name. So long as you do this, and have students sign up for five minute meetings with you at the beginning of the quarter (see below), it's easy to remember their names. Students are usually happy so long as you've learned their names by week five, so don't hesitate to use the name cards until then if you need them to remember student's names.

2. In the first discussion section you should distribute and discuss a handout indicating the location and hours; your expectations for what the section will be like; etc. (see "Discussion Plan" in the handouts section). This is your chance to set the tone for the Discussion Section. Different people have different styles. Some students see philosophy as a "blow-off," "anything-goes," class, so I try to emphasize that our standards are high and the average grade is a B-. I make sure they're clear that philosophy is hard, that they will be called on randomly and expected to participate, that I assume everyone has done the reading and will address the class as such, that they're expected to be responsible (e.g. on time, with material) and that they should stay home if they're more interesting in sleeping/reading for other classes/etc. This is also a good time to remind students that philosophy is civil argumentation, so although not every view is equally philosophical defensible, the goal isn't to attack others but to understand what's good/bad about their arguments. Hence, they need to be respectful of their peers, instructors, text authors, and TAs.

3. Introduce yourself and the course. Students are curious about you. They like to know your philosophical background, life story, etc. Spend a few minutes explaining why you care about philosophy and they'll be much more inclined to care about it themselves. It is also important to explain the purpose of a discussion section—i.e. tell them what they should gain from preparing for, attending, and participating in section—in order to motivate them to participate. Additionally, you should say something about the kind of atmosphere you hope to create in the classroom, and encourage students to participate freely and to become comfortable with the possibility of making mistakes. Finally, you can encourage students to solicit help from you outside of the class when they need it.

4. Have students introduce themselves, e.g. say their name, major, philosophical background, why they're taking the course, favorite movie/book/TV show, etc. I usually tell students the purpose is to reveal something about

themselves. Hence, it's not okay to say "I'm taking the course for GE credit," but it is okay to make up some elaborate lie about why they're taking the course. Students usually laugh at this, a couple take up the offer and make up amusing stories, and it blocks the dull monotony of listening to thirty students say "it fit my schedule."

5. Pass around a "See Me" sheet, where you have students sign up for a 5 minute slot to come see you during your regular office hours. Students love this. It helps them learn where your office is. It helps you learn their names. It's an easy way to earn TA points and will make leading Section enough easier that it's worth the initial time involvement.

Discussion: Filling the 50-Minute Slot

Lecture Summary: Especially in lower division classes, it can be useful to start out with a five minute summary of what the instructor has covered the previous week. This also sets the stage for what you want to spend the section discussing. Don't try to cover every article the Instructor has done in detail. Pick out the highlights and focus on them.

Generating Questions: I ask each student to bring two questions to each class. Then, if no one volunteers with questions, I randomly call on students. Since all students know they're expected to bring questions to class and may be asked to share their questions, no one is put unduly on the spot. I also find students tend to be less passive when they know they may be called upon, rather than just sitting back and waiting for the more active students to answer questions I've asked.

Posing Questions: Of course, it may be that students aren't asking the questions you think are most important to their understanding the material. In this case, you may want to ask the questions yourself. Make sure to give students sufficient time to respond, i.e., don't just answer the question yourself. If no one is volunteering, call on students. If this doesn't work either, the students probably haven't understood the material well enough to answer the question. Put them in pairs for ten minutes and let them work through the answer, then ask the question again.

Group Work: A great thing! There is less work for you, and students frequently get a lot out of it, and almost always enjoy it, so long as you monitor for slackers, etc.. Make sure to (1) set a clear task for the students and write the task on the board, (2) stop by each group to make sure everyone is participating, and (3) let the students know ahead of time they will either be handing in the work or will be expected to share their results with the class orally.

Debate: Especially if you're spending a few weeks on one topic, it can be fun to organize students into a debate. I usually let them choose which side they care about and then have them argue for the opposite side. This fills up two discussions, one of group work in which each side prepares their arguments and one for the debate. Such debates require careful monitoring, e.g., reminding students that their job is to accurately present the philosophical views of the person they're arguing for and not to just "beat" the other side.

