

Frequently Asked Questions

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1. What grade scale do you use?

Answer:

93.0 – 100.0	A
90.0 – 92.9	A-
87.0 – 89.9	B+
83.0 – 86.9	B
80.0 – 82.9	B-
77.0 – 79.9	C+
...And so on	

A	Excellent, exceptional, outstanding work	Strong evidence of deep, robust understanding of the material – even of its most subtle or complex aspects ; Beautifully clear and well-communicated ; Demonstrates exceptional critical thinking and evaluation skills ; Display of extraordinary creativity and/or original thought.
B	Good work	Evidence that student firmly grasps the subject matter ; Demonstration of developed critical capacity and analytic ability; Mostly clear and understandable communication.
C	Satisfactory / adequate work	Evidence that the student is deriving some benefit from course enrollment, and meeting assignment requirements, but displays <i>some</i> lack of understanding of the material, or lack of clear communication or critical reasoning.
D	Minimally acceptable	<i>Some</i> evidence of familiarity with the subject matter, and minimally meets assignment requirements, but displays <i>some major</i> misunderstanding, lack of clarity, or under-developed critical thinking and evaluation skills.
F	Inadequate, unacceptable	Little evidence of even superficial understanding of the subject matter, or of the ability to communicate clearly, or critically analyze and evaluate ideas.

2. Can I get an extension on my paper?

Answer: No. I do not give extensions. However, you may turn the paper in late, for a penalty as described in the assignment sheet.

3. I am going to miss the _____ [quiz, exam, etc.]. What should I do?

Answer: Any and all conflicts with assignments such as exams, debates, etc., must be submitted for my approval no later than the last day of the second week of class. If your conflict is legitimate, and brought to my attention in a timely manner, we will work together to re-schedule (or, for quizzes, simply excuse the absence). If your conflict is not legitimate, or you miss the second-week deadline for submission, you will receive a zero for any assignment that you miss.

Example: Most frequent legitimate conflict: W&M athletes out of town for an away-game.

Example: Most frequent **non**-legitimate conflict: Booking a plane ticket with the intent of being out of town (on vacation, with family, etc.) on the day of the exam.

4. I missed the _____ [quiz, exam, etc.]. How can I make it up?

Answer: You cannot. You now have a zero for this assignment.

5. Do you offer extra credit assignments?

Answer: No. I do not.

6. Why did you take points off of some of my answers on the exam?

Answer: I will consider discussing your graded exam during office hours only after you have taken the following steps: (i) You must first consult the lecture notes and/or a classmate, and write (or type) up a report for each of the questions for which you did not receive full credit. There, you will write down what your answer was, and what you believe to be the correct answer, as well as a brief summary explaining how/why your answer differs from (what you now believe to be) the correct answer. (ii) Then, you must turn this report in to me. (iii) In the event that your report is perfectly accurate, you will now have a perfectly accurate answer to your own question. In the event that your report is inaccurate, I may deem it necessary to arrange a meeting to discuss any confusions and/or mistakes.

Most common reason for why a student is confused about their failure to earn full credit for some particular answer: The student's answer differs from the correct answer by only a couple of words, but these missing words are crucial, and render their answer incorrect or incomplete. Example: The exam question is, "Define hedonism". Student answer: "The view that happiness is intrinsically good." Correct answer: "The view that happiness is the only thing that is intrinsically good." (The student's answer describes not only hedonists but also *non*-hedonists. Virtually everyone believes that happiness is intrinsically good. What's distinct about hedonism is that it is the view that *nothing else* is intrinsically good. So, this student's answer does not earn full credit.)

7. I heard that you are a hard grader. Is that true?

Answer: No. It is not. Several of my students have *believed* that it is true – but these students' beliefs were false. That said, you should *not* expect an automatic 'A' in my course. Per [the W&M grading system](#), I assign B's for good work, and reserve A's for excellent work. So, if you want to earn an A in my course, then you will need to achieve excellence. Ultimately, the vast majority (over 88%) of my graded students receive grades that are either *good* or *excellent*. Below is a breakdown of final grades earned by the 1,688 students that I have taught at W&M (Fall 2014 – Fall 2024).

