THE PINK GUIDE

TO TAKING PHILOSOPHY CLASSES

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Starring **Professor Pink** and his assistant **Philosa Flea**

Contents

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5 Myths about Philosophy

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Philosophy is very different, in several ways, from other subjects that are offered at high school or college. As a result, many students come to their first Philosophy class with mistaken or confused ideas about what it will involve. These misconceptions can make it harder to understand and enjoy Philosophy and can lead to problems in one's papers. With this in mind, the following are some common myths about Philosophy that are worth dispensing with immediately:

1. Philosophers are mainly concerned with answering questions like: "Is that table really there?" or "What is the meaning of life?".

While some philosophers do ask these questions, they also ask many others. Philosophy is best understood not as itself an area of study, but rather as an approach to areas of study. Philosophers are distinguished from other academics by their tendency to select the more foundational, abstract or formal questions that can be asked about an area of inquiry and by their emphasis on the importance of critical, reasoned argument in answering those questions. Here is what some twentieth century philosophers have to say on the subject:

> "[The aim of philosophy is] to be clear-headed rather than confused; lucid rather than obscure; rational rather than otherwise; and to be neither more, nor less, sure of things than is justifiable by argument or evidence."
>
> - Geoffrey Warnock in Pyke (1996)

> "The word "philosophy" means the love of wisdom, but what philosophers really love is reasoning. They formulate theories and marshal reasons to support them, they consider objections and try to meet these, they construct arguments against other views. Even philosophers who proclaim the limitations of reason adduce reasons for their views and present difficulties for opposing ones."
>
> - Robert Nozick (1994)

The highly general nature of this approach means that you can do philosophy "of" almost anything. While there are plenty of metaphysicians, epistemologists and ethicists around, there are also philosophers of law, philosophers of science, philosophers of mathematics, philosophers of economics, philosophers of art, philosophers of religion – even philosophers of *philosophy*. (Let's not even go there).

2. Philosophy is closely tied to religion.

Although Philosophy tends to be shelved in bookstores alongside Religion and the Occult, academic Philosophy has very little in common with either. Academic philosophers don't aim to develop or promote an all-encompassing "philosophy of life" in the way that religious leaders or spiritual gurus do. Instead they apply themselves, in an often quite technical fashion, to highly specific aspects of a particular problem or question. Philosophy proceeds best when it is taken in a slow, piecemeal way. Another important way in which Philosophy is very different from religion lies in its insistence on seeking reasons for believing claims, rather than taking those claims on faith.

3. There are no correct answers to the questions philosophers ask: in the end, "it's all up to the individual".

Students with a background in science come to Philosophy trained in certain research procedures and standards of evidence that don't apply – or at least don't apply in the same way - to philosophical problems. This means that they can have trouble accepting the idea that philosophical arguments can be good or bad, or that claims made in Philosophy can be true or false. This reaction is nothing new. Back in the century before last, the philosopher William James wrote:

> "When one turns to the magnificent edifice of the physical sciences, and sees how it was reared…what submission to the icy laws of outer fact are wrought into its very stones and mortar…then how besotted and contemptible seems every little sentimentalist who comes blowing his voluntary smoke-wreaths, and pretending to decide things from out of his private dream! Can we wonder if those bred in the rugged and manly school of science should feel like spewing such subjectivism out of their mouths?"
>
> - James 1897

But there's no need to be this hasty. Although the evaluative criteria that apply to philosophical arguments may be different from those that apply to scientific arguments, this doesn't mean that they are inferior, or that in philosophy "anything goes". Different subjects require different standards. This means that while it may well be that there are no correct answers to *some* questions philosophers might ask, this is a claim that needs to be argued for in any given case: it cannot just be asserted as an article of faith, or used as an all-purpose rebuttal to any and every argument.