Jeopardy!: To prepare for a final or to review material, divide the room into two sides, then divide each side into pairs. Have each pair come up with a 100, 200, 300, 400, and 500 point question. A pair from side A asks a question of a pair from side B, and so forth. Keep track of the points on the board. The winning side gets to choose first from the candy jar, gets one absence excused, etc. Every time I've done this, it's been a hit. Even if it's towards the beginning of the quarter, students remember and comment on it at the end, so I'd encourage you to try it.

Be Ridiculous: Make a ridiculous statement and defend it. For instance, with a straight face explain to students that you (a) don't think there are any desks in the room, (b) think i's always right to kill others, e.g., because the world's overpopulated, (c) believe that paper grades should be randomly assigned, etc. This gets students' attention and can be a good way to (i) make them laugh and (ii) get them to see the structure of argument, objection, reply to objection, etc. For instance, you could make up a mock paper topic and go through the structure defending the ridiculous statement of your choice. The purpose is to get students to see that it's not what they think, but how well they defend what they think, that matters.

Make Mistakes: Include a couple of errors in your five minute lecture summary, then ask the students what the errors were. This makes them wish they'd listened more closely. It also gives you a good excuse for the inevitable sincere mistakes you will make.

Get Excited: For instance, qualia are cool! Most students really like it when they find out there's an official word for those first-person experiences they've been having all along. Get them to relate philosophical concepts to their own lives. For instance, it's obvious that blue is the best color. Why would anyone disagree? Maybe Nick says his favorite color is green because what we all call "green" gives him the qualia that blue gives me. Maybe Maria says her favorite color is red because what we all call "red" gives her the qualia that blue gives me. And so forth.

Current Events/Flyers: Bring in something from the news that's relevant to your topic and have students discuss it. If you're teaching in Wellman, student groups frequently put up flyers there that contain logical errors. Bring one of the flyers in and see which student can spot the logical error first. Then, when you get around to the ethics part of the class, you can also debate whether taking flyers for your own personal use is moral according to a Kantian/Utilitarian/etc.

Conclusion: At the end of class let students know what you'll be discussing the next class. Leave them with something to think about: either something from the upcoming material that you want to focus on next time, or something from the material you've just discussed that you'll come back to briefly at the beginning of the next class.

Stimulating Discussion

One of the most difficult tasks for the TA is to make the best use of time in discussion sections. Most students have become accustomed to passive learning. The presence of “dead air” can be discomfiting, with the natural response being to rush in to fill it. Thus there is a strong temptation to lecture to the students, who will obligingly take notes and be grateful that they do not have to speak. But your job is to get students talking. If you respond to their silence by filling in with a lecture, this will reinforce their silence. Don't be afraid of some silence. Learn to wait for 15 seconds (try this out so you know what 15 seconds feels like); then rephrase the question.

Each TA should have a plan for stimulating discussion. The plan should be tailored to the TA's pedagogical strengths. A traditional method is to call on students by name and ask them questions directly. Students can also be provoked into talking voluntarily, i.e., give a defense of a controversial thesis. The defense can be put in a way that challenges directly beliefs that students hold widely. Students talk because they want to point out that you're defending the wrong claim.

A recurrent problem in stimulating discussion is the weight of authority carried by the TA. Some students believe that they need to find out what the TA's views are so that they can repeat them. Some TAs deal with this by refusing to give definitive answers. Another method is to tell students what you think, but to emphasize that others think differently and that what they'll be judged on is not what they think, but how well they defend what they think.

Another aspect of the authority of the TA is that students may talk directly to the TA, leaving out the other students. To counteract this, turn a student's question over to the class rather than answering it yourself. Try to get students talking to one another. Your job is to monitor, not to lecture.

A successful discussion requires adequate preparation on the part of the students. Make sure the students know you expect them to have done the reading and to actively attempt to understand it. If students know you expect this and they know you'll call on them randomly, they usually won't show up to class unless they're prepared.

Strategies for Common Readings

Apology: Most students are very sympathetic to Socrates. I think he's a gadfly. Prepare a one minute condensation of Socrates' speech to the jury. Dress up in a toga and give the one minute speech, with your students as jury. Better yet, get one of the students to do it. I'm not sure how much philosophical value this has, but it gets the students' attention and gets them thinking about why Socrates was treated as he was.

Plato's Dialogues: Prepare a five minute condensation of the philosophically significant parts of the dialogue. Get students to volunteer to read the condensation. Give it to them the week before so they can practice, then put on a mini-play. Then, you can spend the rest of the discussion discussing what students heard/read. This makes the dialogue more real for them and there are always some drama students eager to participate.

