

Grading a Philosophical Essay Dr. Deborah Heikes

When I read any philosophical paper or essay, I ask myself two general questions:

- (1) What is good about this essay?
- (2) What does this essay lack?

In all likelihood, you would prefer that I have a lengthy answer to the first questions and a very brief answer to the second. So, how do you make this happen?

Philosophical essays always present a philosophical problem and then attempt to answer or resolve that problem through the use of clearly articulated reasons. Whatever solution one arrives at, the more significant philosophical concerns are **how and why** you arrive at that solution. Your primary goal is to provide an argument that withstands rational scrutiny. The more of your reasoning you make explicit, the stronger your argument will be.

The following criteria (although somewhat general and certainly not exhaustive) indicate what I look for in grading a philosophical essay.

I. Structure

A. Topic/Relevance of Topic to the Assignment

Does this essay clearly state and address an appropriate topic? Does the essay stay focused on this topic? *The answer to these questions is crucial.* However brilliant your paper may be, it can only fulfill the requirements of the assignment if it stays on topic. Basically, don't think you can write a paper full of "fluff" and not be noticed.

B. Introduction

Does the essay have an introductory paragraph that states the topic and thesis of the essay? It helps to let your reader know what the paper is about and what to expect. The more uncertainty and confusion you create in your reader's mind, the weaker your essay becomes.

C. Body

Do you give the reader help in figuring out where the paper is going? Your thoughts should be clearly organized and easy to follow. You should not jump from topic to topic. If the reader can figure out where you're going next, the clarity and brilliance of your ideas will be all the more evident. Remember, you may know where you're going, but other people won't unless you give them explicit directions. In other words, organize your ideas clearly and make your essay readable.

D. Conclusion

Do you briefly state what your conclusion is and how you arrived at it? This need not be elaborate, but you do want to remind your reader what you've accomplished in your essay.

II. Content

A. Factual Correctness

The importance of this criterion cannot be overestimated. Have you presented the arguments and views of each philosopher accurately? Have you clearly defined your terms? Do you accurately represent any factual or empirical claims? You are expected to know and be able to accurately explain the basic definitions, concepts, and arguments that we discuss. You should know who hold what views. If your argument appeals to examples or factual evidence, you should get the facts right.

B. Exposition

Can you explain the views/arguments/concepts/terms clearly and in your own words? Clarity and accuracy are important in showing that you understand this issues and arguments. Used sparingly, quotations can be useful; however, quotations must be explained. No quotation is self-explanatory. For example, take the Sixth

Commandment: Thou shalt not kill. Kill what? Plants? Insects? Dogs? People who are trying to harm you? You must explain the significance of quotations you use.

C. Argument/Critical Discussion

Does the essay contain a substantial discussion of the central claims of the arguments? Do you provide your own assessment of the arguments given by the philosophers whom we read? You should not only summarize and explain the arguments of others but also be able to explain and defend your own view on the topic. There is no such thing as an “A essay” that fails to provide some critical analysis and argument. Originality and philosophical brilliance are a plus, but they are not required. The basic requirement here is that you show you can think and can defend the conclusions of your thought. Remember, the reader cannot get inside your head. The argument on the page is all the reader has. Don’t leave out steps in your reasoning. As a general rule, assume your reader is not all that bright and needs to have everything slowly and clearly explained to her.

III. Presentation

A. Clarity of Writing/Style

Is the paper easy to read? The requirement here is the clear expression of ideas. Write in understandable sentences. Keep it simple and don’t be tempted to think that you have to sound grandiose to write a good philosophy paper. Good papers are usually written very simply.

B. Spelling and Grammar

Did the writer take the time to proofread? If you won’t take the time to read over your essay, why should anyone else? Your essay should have a minimal number of typos, misspellings, and grammatical mistakes.

C. Citation of Sources

Did the author cite the original source of all ideas taken from others? Even if you paraphrase, you must give credit to someone if you use another’s ideas. Failure to do this constitutes plagiarism.

Grading Scale *(modified from the grading guidelines of Luca Ferrero, Dept. of Philosophy, University of Wisconsin/Milwaukee)*

Now that the grading criteria have been (mostly) specified, let’s turn our attention to the grading scale. I do not grade on a curve, but the scale is not absolute. For one thing, in determining your overall grade for the course, I do take into account progress over the course of the semester. Grades at the end of the course count more both objectively and subjectively. Poor grades at the beginning of the class can be overcome, but it is important that you come talk to me early in the semester if you are concerned about your grade. Nonetheless, you can get an indication of how much work you have to do to achieve the grade you want by considering that when I grade, here is what each grade means:

A/A-: Excellent Papers

Structure: The paper is clearly written and easy to follow. The topic is clearly presented and the paper stays on that topic throughout. The transitions are smooth, the argumentation is clear, and the author speaks with a clear voice.