4. You get a bad grade in Philosophy classes if you disagree with your Teaching Assistant or Professor.

Doing philosophy is chiefly a matter of assembling arguments for some conclusion or other. In Philosophy classes you don't get credit for merely stating your opinion concerning an issue: you need to provide reasons for believing that opinion to be true, and reasons for rejecting arguments that claim it to be false. This means that you can receive an A grade for a paper even if the conclusion that you reach in that paper is the exact opposite of the one that your Teaching Assistant or Professor favors. What she or he will be assessing is your *argument* for your conclusion, not your conclusion itself.

5. Philosophy is a useless waste of time.

Philosophy doesn't have direct practical applications, in the way that studies in science, engineering, medicine, law or foreign languages do. But it does provide you with general, concrete skills that are useful in a wide variety of careers. Studying philosophy will help you hone your abilities to think carefully and systematically about difficult and abstract questions, to construct tight and well-supported arguments for your conclusions, to ask probing questions and detect mistakes in reasoning, to defend your opinions against criticism, and to express yourself with concision and clarity. The habits of mental hygiene, logical rigor, and polemical skill that Philosophy provides you with will serve you well in many areas of life.

The Top 10 General Tips

that made Professor Pink the philosophical paragon he is today

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1. **Come to all lectures and sections.**

2. **Make notes in lecture, even if there is a handout**. This helps you to process the information as you hear it, and to identify areas that you don't understand. If you can't put it into your own words, you probably don't get it.

3. **Do *all* the readings, and read creatively**: see pp.8-9 below.

4. **Participate in section**: come prepared to class, and don't be shy about entering the discussion, or contributing to debates and other activities.

5. **Choose your paper topics carefully**. Pick a subject that you find both intriguing and manageable. Your Teaching Assistant or Professor will be happy to discuss the options with you.

6. Start writing your papers early. At least one week in advance of the deadline.

7. **See your Teaching Assistant/Professor before and after papers are due**, to discuss your drafts. Regular meetings improve your grade. This is a *fact*.

8. **If required, revise your papers *thoroughly*,** following the guidelines on p. 18.

9. **When confused, ask questions***:* of your professor, your Teaching Assistant and other students. Don't be afraid to look stupid. A large part of success in Philosophy involves recognizing that you are stupid and learning to deal with it.

10. **Unleash your Inner Philosopher**: The ideal philosopher takes nothing on faith, leaves no assumption unchallenged, scrutinizes every step of an argument, and aims at utter clarity of expression, unfailing accuracy, and rigorous adherence to the laws of logic. Imitating the ideal philosopher at all times will ruin your social life.

Above all, the ideal philosopher is patient. He or she is able to live with uncertainty, and is happy to proceed one step at a time.

> "The only difference between science and philosophy is that science is what you more or less know and philosophy is what you do not know…Just as there are families in America who from the time of the Pilgrim Fathers onward had always migrated westward, toward the backwoods, because they did not like civilized life, so the philosopher has an adventurous disposition and likes to dwell in the region where there are still uncertainties."
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> - Bertrand Russell (1918)

How to Read Philosophy Papers

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Let's be honest: sometimes you're going to read a prescribed reading (if at all) at great speed just before lecture. But if you want to get the most you can out of your Philosophy class, you're not going to want to do this often. Instead, you're going to want to read the papers you have been assigned, and read them *properly*. This almost always involves reading them more than once. Philosophy papers are difficult, and understanding them takes time, concentration and effort – even for seasoned philosophers.

It's worth it, though! If you follow the advice below, you'll find that you're better able to engage with the class that you're taking, and that participating in section and writing your papers is much easier than it would otherwise be.

STEP 1. Skim the paper briefly.