Mackie's "Evil and Omnipotence": Students frequently don't understand how one can "always freely choose the good." Get a large bowl of starbursts. Ask a volunteer to come up and take three for himself/herself to eat. Keep doing this until you get a student who chooses all three of the same flavor. Talk about how the student could have chosen any flavor, but freely choose the same flavor every time. Then ask the students how this experiment is relevant to the Mackie article.

Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* : In justification of his view that the distinction between theory and fact is not as tight as we might initially have thought, Kuhn cites certain psychological experiments. Take a four of hearts and a six of hearts and make color copies of them blown up 400%. Take a five of hearts, a four of spades, a five of spades, and a six of spades and make black and white copies of them blown up 400%. Affix each blown up card to a poster board. Show each card to the students for one second, then ask students to write down what they saw. A few will notice the anomaly, but most will judge the black five of hearts as either a black five of spades or as a red five of hearts. The key to this working is to show them the cards very quickly. For a paper assignment, you can ask them to explain how this, and the other experiments Kuhn mentions, supports Kuhn's claims regarding facts and theories.

Difficult Students

If all goes well, you will have been scary enough the first day to have frightened away all the difficult students. But perhaps not. Then you'll just have to deal with them. So far as I know, no one's really found a satisfactory solution to this problem. Here are some suggestions:

- Make sure the student feels that his/her point has been heard. Then move on quickly, viz. "That's an interesting point, but right now we're talking about . . ." or "That's a good idea, but it's beyond the scope of this discussion. Why don't you come to office hours?"
- If the student is being rude to others, you've got to stop it. Remind the student that philosophical argumentation is not about attacking others, that our goal is to figure out what author x is saying, etc. Tell (or make up) a story about how your feelings got hurt in class once with the goal of reminding the student that although he/she may be happy being criticized aggressively not everyone is.
- Talk to the student after class. If you've done the five-minute sessions, the student is probably inclined to be sympathetic to you. Figure out what's going on with the student. Express your sympathy that the student has to put up with whatever it is that's making him/her unhappy. Appeal to the student to help you do your job by x, y, and z. Try to get the student on your side. Talk to the course instructor about how to deal with the student.
- Pose a difficult question to the student. Use his or her response to demonstrate that he or she has something to learn from the course.
- Flatter the student, e.g. "It's great that you've figured out x's view. But I want to discuss a couple more aspects of it." or "It's great that you're so certain God exists. However, the point of this class isn't to discuss first-person certainty, but to figure out how to convince someone who's initially inclined to disagree. So, let's pretend that Sue isn't convinced, what philosophical arguments can we give her?"
- If a student is really acting out, you need to respond firmly and publicly, both for your own sake (in terms of maintaining appropriate control of your class) and so that your students do not feel frustrated about your failure to deal with the problem. (e.g., "X, when you interrupt like this it makes it difficult for others to follow the lecture/discussion. We are interested to hear what you have to say. But we/I also want the opportunity to express our/my points without interruption.")
- See the "Disruptions in Class" document on the Student Judicial Affairs Web page, <http://sja.ucdavis.edu/publications.html>, for further suggestions.

Preparing Students to Write Philosophy Papers

Grading will be a lot easier if your students know ahead of time exactly what you expect. Write a sample outline on the board. For a lower division course in which all the students are writing on the same topic, you might spend one section making up an outline, then type up the outline yourself, and finally (with the instructor's permission) give the outline to the students. Most students have a lot of difficulty with structure and this makes their papers very hard to grade, so do all that you can to make sure they understand how important structure is and how much their grade will depend on it. Students need to be told the obvious, i.e., you need an introduction, a thesis, objections, replies, etc.

Have sample papers available for students to read. Whenever you come across a solid "A" undergraduate paper photocopy it (with the student's permission) and keep it on file, then make copies for students to read. Tell them the topic the paper was on, have them construct an outline of how they'd write the paper, have them read the paper, and then have them write the outline the paper followed. This gives you an entire section of group work and it helps the students figure out how to write a good outline and how their initial outline might differ from the "A" student's outline.