722 A's (45.5%), **679 B's** (42.8%), **128 C's** (8.1%), **36 D's** (2.3%), **21 F's** (1.4%) ; **Average GPA:** 3.3 (B+)

Note 1: Over this same period, the average GPA for all undergraduate courses at W&M was 3.44 (B+).

Note 2: The data above does not include the **102 P's** earned by those students who took my course pass/fail (50 of which were in 2020 during the pandemic), nor any of the handful of withdrawals.

8. How do you calculate participation grades?

Answer: I first calculate your grade for all course work (typically 90% of your grade). I then assign a participation grade which is equal to that grade. So, for instance, if you received an 86.9% on all course work, then your base participation grade is also an 86.9%. I then adjust this grade if and only if the following criteria are met:

- (a) The final grade is borderline (e.g., a couple of tenths of a percent above or below a letter grade boundary).
- (b) It is mathematically possible for the participation grade to affect the final grade.
- (c) The student's participation and attendance were exceptional in some way, whether exceptionally good or exceptionally bad (e.g., they had 100% attendance and regularly made constructive contributions to class discussions, or they never came to class, or were constantly disruptive, etc.).

In this particular example, the student's grade (86.9%) is *almost* a B+ (which is an 87.0%), and the participation grade *could* affect whether this student receives a B or a B+. So, the first two criteria met. As such, I then move on to criterion (c), and ask: Were the student's attendance and participation exceptional? If so, I will change the participation grade from an 86.9% to something higher, in order to boost the student's final grade by the one-tenth of a percent needed to receive a B+.

Note: In rare instances, for those students whose final grades are close but not *super* close to the borderline (for example, an 86.6%), but who still meet criteria (b) and (c), I may take additional factors into consideration when assigning participation grades. For example,

- I may look at the student's grade on the "Big Four" – typically, two papers and two exams. This is the student's "real" grade in the course – i.e., their grade on the assignments that actually measured their understanding of the material in the course. If the Big Four grade is very high, this counts as a reason in favor of a grade bump. But, if the student's Big Four grade is significantly lower than their broader final grade, then this is a reason against a grade bump.
- I may look at the trend line across the Big Four, over time. For example, if the student did poorly on early major assignments, did they improve dramatically from the first paper to the second, and/or from the first exam to the second? If so, then this shows me that the student has put in the effort to learn from earlier mistakes, and to do better over the course of the semester, and this is a reason in favor of a grade bump. If the student did poorly on early assignments, but did *not* improve significantly, then this is a reason against a bump.
- I may check to see if the student has ever received any penalties. For example, perhaps Student A received a 12 point penalty on one of their papers, for turning it in 24 hours late, while Student B received a 50 point penalty for not following instructions. (They wrote their paper on something not listed under the approved topics, without obtaining instructor approval first.) If this penalty is the *only* reason that each student falls just shy of the next letter grade, then this is a reason in favor of a grade bump (though not a decisive reason).
- I frequently also re-read / re-grade papers and exams, to regain a fresh sense of what the student's performance was in the course as a whole, and also to compare my re-assessment with my original one. If there were any way for me to justify a slightly higher grade on any earlier assignments, then this would be a reason in favor of a grade bump. If not, then this is a reason against a grade bump. (*Though I should clarify that, in practice, my re-assessments have never revealed that my earlier, original assessment was too harsh. I simply check, to be absolutely sure.*)

9. What is my grade so far in the class?

Answer: Please consult the syllabus and apply your basic math skills.

Example: Suppose that we have had so far a mid-term (worth 15% of the final grade), a paper (10%), and four reading quizzes (worth 1% each). In that case, you have completed 29% of your final grade so far ($15 + 10 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1$). Suppose further that your grades on these were: 86/100 on the mid-term, 82/100 on the paper, and a 6/10, 8/10, 8/10, and 10/10 on the four quizzes (so that your quiz average is 32/40, or 80%). Calculate your grade as follows:

$$[(86 \times 15) + (82 \times 10) + (80 \times 4)] / 29 = 83.8\%$$

10. How can I improve for the next paper?

Answer: First, if you are asking this question, make absolutely sure that you have studied the guides linked to in the paper prompt: [The Pink Guide to Philosophy](#) (pgs. 11-17), by Wellesley professor Helena de Bres, and this [Video Guide for Writing a Philosophy Paper](#), by professor Jeffrey Kaplan (UNC Greensboro). Here are some additional guides to help you as well:

- Harvard's [Brief Guide to Writing a Philosophy Paper](#)
- this guide from [Aaron Griffith \(W&M\)](#)
- this guide from [Manuel Vargas \(UC San Diego\)](#)

Second, if you did not receive the grade that you wanted, ask yourself:

- (a) Did you start your paper more than 48 hours before it was due?
- (b) Did you put at least 10 hours of work into your paper? (or 20 for longer papers)

If 'No' to both, then a poor to mediocre grade is to be expected. For the next paper, be sure to correct these two mistakes. I strongly recommend starting your papers several days or weeks in advance. In all of my courses, it is typically possible to begin working on your papers at least a month in advance (often, two months). Regarding the work itself, a good strategy is as follows:

- Start by re-reading the relevant article(s) or text(s) that you plan to write about.
- Then, begin mulling things over informally. For instance, create a document and just start typing, spilling all of your thoughts out onto the page. Or, discuss the topic with a friend. Philosophy makes for a great conversation starter. This will help you clarify your thoughts.
- Decide what your stance is on the issue, and what your reasons are for *why* you believe this.
- Figure out what you hope to achieve in your paper, and make a plan for how you'd like to do it.
- Write a rough draft, following your plan, or outline.
- Let that draft rest for a while. Spend a week or two mulling over your objections every now and then. Let your brain work on it for you in the background.
- Return to your draft and revise it, getting it into its final shape to be turned in.

Finally, feel free to stop by my office hours to discuss your outline, bounce ideas off of me, etc. That's what I'm here for.

Here are the two most common issues with student papers:

(1) **The paper is not clear.** Some general tips:

- *Do not try to sound smart.* Use simple sentence structures, and write in plain English.
- *Signposting.* Be sure to let your reader know what you are doing at every stage. Are you transitioning from discussing an argument to presenting some objections? *Tell* the reader!
- *Start early.* Begin writing the paper well in advance of the due date. After writing a draft, let it sit for a day or two and then re-read it. Often, the paper will make way less sense to you once you've distanced yourself from the mindset you were in when you initially wrote it. This will help you to better detect and revise the portions of your paper that are unclear.
- *Have a peer read it.* Try having your roommate read the paper. And don't merely ask them, "Was it good?" because they'll just say "yes" to be nice. Instead, quiz them. Ask them: What was my central thesis? What were my primary reasons given in defense of this thesis? What were the main objections that I examined? Why were those objections potentially damaging? How did I reply to them? And so on. If they cannot answer every question perfectly, then your paper may have been unclear (or else your friend didn't read it very carefully).

(2) **The thesis is not well-supported.** Some general tips:

- *Provide reasons.* For every claim that you make which is not immediately obvious or almost universally accepted, you need to provide *reasons* in support of that claim. Supply *evidence*. Explain *why* your reader should accept that the claim is true.
- *Uncontroversial reasons.* The reasons that you appeal to in support of your claim should be uncontroversial. Remember, you are trying to convince someone who may *disagree* with you. To do that, you'll need to find the common ground between you and your opponent – some claims that you can BOTH accept – and argue from *those* claims to your conclusion. For example:

Imagine that you were arguing in favor of laws enforcing mandatory vaccination. Your opponent has raised an objection: "But," they say, "It is unjust for the government to tell you what you can and cannot do with your own body. A vaccine mandate would infringe on our right to bodily autonomy!" Now imagine that you respond as follows: "No, a vaccine mandate would not be unjust on those grounds. There are already lots of laws that restrict bodily autonomy. For example, lots of states have laws banning abortion. Therefore, since the government already restricts bodily autonomy in this way, it would be permissible for the government to further restrict bodily autonomy by mandating vaccines." NO! In order to support your stance on vaccine mandates, you just appealed to one of the most controversial issues in the country! At least half of your readers are going to reject your claim that abortion bans are just. The reasons that you give in support of your claims should always be less controversial than the claim you are trying to defend – not more controversial.