Aim to identify the author's main argument, and the general structure of the paper. The opening and closing paragraphs should be the most useful for these purposes. Keep an eye out for ***supporting arguments*** (arguments for important premises that the author uses in making his or her main argument), and for ***logical connectives*** (words or phrases signposting the connections between different parts of the argument). Examples:

- On the one hand….on the other
- Hence; thus; therefore; as a result; it follows that…
- But; nonetheless; however; despite; and yet…

STEP 2. Read the paper a second time, this time more slowly and carefully. Be sure to read it *actively*:

- As you read, ***underline or highlight***: the main points; any definitions or distinctions that the author introduces; any unargued assumptions that you detect; and any statements that are ambiguous (i.e. subject to diverse interpretations).
- ***Write notes as you read***, either on the article itself, or on paper or your laptop: summarising the author's main claims in bullet points; constructing diagrams or flow charts to help you follow the course of the argument; using different coloured pens or different fonts to represent opposing views or objections to the issue being discussed.
- ***Note any questions or criticisms*** that occur to you in the margins. You can raise these with your Professor or your Teaching Assistant in class.
- Don't get so caught up in the details that you lose track of the argument as a whole, and of the broader debate in which it is situated. Take F.A. Hayek's advice:

> "From time to time it is probably necessary to detach one's self from the technicalities of the argument and to ask quite naively what it is all about."
>
> - Hayek (1937)

3. Sit back and think.

Once you feel you understand the author's argument, spend some time thinking about whether or not it's a good one. The following questions may help:

- Are the main premises correct? (If not, why not?)
- Does the argument contain any unsupported premises, or unstated assumptions that might be challenged? (How?)
- Do you agree with the author's conclusion? (If not, what do you think is wrong with the author's argument for it?)
- Does the conclusion follow from the premises, or are additional premises needed? (What might they be?)
- Could alternative conclusions also be drawn from the same premises?
- Does the author's argument assume the conclusion it is attempting to prove ("beg the question"), use the same term to mean different things at different points ("equivocate"), or contradict itself?
- Do the premises or the conclusion have any implications that seem to you to be false, bizarre or otherwise unacceptable?

An excellent way to structure your thinking when evaluating an author's argument is to assume the persona of the author's most vicious critic. Even if you find you agree with what the author says, try to imagine what a less sympathetic opponent

might say in response. Then consider what you, or the author, might say back. Write the exchange down in dialogue form if this helps you to keep track of the various objections.

> "Both teachers and learners go to sleep at their post, as soon as there is no enemy in the field."
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> - J.S. Mill (1859)

How to Write Philosophy Papers

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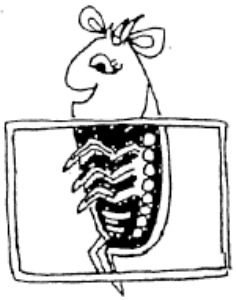
Professor Pink's 9-step plan to a Better, Brighter You:

1. Choose a paper topic: Think carefully about which of the assigned paper topics you find most interesting, and which you have the most to say about. Make sure you understand what the question is asking and which material covered in class is relevant to answering it. As your Teaching Assistant or Professor to clarify the topic for you if you find any part of it ambiguous or unclear.

2. Review the relevant course materials: Look through your lecture notes and course readings to isolate those that are relevant to the topic you have chosen. If you haven't already done so, make notes in your own words on the main points and arguments covered. Follow the advice on reading philosophy papers and active note-taking on pp. 8-9 above.

3. Decide on your thesis: Read over your notes and jot down the ideas that occur to you in response to the arguments that you have studied. Go back to your paper topic and consider what your thoughts on it are, now that you have re-familiarized yourself with the material studied in class. If your topic asks you to compare two different positions on a given issue, think about which of the positions you have studied you find most persuasive, and why. If your topic asks you to explain and evaluate an author's argument for a given conclusion, ask yourself some of the questions suggested on p.9 above. Try to settle on a broad answer to the paper topic early on. Then try to get that answer clearer and more precise in your mind. It's fine to revise your thesis later on in the writing process, but you will only be able to do that successfully if you have a strong and well-defined thesis to begin with.