Pass out a handout about what you expect from a paper. Go over it in class. This ensures that students know what you want. It also ensures that they can't plead ignorance when they come in to complain about their grades. A sample handout is included in this handbook. The sample handout also lists a Web page with additional hints on paper writing. Many students find the Web page has too much information to be useful, but you might want to peruse it for further writing hints.

Paper Grading

Most TAs find paper grading and talking to students who are unhappy about their paper grades the most onerous aspects of TAing. This section contains suggestions to try to make these tasks less unpleasant.

Grading: You should grade your papers as quickly as you can (see “Managing Your Time”). You need to accomplish only two things when you grade a paper: (1) give the student enough feedback that they can understand why they got the grade they got and how to improve future papers, and (2) give enough comments that you can tell at a glance why you gave the paper the grade you did and can easily explain the grading rationale to the student, instructor, or any other random person who might ask.

Use a comments sheet (see “Paper Comments” in the handouts section). Most students will make very similar mistakes. There’s no reason to write the same comment multiple times.

Prepare the students as much as possible ahead of time, so their papers are better.

Don’t be overly sympathetic. A philosophy paper is supposed to be clear. Some find that requiring students to use subheadings and to write arguments out formally in premise/conclusion form results in clearer papers. You should be able to glance over a paragraph and tell what the student is saying. If you can’t, grade the student down and move on. A paragraph that you have to spend five minutes deciphering isn’t a paragraph worth spending five minutes on.

You are not an English teacher. Students who graduate from UC Davis should be capable of writing grammatically acceptable English sentences. You should note grammar errors and grade down for them, but it’s not your job to teach students grammar. Tell students ahead of time that you expect them to proof-read and to use grammatically appropriate English. Students that need help with this should visit the Learning Skills Center at 2205 Dutton Hall. Their Web page is <http://www.lsc.ucdavis.edu/faq.htm>. You should familiarize yourself with the services they offer, so that you can refer students. Make sure students understand that the center is not for remedial students, but for everyone. Non-native speakers especially should have their papers proof-read. If you really emphasize that you take grammar seriously, students will meet your expectations. They will go to the Learning Center and they will take the time to write grammatically.

The typical average grade for undergraduate philosophy classes is a B-. Although you should not feel compelled to conform your average to a B-, it’s generally a good idea to do so. Tell students ahead of time (the first day of class) that the average is a B-. Some students will think philosophy is an easy “A” and that any decent paper deserves an “A.” Make sure they understand that you stick to the average (unless the Instructor tells you otherwise; many Instructors here follow the B- average).

Always begin by saying something good about the paper. If you can’t think of anything good, make some positive statement that’s so general it’s not an outright lie. Negative comments should be frank and to the point, but constructive and expressed gently. They should be expressed as suggestions for how to improve this and

future assignments. A student should be able to read comments and understand both why he/she received a particular grade and what strategies to pursue to improve his/her work. Some find it easiest to focus on the former in the comments they write on the paper and to rely on a comments sheet to explain how to improve. Keep in mind that too many suggestions can be overwhelming, so you might focus on a few general ways in which the paper might be improved. You also might want to read the paper through once quickly and then go back and write in comments on only the major problems.

Some TAs find it useful to sort papers into four piles, "A," "B," "C," and "D/F," before deciding exactly what grade to give each paper.

You should spend around ten minutes grading a 5-page paper. The more papers you grade on the same topic, the faster your grading will get, as you will have already noted down major mistakes on the comments sheet and will be able to write in symbols. You should be able to grade twenty five-page papers in two hours. If you can't, figure out how to go more quickly. Set a timer and give yourself an hour for ten papers, etc.

Talking to Unhappy Students: Inevitably you will have students who are unhappy with their grade and who will want to talk to you about it. Decide ahead of time whether or not you will raise students' grades. Some people raise the grade of any student who comes to talk to them; some people never, or only rarely, raise students grades. It's up to you and the instructor to decide what you'll do. Make sure students understand your policy. When I first starting TAing I didn't have a policy and I had students complain all the time. Now I have a firm policy and (surprisingly) no one has complained in the last couple of years. Here's what I tell students: that I will be happy to raise their grade if I've made a mistake, but that I don't usually make grading mistakes. If a student wants to talk about their paper with the goal of figuring out how to improve future papers, I strongly encourage them to come to office hours. But if students' sole purpose is to raise their grade, I tell them they must provide a one-paged typed explanation of the mistake I made in grading their paper. Such an explanation must refer explicitly to the assigned topic, the paper writing handout, and the comments I made on their paper. That is, they must give me an argument that they have answered the assigned question satisfactorily and they must provide a good justification for their belief that my comments to the contrary are incorrect. I've never had a student do this, but if one could successfully, then certainly he/she would deserve a raised grade. Most students discover, when they try to do this, that their paper is actually not so good. Rarely, you will have a student who refuses to recognize your authority and who simply doesn't listen to any explanation you give as to why the paper got the grade it got. In this case, send him/her to the man/woman upstairs (the instructor that is). If this happens, e-mail the Instructor to notify him/her that an unhappy student will soon be seeking him/her out.