- *Examples help.* It is often helpful to support your claim with a concrete case, or story, or example, which illustrates the point that you're trying to make.

11. What do these marks on my exam mean?

Answer: Here is your secret decoder.

✓ Answer is correct

ok Answer is basically correct, but imperfect; slightly vague, sloppy, or incomplete, but not enough to warrant a point deduction

- ~ Answer is nearly correct, or is in the general vicinity of the correct answer, but is ultimately flawed in some way; vague, sloppy, or incomplete enough to warrant a minor point deduction
- x Answer contains some clear error; e.g., it asserts something false, or it does not address the question, etc.
- ? Answer is unclear in some way; e.g., it is worded in a confused way, it is vague and could be interpreted in several different ways, it contains a controversial assertion which is unsupported by any reasons, etc.
- ?? Answer contains a serious confusion; e.g., it is unintelligible due to word choice (or poor handwriting), or seems to misunderstand the question, etc.
- why? Answer contains an assertion that is left unexplained and/or unsupported by any *reasons*—likely in a way that fails to fully answer the question.
- ^ Answer is missing one or more important words where this mark occurs.
- ... Answer is incomplete. Further explanation is needed for full credit.
- =? Written next to a term or phrase, this mark indicates that the phrase/term needs to be defined or explained more carefully.
- “ Typically accompanied by an arrow which connects some portion of the question to some portion of the answer, this mark indicates that the answer (or some portion of it) is essentially just repeating the question without adding anything new, and therefore fails to actually answer that question.

12. What do these marks on my paper mean?

Answer: Check out this handy decoder.

- ✓ Nice job. You’ve stated something in an exceptionally clear and careful way; or this passage contains some impressive insight; or perhaps you have presented an original case or objection that very nicely demonstrates your point.
- ~ Sort of. You’ve stated something that is nearly correct, or almost clear, but is ultimately flawed in some way; vague, sloppy, unclear, or incomplete.
- x No. You’ve said something false, or drawn a mistaken inference, or inappropriately applied a case or objection, etc.
- Ⓡ This passage contains an assertion which is insufficiently supported by *reasons*. Remember that you are trying to *convince* your reader to agree with you. This means that any claims that are not obviously true—and *especially* any claims that are controversial—must be *argued for*. That is, they must be demonstrated to be true by presenting supporting reasons or evidence in favor of them. Furthermore, these reasons must be ones that the average reader is likely to accept.

- why?** Often interchangeable with the previous mark, ‘@’, the present mark, ‘why?’, indicates that this passage makes an assertion, or draws an inference, etc., without stating clearly to the reader *why* they should believe that this assertion is true, or *why* this inference is legitimate, etc.
- DEV.** I’d like to see this point developed further. As it stands, it is not adequately explored. I’d like to see you take a deeper dive into this issue, or objection, or reply, etc., exploring it more carefully & thoroughly.
- ?** This passage is unclear in some way; e.g., it is worded in a confused way, or is ambiguous, or draws an inference that is not quite clear, etc.
- ???** This passage contains a serious confusion, or is worded in a way that makes it unintelligible to the reader.
- //** A transition is needed where this mark appears. If you are moving on from discussing an argument to discussing objections to it (or from an objection to a reply), *you must clearly indicate this to the reader.*
- ^** One or more important words are missing where this mark occurs.
- ...** This passage is incomplete. Further explanation is needed in order to fully or convincingly or accurately convey the point that is being made here.
- =?** Written next to a term or phrase, this mark indicates that the phrase/term needs to be defined or explained more carefully. Remember, your target audience has not studied this issue, so any technical terms or unfamiliar concepts will need to be explained to them.
- “** Typically accompanied by an arrow which connects two portions of the text, this mark indicates that the two connected passages are redundant. Perhaps you have claimed to be presenting a new objection or issue, when it is really the same as something stated previously—or perhaps the text is simply too redundant—without adding anything new to the narrative.

13. What sorts of things do your students say about you?

Answer: Below are some excerpts of my favorite positive reviews, as well as some negative reviews (alongside my replies to these).

Note: This section under construction. I will add more to it later, time permitting.