4. Outline your arguments in skeletal form. Jot down your arguments for your thesis in short, succinct sentences. Consider how an opponent might respond to them, note down those objections, and respond to them in turn. Consider running your argument past a friend, family member or your Teaching Assistant or Professor in order to ferret out further possible objections that you can then anticipate and respond to in your paper.



5. Construct a paper outline. Once you have settled on a main thesis, and on the arguments that you will make for it, think about how you will organize your paper in order to most clearly and effectively present your position. There is no single correct way to organize a Philosophy paper. Different paper topics will invite different structures. If your paper topic consists of 2 or 3 separate questions, sometimes it will be best to respond to those questions in the order given in the topic, other times it will be best to rearrange the order. Sometimes you will decide to respond to points made by an author as you introduce them; other times you will find it best to outline an author's position in its entirety, and then go on to evaluate it in the following paragraph. You should, however, aim for at least the following general structure:

i. Introduction. A good introduction should be concise and to the point. It ideally contains the following three elements:

(1) a sentence describing the problem, question or issue your paper addresses, (2) a sentence stating your main thesis, (3) a sentence mapping out the structure of your paper.

ii. The body of the paper. This will standardly include:

(1) a brief exposition of the concepts, positions and arguments you aim to discuss, (2) your own arguments in defense of your thesis, and (3) a discussion of potential objections to your thesis along with your responses to them.

iii. Conclusion. The conclusion should restate your paper's thesis, and summarize the main argument(s) you have used to support it.

6. Write your paper: Write a first draft of your paper, following the outline that you have decided upon. Write the body of the paper first, saving the introduction and conclusion for last**.** Check that you follow each of the writing guidelines listed on pp. 14-17.

7. Set your paper aside for 1-2 days. This step is very important, as it will allow you to come back to your paper with a fresh perspective and more critical eye.

8. Read and revise your paper. You should expect to go through at least two drafts of your paper before handing it in for comments, and a further draft after you have had the paper returned to you for revision (if required). Don't be afraid to revise your paper dramatically if you find you have changed your mind, or have missed an important point the first time around.

9. Format your paper according to the guidelines provided. Generally, papers should:

- be double-spaced, in 12-point, readable font, with standard-sized margins
- have page-numbers
- include a word count at the end
- have your paper topic printed in full at the top of the first page
- display your name and the name of your Teaching Assistant or Professor in the top right-hand corner of each page.

General writing advice

DO:

- ✔ **Stick to the paper topic you have chosen**. Your paper must provide a direct answer to the question(s) asked in the paper topic. If it doesn't do so, no matter how smart you show yourself to be in your paper, and no matter how true, insightful or original the points you make, you will get a poor grade. If the topic includes several questions, you must be sure to answer *each* of them, in full. Often it helps to type out your paper topic in full at the top of your paper, so that you can refer back to it constantly and check that you are keeping on track.
- ✔ **Aim for a concise, simple, straightforward writing style**. Keep your sentences and paragraphs short, and use everyday words. Don't be afraid to repeat words when referring to the same things, or to use the verb 'to be' too often. Especially, don't begin your paper with grand, pseudo-eloquent claims such as "Since the dawn of time, philosophers have pondered questions of right and wrong…", or vacuous statements such as "The topic of abortion is a fascinating and controversial issue." These claims sound silly and take up valuable space. After you have written your paper, try reading it aloud. If it sounds like something you'd feel embarrassed reading to your best friend, revise it.
- ✔ Above all, **aim for *clarity***. Not all professional philosophers are good at this. Do *not,* for example, produce something like this:

"Total presence breaks on the univocal predication of the exterior absolute the absolute existent (of that of which it is not possible to univocally predicate an outside, while the equivocal predication of the outside of the absolute exterior is possible of that of which the reality so predicated is not the reality, viz., of the dark/of the self, the identity of which is not outside the absolute identity of the outside, which is to say that the equivocal predication of identity is possible of the self-identity which is not identity, while identity is univocally predicated of the limit to the darkness, of the limit of the reality of the self)." - D.G. Leahy (2006)