Managing Your Time

TAing is important. How well you do at TAing occasionally affects what funding you receive while you're a graduate student. There are various teaching awards which it's good to have on your CV. Finally, when you go on the job market (unless you're a genius who's already published a ton of papers) people will want to see that you have a strong TAing background. Nonetheless, by and large you are judged (and will be judged) by the quality of your papers. Your goal is to be a good TA without devoting too much time to it. It gets easier with experience. Partly because you've figured out discussion-leading strategies and paper-grading strategies, and partly because you've already read most of the material discussed in lectures, so you can just glance over it.

Your job is to (1) do what the instructor wants you to do, and (2) help your students do well in the class. It's important to know the material well, but you don't need to know it at the same level you would if you were writing a seminar paper on it. What you need is to understand the material clearly enough to present it at a level that is comprehensible and philosophically engaging to the students. Your focus should be as much on how to present the material, as it is on the material itself. Spend a section teaching students basic logic. Most Instructors will use logical terms, e.g., "valid," "sound," "compatible." Most lower division students don't know what these terms mean. Spend a section discussing papers. Most students have far more trouble with presenting the material clearly than they do with understanding the material (I know, you might think they go hand in hand, but they don't seem to in the undergraduate mind). Now, you've only got eight sessions left . . .

Office hours can easily become a drain on your time, especially if you find yourself making appointments outside office hours with students who don't show up. Schedule appointments for a time when you're already on campus. If students e-mail you and wish to set up an appointment, don't just e-mail back with times you're available. Instead, ask the student to come up to you after lecture and set up an appointment. Many students won't bother and the ones that do have made at least an initial time investment, which makes them slightly more likely to keep the appointment. Remind students that, if they can't come to your office hours, they can attend the instructor's or (in a multiple-TA course) other TAs' office hours.

E-mail can also quickly become a drain on your time. You aren't required to be available to students 24/7. Some TAs manage e-mail by letting students know, e.g., they'll be checking their e-mail from 7pm to 7:30pm on Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday. Hence, students who e-mail after 7:30pm on Sunday shouldn't expect a reply until Tuesday evening. You shouldn't find yourself spending a lot of time going back and forth with students via e-mail. That's what office hours are for.

Discussion Plan (Sample Handout)

My Office Location, Hours, & e-mail

[My Name:](#)

[My Office:](#) SocSci

[Directions to my office:](#) Go to 3rd & A (across from Off Campus Books)

Enter the glass doors marked “philosophy”

Turn left and walk down the hall a few feet

My office is the door on your left with the Sherlock Holmes postcard on it.

[My Office Hours:](#)

[My E-mail:](#)

Format of Each Class

[Discussion Plan:](#) Before class I will write on the board the topics to be covered.

[Your Name:](#) Before each class please take a sheet of paper and fold it in half. Write your first name in large letters on the front and stand it up on your desk.

[Lecture Summary:](#) At the beginning of class I will spend five minutes summarizing instructor X’s lectures of the previous week and re-emphasizing important points. If you have questions about material mentioned in class, you should ask them at the end of my summary.

[Questions:](#) The purpose of discussion session is for you to talk!!! Consequently, each student is expected to bring two questions to each discussion session. These should be substantive questions about the material you’ve read or the information covered in class, i.e., “When are your office hours?” doesn’t count. I will call on several students at the beginning of class to ask their questions and get the discussion going. Each student will be called on at least once, and possibly more than once, during the quarter.