Environmental Ethics (PHIL 308 / ENSP 303)

“Vance is a gem of a professor, and makes anything he teaches interesting. This was my first ethics class, and I enjoyed it very much, despite it being early in the morning. One of my favorite professors and classes I’ve taken at W&M.” (S24)

“Chad is absolutely hilarious which makes you pay attention during his classes. He is a genuinely nice guy and holds discussions during class in a really really effective way. One of my favorite classes and professors that I have taken at W&M.” (S23)

“Professor Vance is amazing! I really appreciate the effort he puts into making class engaging and interesting. His assignments can be challenging, but I feel like they force me to develop new skill sets and strengthen existing ones. He is very accessible and fun to discuss philosophy with. I learned a lot in this course and had a fun time doing it.” (F24)

“This is probably my favorite course I’ve ever taken. I never expected I’d take a philosophy class, let alone actually enjoy it. Professor Vance is not only incredibly engaging and fun, but he is also excellent at prompting productive discussions. This class changed the way I think about a lot of topics, and if I could take it again, I would. Professor Vance has high expectations, but it isn’t too difficult to meet them if you show up to class and actually think about the material that you’re reading. Additionally, Professor Vance was always offering his help and genuinely wanted to talk to students about their ideas. I liked that he writes on a chalkboard as opposed to projecting slides. It makes the lectures feel more personal and engaging, like the class can go in any direction rather than being super structured. I will take what I learned in this class with me probably for the rest of my life. I hope I can take a class with him again sometime.” (F24)

“Daily lectures were super engaging and I loved that in each lecture he basically just led a discussion around the topic of the day. Also, daily reading assignments were engaging and weren’t a chore to complete. Chad is such a character and I will never hesitate to take a class with him.” (S24)

“I am not a philosophy person but this class and Professor Vance blow me away. From day one, Professor Vance made the class fun and engaging. I was excited to come to class and he made complex topics easier to understand. He is a treasure at William & Mary and I am so glad that I got the chance to take his class.” (S23)

“This class was EPIC!! Professor Vance is an excellent teacher and he never fails to present class material in a way that is engaging, exciting, and interesting. I have really enjoyed taking this class!” (S23)

“Overall, this class often made me angry and confused, and I count that as a massive success. If I walked away from this class still thinking I had good answers about things, I would have wasted 3 credits. Professor Vance successfully destroyed my confidence in many things I assumed I knew.” (S23)

“I wasn’t sure what to expect in the beginning as I had never taken a philosophy course before, but Professor Vance really made it a good and relatively pain free experience. He has a great personality and sense of humor that bleeds over into his teaching style that kept my attention usually for most of the lectures. The way he would illustrate concepts through different examples or scenarios really helped me understand the material being presented. I’m not a major or minor in this department but I would definitely take another class with him in the future.” (S24)

“This was probably the most enjoyable class I’ve ever taken here. Chad is a fantastic lecturer. He is clear, friendly, facilitates discussion well, and best of all HE IS HILARIOUS!!! I loved all the wacky case studies and the examples he shared from his life. The material of the course is also incredibly interesting and relevant to real life. I changed so much because of this course, and feel like I have a stronger sense of direction when it comes to how to live my life ethically. I think Chad is a truly fair grader and I respect that. I feel like I have to put in good work to get a good grade. I think the reading quizzes were good because they kept me on top of the readings. I liked that all the assignments and readings were clear from the start of the class. ...

Chad also provides really helpful feedback on all written and discussion assignments. Chad was also really supportive of an environmental project that I'm doing relevant to the course. This meant a lot to me and makes me feel motivated to keep doing what I'm doing.

TLDR: This class was extremely enjoyable, I learned a lot, and Chad is an outstanding professor!" (S23)

"As a non-philosophy major, I was nervous about taking this class since I have never had experience with the kind of thinking ethics classes require. However, I really enjoyed this class. It has challenged my previous ideologies and changed the way I think. I feel like a more well-rounded student because of it. I think Dr. Vance is very well-versed about Environmental Ethics and teaches the course very well. He recognizes when students are losing interest in the discussion and steers the direction of discussions in a way that makes sense and allows for student participation. He also makes himself available to give feedback on assignments before they're due." (S24)