- ✓ **Make the structure of your paper crystal clear** for your reader. Don't make the reader do all the work in figuring out how the various parts of your argument fit together. Instead, make it easier for them by:

  1. Using connective words, like:

  - On the one hand….on the other
  - Hence; thus; therefore; as a result; it follows that…
  - But; nonetheless; however; despite, and yet…

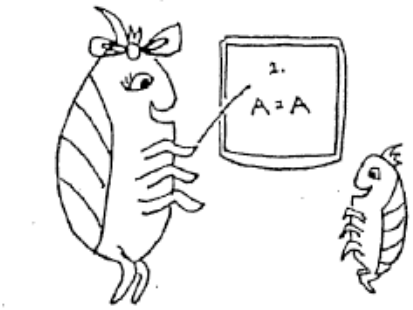
  2. Explicitly signalling the structure of your paper, by writing things like:

  - The previous argument suggests that…
  - A good illustration of this point is…
  - Before evaluating this argument in detail, I will...
  - In response to this objection…

  3. Dividing your paper into sections and subsections, using headings or numbers, to help guide your reader through the paper.

  4. Making sure that it is obvious to your reader what the point of every paragraph is. An easy way to do this is to start a paragraph with a *topic sentence*: a key claim or premise in your argument that the rest of the paragraph is then dedicated to explaining, elaborating or supporting. (Some paragraphs will not need a topic sentence, because they will be dedicated to continuing to support the topic sentence of the preceding paragraph.) If your topic sentences are well formed, you should be able to identify a skeletal version of your entire argument by reading only the thesis statement included in your introduction, and the topic sentences that follow it. If your paper doesn't yet allow you to do this, try to reorganize it so that it does.

- ✔ **Use examples.** Often the best way to convey a point to your reader is to illustrate it with a vivid example. Don't, however, take this too far: if your examples are too lengthy, or contain irrelevant details, they can be distracting, and waste space.
- ✔ **Explain yourself fully**. Make clear to the reader what you mean by any unusual terms you introduce. Don't throw in controversial claims without offering support for them. Don't assume that the reader knows as much as you do about the topic that you are writing about, or indeed that they know anything at *all* about it. Pretend, roughly, that you are writing for a slightly dim-witted and very ill-informed third-grader.



- ✔ **Aim for originality**. There is no need to panic about this. No one expects you to come up with a brand new answer to an age-old question. It is important, however, to demonstrate to your Teaching Assistant or Professor that you have thought carefully about the topic that you are writing about and that you have not merely parroted what you have read or heard in class. Try to come up with at least one or two novel points, criticisms, examples or elaborations of the material that you discuss. Don't be afraid to try out new ideas, or to make your own suggestions - provided, of course, that you are able to back them up with compelling arguments.

DON'T:

- ✖ **Digress.** There should be nothing in your paper that does not contribute to the support of your thesis. Digressions that are irrelevant to the paper topic interrupt the flow of your argument and are distracting and confusing for your reader. When going through the first draft of your paper, ask yourself of every sentence: "Is this sentence necessary for my argument?", and, if so, "Is this the best place in my paper for it, or would it be more effective elsewhere?"
- ✖ **Go over or under the word limit.** If you write less than the word limit, you have missed some important arguments or objections. If you write over the word limit, you are either including unnecessary material, or are failing to express yourself succinctly.
- ✖ **Use dictionary definitions of key terms.** Many terms used in Philosophy have a precise, technical meaning. This means that they are not well captured by dictionary entries, which generally attempt to explain how a term is used in everyday English. Try to avoid using technical terms if you can, but if you must, be sure to explain very carefully what they are intended to mean.
- ✖ **Try to cover too much.** There are usually many, many things that one could say about a given paper topic. Part of the skill in being a good philosopher consists of knowing what to put into your paper and what to leave out. Concentrate on selecting a few of what you consider to be the

most important arguments for and against your thesis, and use the limited space you have to examine those carefully. It is generally better to delve deeply into one or two issues than to spread yourself thinly over five.