[Format:](#) Each class will spend approximately 15 minutes on the above mentioned items. After that, every class will be different. We will examine the material in a variety of ways, e.g. small group analysis of text, debates, whole class discussion, etc. I am open to any suggestions you have regarding the format of discussion sessions. I will make an effort not to put anyone on the spot. However, discussion session is not the place to sit quietly and take notes. I expect active participation and your grade in philosophy X will partially represent the effort you demonstrate in discussion session. This means you must talk!

[Conclusion:](#) I’ll tell you what we’ll cover in the next discussion session. You should come to the next discussion having read the material and prepared to discuss the topics I mention.

Discussion Plan (Sample Handout, continued)

Attendance

[Participation in Section](#): Roll will be taken at the beginning of every section. If you miss roll call, it is your responsibility to come up to me at the end of the session and let me know you were late. This may only be done at the end of the section to which you were late. Your grade for section will depend on your participation in section. Of course, if you don't attend, you can't participate. Hence, I strongly encourage you to attend all sections.

[Tardiness](#): Although I understand it may not always be possible for you to arrive at discussion on time, tardiness disrupts me and your peers. You are considered tardy if you arrive after roll call is complete. You may be tardy to discussion twice with no consequences. Any subsequent tardies will adversely affect your grade.

[Missed Discussion](#): If you miss a discussion session you may get the information from that discussion either from a friend or from me during office hours. Please do not e-mail regarding missed discussion sessions or missed lectures.

Papers

[Headings](#): Please head all papers you hand in as follows:

Your Name
TA: Dana
Discussion Time

[All Papers Must be Typed](#): Hand-written papers will be returned ungraded and you will not be allowed to make them up.

[Late Papers](#): Per instructor X's policy, late papers . . .

[E-mails Regarding Papers](#): I prefer you come to my office hours. However, I understand this is not always possible. You may e-mail me questions you have regarding papers. The more specific your question, the better I will be able to answer you, e.g., if you feel compelled to write "I'm totally confused," I can't help you via e-mail and you should come to office hours. Due to the large number of e-mails I receive before papers are due, I will only answer e-mails which are sent by 6pm the day before the papers are due. I suggest you start early.

See Me

[I Want to Meet You](#) before you're in a panic because you realize you haven't understood anything for the past nine weeks and are afraid you're going to fail the final. Consequently, I am going to pass around a sign-up sheet for you to stop by and chat for five minutes. Nothing scary. I just want to know your name, year, why you're taking the class, and that you're interested enough in the class to spend a few minutes of your time finding out where my office is and introducing yourself.

Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Sample Handout)

Setting the Foundation

Meditation I: Methodology: Radical Doubt thought experiment

Meditation II: Indubitable: I exist. I am a thinking being.

Meditation III: P1: I have an idea of an infinite God.

P2: There is some x such that x causes my idea of an infinite God.

P3: There is at least as much reality in the cause (x) as there is in the
effect (my idea of an infinite God).

C1: God exists. (P1-P3)

Meditation IV: God would not allow me to be deceived about things I clearly and distinctly perceive.

Thus, radical doubt isn't required. Some things I thought I could doubt, I can no longer doubt.

Building on the Foundation

Meditation V: Essence of Material Objects vs. Essence of God: The essence of material objects is such that it does not imply the existence of material objects. The essence of God is such that it implies the existence of God. The Content Arg. for the existence of God (aka The Ontological Arg. for the existence of God) is presented.

P1: I clearly and distinctly perceive God's essence.

P2: Everything I clearly and distinctly perceive is as I perceive it to be.

P3: God's essence entails that God exists.

C1: God's essence is as I perceive it to be. (P1, P2)

C2: God exists. (P3, C1)

Meditation VI: The existence of Material Objects. The Mind, though not a Material Object like the Body, is closely tied to the Body.

Logical Terminology (Sample Handout)

Argument

In philosophy an argument is a set of sentences some of which are the premises (what you're assuming is true) and some of which are the conclusions (what you can conclude to be true simply in virtue of the fact that the premises are true).

P/C Form

Taking an argument written in paragraph form and rewriting it as follows:

P1:

P2:

C1: (P1, P2)

Validity

If the premises were true, the conclusion could not be false.

How to Test an Argument for Validity

Step 1: Pretend that all the premises are true.

Step 2: Ask yourself, given that you're pretending all the premises are true, is it possible to pretend the conclusion is false, or are you forced to pretend the conclusion is true?

Step 3: If you're forced to pretend the conclusion is true, then the argument is valid.