"This class was probably the most interesting class I've had so far at William and Mary; if it wasn't a 9 AM class I would definitely have perfect attendance. Professor Vance is genuinely one of the most entertaining and engaging professors to take a class with, every class felt like I was walking into a comedy show that happened to be about issues in environmental ethics. Vance knows the material well enough to explain the complex philosophical concepts in a way that feels more like a casual conversation, and he often encourages students to engage with the topics being discussed. I thoroughly enjoyed exploring the environmental issues and ethics discussed in this class, and the assignments were always relevant to the course. One of these assignments was an environmental change project, which encouraged students to make some sort of eco-friendly lifestyle change. I chose to become vegetarian on a whim, and after the animal ethics section of this course I plan on committing to this change even after the semester is over. Probably one of the most impactful classes I've taken, and I can't wait to explain to my parents how their decision to have me was morally wrong." (S24)

"Professor Vance is an engaging teacher who is able to elicit thought-provoking discussion from students every class, and who is never reluctant to grapple with various perspectives in class. He values everyone's thoughts and ideas and makes the class fun. He also teaches the material in a clear, approachable manner and facilitates the learning of complex material. When lecturing, he is engaged, interested, and knowledgeable about the material, and provides various perspectives on every unit we cover. He makes philosophy intriguing for people who are new to it. Assignments are relevant and useful to the units covered. His class made me more interested in the field of ethics overall and gave me confidence to explore a new kind of topic for me." (F24)

"Professor Vance was a breath of fresh air this semester! I've never met someone else who teaches in the way that he does. It could possibly be because I don't take many PHIL classes, but I'm so thankful that this one overlaps with ENSP. The manner in which he communicates/simplifies what can be considered convoluted philosophical ideas is more than impressive. I remember doing many readings before class and not being able to get a firm grasp on what was being argued, only to sit in class and have everything clarified for me. I'll forever appreciate his in-class anecdotes and skits, they've done nothing but keep things interesting. ...

Overall Professor Vance is a very flexible and engaging professor, it feels as if this class was made for him to teach! I wish him nothing but the best in life :)" (S23)

Philosophy and Technology (PHIL 150)

"This was easily among the best courses I've ever taken. Philosophers and philosophy professors have a reputation of pontificating or being unclear, and Chad Vance is neither. He presents complicated material in an astonishingly clear and engaging way, and throughout the entire semester has not said so much as an unnecessary or unclear sentence. His readings are also interesting and pertinent, and his methods of encouraging class participation are fair and effective. I have learned so much in this class and will probably apply it to much of my life going forward." (F23)

"Incredible professor. Very interesting and thought provoking lecturer. Best feedback I've ever received and I feel like a much stronger writer because of it!" (F24)

"Professor Vance is awesome. He is absolutely the best and probably my favorite professor. He's an excellent fit for teaching this class, as he is brilliant in philosophy and extremely knowledgeable in technological news. Clear explanation, open participation, and great organization are all aspects of Professor Vance's class that I valued. However, probably my favorite feature of his class was his sense of humor. He made an already interesting class even more engaging through his personality, which I really appreciated." (F23)

"Professor Vance's lectures are extremely engaging and made what I thought would be a boring COLL-150 into a class I enjoy attending. The way he teaches the material enables it to stick in my head, which is rare for me in humanities classes." (S24)

"This was by far my favorite class that I took this semester. Professor Vance did an incredible job at making the class fun and engaging, which helped facilitate more thoughtful conversation, as everyone showed up to class prepared and willing to participate. I think that all of the readings we did for the class were interesting, and they helped us have thought-provoking conversations. Additionally, the class discussions were interesting, and Professor Vance clearly taught all of the concepts without making the class boring/lecture-heavy. For assignments and exams, he gave detailed instructions that made his expectations clear, and he gave very good feedback that helped me improve." (F22)

"Professor Vance always made class interesting. Each topic was presented in a fun way that made me think about philosophy in a new way. I thought tests were fair and his comments on my essays were helpful." (F22)

"Professor Vance is so kind and answers emails outside of class very fast. He is very understanding if you have to miss class." (S24)