Content: The thesis of the paper is clearly presented and successfully/persuasively argued. The author has something to say and s/he defends it well. The paper demonstrate insight into the issue as well as an ability to present the philosophical arguments in clearly articulated manner. The issue/topic is thoroughly explored (given the constraints of the topic assignment), and each conclusion is well-supported by evidence.

Presentation: The paper has minimal typos. The grammar and writing are clear.

In general, an A is reserved for those papers that are truly outstanding and that fulfill the requirements of the assignment with insight and thoroughness. An A paper will be grounded in hard work, but the main feature of an A essay is originality and insight into the philosophical issues. This type of paper will go far beyond simply a restatement of the issues. Rather, it will show significant thought and reflection on the issue.

An A- paper is also excellent, but it contains minor problems. This essay is still insightful, interesting, and creative. However, there may be factual or argumentative errors--or an incomplete argument or explication. This is still a worthy intellectual effort. It's lack is in minor details.

B+/B: Good Papers

Structure: This paper is on topic, with a clear thesis statement and an easily followed structure. There may be an occasional wandering, but the overall progression of ideas is logical and clear.

Content: This paper is clearly focused and demonstrates a good effort at a philosophical argument. However, there may be problems with the explication or insufficient support given for conclusions. Questions in the reader's mind are left unanswered. Terms may not be fully or adequately defined. Overall, however, the paper is strong in its understanding of the philosophical issues and in its effort at critical analysis and argument.

Presentation: Easily readable, but perhaps some lapses in grammar or a loss of clarity in the expression of ideas.

A B+ paper is quite similar to an A- paper except that it has made an error in explication or failed to fulfill the promise of an argument. All the elements of an A/A- paper are there. It's just a matter of better execution. There is promise and originality here.

A B paper is a solidly explained and argued paper, but the originality and insight are diminished slightly. The author of a B paper clearly understands the material but does not add to the discussion of the topic. The difference here lies in the quality of the argument, or there is some significant misunderstanding of the issue or philosophical views involved. This is a worthy paper that simply needs more thought or precision.

B-/C-: Acceptable Papers

Structure: This paper may lack in clear structure. The topic may be poorly defined or lost in places. The paper can wander and lose sight of the fact that all the elements of the essay should be producing an argument for some conclusion.

Content: The B-/C paper is mostly clear and accurate in explicating the issues, although there is some confusion or misunderstanding evident. The author has a grasp of the issue, but there is less philosophical insight. There is an argument, but it is probably underdeveloped and unclear in places. Steps in the reasoning are missing or facts are misused. There may even be a tendency to dogmatic assertion or pedantic ranting.

Presentation: The writing may be clear or there may be some incomprehensibility evident in places. Typos, spelling mistakes, grammatical errors are more evident—and may interfere with the clarity of expression.

These papers are acceptable and competent; however, there are serious problems either in explication or argument. Serious misunderstandings of the material or a minimal effort at argument are the hallmarks of B-/C- papers. The range of grades indicates how serious these problems are (obviously, B- essays have fewer problems than essays scoring lower). The author clearly understands the basic requirements of a philosophy paper, and there are no wholesale misunderstandings of the topic or argument. However, these papers exhibit weaker or minimal arguments. Sometimes the only problem is a laziness of thought, an easily correctible problem. Sometimes it is simply a matter of coming to understand how to explain, organize, and defend a position. These papers exhibit competence and a hope for better things in the future.

D: Seriously Troubled Papers

Structure: These essays are unclear and unfocused, either barely on topic or rambling. There may be a thesis (or not), but the paper lacks unity and is hard to read.

Content: Here there is little evidence of argument and a serious misunderstanding of the material. Any argument that is evident is unfocused and poorly supported. Entire views may be misrepresented, and little effort in understanding or explaining the material is evident.

Presentation: The grammar may make sentences completely incomprehensible. There are serious typos and a clear lack of any effort to re-read and correct mistakes. These problems probably interfere with understanding the ideas being expressed.

Any D paper exhibits fundamental errors in explication and usually includes almost no argument. This grade indicates a major misunderstanding of how to write a philosophy essay. What distinguishes these papers from F essays is there is evidence of genuine effort (despite the misunderstandings) and, usually, some merit in explication. Whatever the problems with these papers, they can be overcome with work. However, ***you must come see*** me since these grades indicate something is going seriously wrong.

F: Unacceptable Papers

F papers have serious flaws that usually stem from a combination of little effort and little understanding of the material. Either they are not on topic, they do not fulfill the assignment, they show little (if any) effort, there are quite serious misunderstandings of the material, or may be plagiarized.