If you can pretend the conclusion is false, then the argument is invalid.

Soundness

The argument is valid and all the premises are true.

How to Test an Argument for Soundness

Step 1: Do the validity test first.

Step 2: If the argument is invalid, it is not sound.

If the argument is valid, go on to step three.

Step 3: Are all the premises true?

Step 4: If all the premises are true, then the argument is sound.

If one or more of the premises is false, then the argument is not sound.

Grammar Guide (Sample Handout by Brooke Roberts)

Let me just qualify what I am about to offer you, by saying that few people have impeccable sentence structure, grammar, etc. However, since this course does fulfill a writing requirement, I would like to offer something in the way of grammatical guidance.

Cardinal Sins

Flowery prose: Please, please save it for your English papers.

Long and irrelevant introductions: Jump directly into the issue at hand.

Restatement of lecture/text: At best, this type of paper will net you an average grade (C). At worst, especially if you are not careful about citation, this sort of paper may count as plagiarism.

Including irrelevant material: This one is especially annoying. I do not want to take the time to decide which paragraphs are on track with the assignment, and which paragraphs are filler. It is tedious, and if I find it sufficiently aggravating, have no doubt that my annoyance will be reflected in the grade you find staring back at you. I would much rather read a short but concise paper, than some meandering diatribe.

Not proofreading your paper: Write at least two drafts. For non-native speakers, I highly recommend taking advantage of a friend's critical eyes, or the language lab.

Okay, now that I have the especially grating errors out of my system. I read some books on style and grammar over break, and I would like to share a few pearls with you.

It's okay to write in the first person, just don't go overboard.

Relish every word. Strip down sentences.

Shun adverbs that express degree, i.e., say "thrilled" instead of "quite happy"

Rid prose of prepositional phrases when possible. Use nouns and verbs instead, i.e., use "about" instead of "in regard to."

Always use double quotations for American style writing. Avoid long quotations.

Commas should be placed inside quotation marks, and semicolons outside of them.

Possessive forms of singular nouns ending in 's' are the same as others, i.e., Lewis's book, not Lewis' book.

Philosophy I

T.A.- Brooke Roberts

Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper (Sample Handout)

- Supported Claims: You have to defend the claims you make. You have to offer reasons to believe them. Your paper can't consist of the mere report of your opinions, nor in a mere report of the opinions of the philosophers we discuss.
- Be modest: Make a small point, but make that point clearly and straightforwardly. Offer good reasons in support of it. Don't be overly ambitious. Don't try to establish any earth-shattering conclusions in your 5-6 page paper. Only make claims you can adequately support.
- Clear Structure: Follow an outline. Making a detailed outline is at least 80% of the work of writing a good philosophy paper. You should make the structure of your paper obvious to the reader. Your reader shouldn't have to exert any effort to figure it out. Beat him over the head with it. Use subheadings.
- Simple Prose: Use simple, straightforward prose. Keep your sentences and paragraphs short.
- Be Relevant: Make sure every sentence in your draft does useful work. Get rid of any which don't. If you can't figure out what some sentence contributes to your central discussion, then get rid of it—even if it sounds nice. You should never include any points in your paper unless they're important to your main argument, and you have the room to really explain them. Don't try to tell the reader everything you know about X's views. Rather, summarize the parts of X's views that are directly relevant to what you're paper.
- No fluff: Don't begin with a sentence like "Down through the ages, mankind has pondered the problem of" There's no need to warm up to your topic. You should get right to the point with the first sentence.
- Anticipate objections: Try to anticipate objections to your view and respond to them. For instance, if you object to some philosopher's view, don't assume he would immediately admit defeat. Imagine what his comeback might be. How would you handle that comeback?
- Critical Reader: Pretend that your reader is lazy, stupid, and mean. He's lazy because he doesn't want to figure out what your convoluted sentences are supposed to mean and he doesn't want to figure out what your argument is, if it's not already obvious. He's stupid, so you have to explain everything you say to him in simple, bite-sized pieces. And he's mean, so he's not going to read your paper charitably.

These guidelines are from Jim Pryor's web page.

<http://jimpryor.dyndns.org/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

Paper Comments (Sample Handout)

awk: Awkward: your phrasing sounds funny

C: Clarity: it's not clear what you're trying to say here. Use short, simple, direct, easy-to-read sentences.