"The professor is fantastic, very funny, engages with the class extremely well, keeps me interested in learning the material and has me excited for class the day prior. The content was fascinating, was a very good introductory philosophy course, makes me want to look into the subject more and learn more about it. Professor is a tough but very fair grader, this class made me a better communicator, a better writer, and better overall at understanding how to form and defend arguments. Although it was a 9 am class, I never felt bored or tired. Hopefully I'll be able to take another class with Professor Vance at another point in my college career." (F22)

“I enjoyed the class, and I thought it was a great introductory course in philosophy. I appreciated that Professor Vance pushed back on comments made in class with rebuttals because it forced the class to critically think. He was enthusiastic throughout the course and made the learning accessible through lecture notes that are very clear and easy to learn for the exam. ... [T]his was a very valuable course and I enjoyed Professor Vance’s energy and enthusiasm throughout the semester.” (S24)

“Extremely funny professor, but still very knowledgeable and fantastic at breaking down confusing concepts.” (F22)

“Professor Vance very clearly cares about philosophy and wants his students to grow as students. I appreciated his enthusiasm, his humor, his honesty, and his knowledgeability. He made philosophy engaging and very valuable. I’m very glad I took this course.” (F23)

Senior Ethics Seminar: Doing Allowing, Intending, and Foreseeing Harm (PHIL 403)

“Vance delivers his lectures with a blend of off-beat humor, morbidity, and absurdity that makes them never-boring and sure to have you thinking about them for days afterwards. That being said, the lectures don’t sacrifice content at all and he often explains views better than the people who actually wrote the papers themselves. ...

I give Vance an excellent rating overall as a professor because rarely does a professor demonstrate such engagingness and attention to detail in their course structure and teaching. His course is meticulously planned and expectations for assignments were always crystal clear. ...

One upshot of Vance treating us more as philosophical peers and not mere simple undergrads is that he gives meaningful, engaging, and critical feedback on everyone’s work constantly. This is wonderful and the amount of meaningful feedback Vance gave during this course was more than I received in my other courses this semester combined! ...

Vance assigned us to read one of his own papers for the class. Usually I hate when professors do this because it feels like honest engagement with their work is impossible and its better to just regurgitate what the professor wants you to take from their work back at them. However, I have tons of respect for Vance for the way he handled the discussion of his own paper. He was completely open and respectful to all feedback from the entire class. He defended his paper when necessary, but also was extremely open and vulnerable about the flaws and mistakes of his own ideas. It was amazing and made me gain a lot of respect for him. At least if he holds rigorous standards and is constantly scrutinizing things, he himself knows that he’s not above that same rigor and scrutiny. This was further evidenced by his in-depth feedback, prompt grading, and constant and open communication with students via email and in class. ...

Vance responded to emails very promptly, was very fair and understanding of me when I had to be accommodated due to a health emergency during the semester, and was kind enough to take upwards of 15-20 minutes discussing my thesis for my paper with me during his office hours. I can tell Vance genuinely values philosophical analysis and isn’t above thinking great ideas can come from undergrads and I did overall feel respected and valued by him as a member of the class in ways that I did not feel in other philosophy classes. I feel like Vance is the absolute perfect teacher for a senior seminar due to his mix of challengingness, engaging lectures, mature humor, and dense philosophy and even though

his class probably challenged me more than my other courses this semester combined I would absolutely do it over again if I could because it was a great and fascinating course.

... Say what you will about the man, but he is a one of a kind professor and personality that I think any Phil student would benefit from taking at least once in their W&M journey.” (F23)

“Prof. Vance is the most interesting, engaging lecturer I’ve ever had. He makes us laugh throughout his lectures. He knows how to identify and present ideas that his students will find highly relevant, and take a vested interest in. He makes philosophy accessible to laymen like me, explaining complex concepts clearly and assigning readings that are easily digestible. He is kind, gives constant, detailed, helpful feedback, and returns assignments quickly. He is an amazing writer, and makes us better writers ourselves. He singlehandedly made me fall in love with Philosophy.” (F23)

“The most I’ve ever learned from a single course of anything, really. The depth of focus on the sheer number of areas was all so intense in the best possible way, giving us enough time to process the information and respond critically, while still moving fast enough to hit everything we needed to. Give this man the biggest raise you have, he is among the best teachers I have had in any institution of learning I have thus far attended.” (F23)

Criticisms

Most Common Critique: Dr. Vance is a harsh grader.