- **Think you need to come to a definitive conclusion** one way or the other on your topic. While you do need to argue for a thesis of *some* kind, that thesis doesn't have to commit you definitively to one side of a debate over the other. It's fine for your thesis to claim that the reasons for and against a given position are equally compelling, and that therefore a final decision would be premature. (In order for this thesis to be convincing, however, you have to give the reader reasons to believe it).
- **Spend time searching out and responding to secondary readings**. Your Teaching Assistant or Professor is interested in *your* ideas and response to the arguments discussed in class. While in some cases secondary readings may be useful, most of the time discussing them will take up space in your paper that might otherwise be dedicated to your own views.
- **Over-quote.** If you think you absolutely need to quote an author, do so sparingly. Try to keep yourself to a maximum of two quotations per paper, of no more than one or two sentences. Where possible, paraphrase instead: *i.e.* summarize the author's claim in your own words. Paraphrases should not involve merely changing a few words, but should be sufficiently distinct from the original to demonstrate your understanding of the passage selected.
- **Plagiarize.** Presenting another person's view as your own is a serious offense, which the university takes very seriously. In order to avoid being accused of plagiarism, you must take special care to make explicit when you're reporting your own view and when you're reporting the views of some philosopher you're discussing. You must never quote or paraphrase an author without acknowledging him or her in a reference. The particular format of the reference is not important, provided that it contains the essential details (author, title of the book or article, year of publication), and is consistent throughout your paper. If you have any doubts about how to refer to another author's work correctly, see your Teaching Assistant or Professor for advice.

Revising Philosophy Papers

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Sometimes you will be required to revise and resubmit at least one of the papers you are asked to write for the course. You will be provided with fairly detailed comments on the main areas for improvement, and will be asked to rewrite your paper in light of those comments, and the new thinking that you have done in response to them. The new paper will be held to a higher standard than the original version, to the extent that sometimes, despite genuine improvement in the paper, a grade will not be raised. If the revised paper meets the following conditions, however, a higher grade is at least likely:

i) The paper must be ***substantially* revised, *throughout***. Changing the odd word, correcting a spelling mistake, deleting or relocating one or two sentences, or inserting a single new paragraph are not enough.

ii) The paper must evidence substantial ***new thought* on your part.** Your Teaching Assistant or Professor will be looking for brand new material that you yourself have come up with. Simply incorporating the comments that you have received into the original text will not be adequate. Relatedly, don't merely assume that the parts of your paper that have not been commented upon don't need revision. Often changing one part of the paper will require changes in other parts, and it is not your Teaching Assistant's or Professor's job to point each of these out to you. This means that *you* need to consider critically all sections of the corrected draft, looking for further areas for improvement.

iii) The paper must be significantly ***better:*** it must show improvements in clarity, structure, comprehensiveness or argumentation. Change alone won't get you far.

iv) The paper must ***respond to a significant number of the criticisms*** that were raised in the comments. You are not required to change your paper in all of the respects that your Teaching Assistant or Professor suggests: you may think your paper is better as it stands, in regard to a given point, or could be improved in a direction other than the one suggested. You do, however, need to consider carefully the points that your Teaching Assistant or Professor has made. She or he generally has a pretty good idea of where the most important areas of improvement are, and will be checking to see that you have at least taken note of her/his comments in the second version of your paper.

Note: while you will (hopefully) get a revised grade for your second draft, you shouldn't expect to get substantive written comments the second time round. Some effort will be made to explain why the grade was raised (or why not); but if you want more meaty feedback or advice, you will need to make an appointment.


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http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html
http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html

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