Cit: You need to cite when you paraphrase or take an idea from someone else

DFA: Didn't Follow Assignment: you skipped part of the assignment

G: Grammar: you've made a grammatical error which makes your sentence difficult to understand

IDA: In-Depth Analysis: don't just skim over the topic; pick one aspect and really analyze it thoroughly

inV: This argument is invalid, and I have no idea why you thought it was valid

J: Justify your claim, offer proof, don't just state it

m.l.: Misuse of logic or of logical terminology

N.Q.: No Quotes (see below)

NQR: Not Quite Right: you have not stated the theory exactly right

NQV: Not Quite Valid: this argument is not valid, but I can tell by your explanation what you meant to say and if you just changed the wording a bit or added another premise, you'd have a valid argument

Rep: Repetitive

?R: Questionable Relevance: does not relate to or advance your topic

?Re: Questionable Reasoning: you say "x follows from y" but you haven't given me any reason to think this

S: Storytelling: you're telling me the story of what happened in the text; you're writing a book report. In a philosophy paper you should analyze what was said in the text, rather than merely repeating what was said.

sum: Summarize: pick out the relevant information from the passage you are discussing and present it. Don't just quote the entire passage.

w/w: Wrong Word: the word you've chosen doesn't mean precisely what you've used it to mean

Paper Comments (Sample Handout, continued)

Good Use of Quotation

Quotations are used to prove the text really says what you claim it says. For instance—Socrates believed that in order for life to be worthwhile one must engage in constant reflection: “The unexamined life is not worth living” (text, 24).

Bad Use of Quotation

Quotations are not to be used as a substitute for putting what the text says in your own words. For instance—Socrates believed that “the unexamined life is not worth living” (text, 24).

Why Good Students Get Bad Grades on Philosophy Papers

- **Being too Creative**: In philosophy papers we want you to answer all and only what the assignment asks you to. Don't go beyond the scope of the assignment and include irrelevant information. No matter how interesting, impressive, creative this information is, if it is not relevant to your assigned topic, your paper will be graded down.

- **Not Following Directions**: Philosophy papers are very different from English/Sociology/Science/etc. papers. Pay careful attention to advice the instructor and TAs give. Don't rely on information you've received in other classes, or on your general notion of what a good paper is. You're not just trying to write a good paper, you're trying to write a paper that satisfies the criteria determined by the Philosophy Department.

- **Being Over-Confident or Dogmatic**: A philosophy paper is not a law suit. You aren't trying to bludgeon the reader into agreeing with you by only giving one side of the matter or by dogmatically adhering to a particular point of view. Your goal is to be objective and careful. Don't make strong statements (e.g., that everyone knows there's no such thing as gods) which are easily disproved (I'm reading your paper and I don't know what you've just claimed everyone knows). Make weaker statements (e.g., many people believe there aren't any gods) which are more difficult to disprove.

- **Being Careless**: The grading standards in philosophy are very high, sloppiness is not tolerated. Read your paper aloud to yourself. Have you made grammatical errors? When you write “he” is it clear to whom you're referring? When you write “the account,” is it clear which account you're talking about. Is every single sentence grammatically correct? Is every sentence clear? Does every sentence contribute directly to what you're trying to accomplish with the paper? These are questions you should ask yourself before you turn a philosophy paper in.

Paper Comments (Sample Handout, continued)

- Being Wordy: I am not impressed that you have a large vocabulary and know many synonyms for “pious.”. Who cares? This just makes your paper harder to read. Use simple language, be direct. Don’t use a long or atypical word when you can say the same thing with a small or common word (e.g. don’t say “I will entertain Socrates’ response” when you mean “I will discuss Socrates’ response”—you aren’t inviting Socrates over for a party, you’re discussing what he said in the *Euthyphro*). Don’t use ten words to say what you can say in five (e.g. don’t say “I will lead an analysis of Plato’s *Euthyphro*,” say “I will analyze Plato’s *Euthyphro*”).

How to Get an “A”

(1) Do the assignment clearly and concisely. The majority of “A” papers get As this way.

(2) Be so insightful and clever that your work is a delight to read and I overlook the fact that you made some of the errors listed above. Only a few papers get As this way.

- I suggest you aim for method (1). Papers that aim for method (1) and don’t quite succeed generally get Bs. Papers that aim for method (2) and don’t succeed generally get Ds.