“VERY harsh grading, unnecessarily so in mine and many of my classmates’ opinions.” (PHIL 308, F24)

“Professor Vance is also a very hard grader with high expectations, this is the opinion of anyone who I have talked to about him.” (PHIL 150, S24)

“I also thought the papers and exams are graded a bit harshly for a COLL 150 course where students have never written a philosophical paper before ...” (PHIL 150, S24)

“This class was very enjoyable and thought-provoking, however, the professor’s grading style was too harsh.” (PHIL 150, S23)

“He is an incredible lecturer, and his tough grading style means I’ve improved my writing in this semester more than in prior semesters. However the time and effort costs are really high.” (PHIL 403, F23)

“I believe he graded papers and exams pretty harshly. Professor Vance often looked for word-for-word answers on exams. It was unclear what he exactly wanted on the papers, since I was penalized for both adding my own ideas and including cited examples.” (PHIL 150, F23)

“I think this course definitely allows students to think critically and fosters an environment that people are able to freely give their philosophical analysis on different ethical dilemma. I do think that he grades way too harshly and that sometimes if you miss a single word points will be reduced is absurd. However, I do think that my writing skills and critical thinking abilities have drastically improved over the semester because of his class.” (PHIL 150, F23)

“I do not believe my grade reflects my effort in this class.” (PHIL 150, S23)

“I think it’s great that Vance challenged and pointed out the problems in all of our philosophical views, I just wish his grading was done a bit more in good faith and reflected the effort that people put in and not just how smart they were at coming up with philosophical answers to problems. Vance’s response to this will no doubt be that a B is perfectly fine for students who demonstrate effort but don’t achieve excellence in thought, but I’d urge him to understand that in today’s world things like internships, jobs, and grad programs often expect kids to have a very high GPA because of the implicit notion that grading is done based on effort and hard work and not really based on intellect or ability to produce research for the most part. I like that Vance asks his students to do a bit more, and I did feel meaningfully challenged, but I think the grading could have been a little bit more rewarding of effort, which Vance certainly commands a lot of.” (PHIL 403, F23)

“I and many others believe that he was quite rude/snarky on occasion on paper comments or office hours.” (PHIL 150, S24)

“Chad made this class incredibly captivating and exciting. His remarks on papers seem overly harsh but really it taught me to be a much better writer.” (PHIL 150, S23)

Reply: There are several sub-categories of critique raised here. I will address each of them in turn, below.

- My grading is too harsh.

Reply: The overwhelming majority of my students receive grades that are either *good* (B’s) or *excellent* (A’s). Students who level the complaint that I am a hard grader are typically students who either (a) mistakenly believe that a B is not a good grade, or (b) are operating under the false conception that classwork sometimes (often?) deserves an A, even when it falls short of excellence – e.g., because they believe that they deserve an “A for effort”. See questions #1 and #7 above, as well as the section below on “A’s for effort” for further discussion and explanation of this topic.

- I require “word for word” answers, or take off points for missing a single word.

Reply: I certainly do *not* require word for word answers. In fact, I encourage students to internalize the material so that they are able to put things into their own words. However, when a student puts things into their own words, this sometimes reveals a confusion or misunderstanding on their part (e.g., when the new wording no longer means the same thing as the original wording). And yes, this can sometimes be the case with the absence of just a single word. For example, <Birds are mammals> is false, while <Birds are *not* mammals> is true – with the only difference being the addition of a single word. (See question #6 above for an example of how missing a single word can make the difference between a true and a false answer on an exam question in one of my classes.)

- I give “harsh” feedback on papers.

Reply: I will not hesitate to let a student know when their writing is unclear, or when they have contradicted themselves, or mis-understood the material, or stated something false, etc. One of the most common words that I find myself writing on a student’s paper is “unclear”. Some students find this “harsh”, but they should not. For starters, *you are paying me to evaluate your work and assess learning outcomes*. In fact, that is my primary function. (The lectures are an important part of it, sure. But, you could watch philosophy lectures on YouTube. The one thing YouTube will *not* do, however, is assess your work.)

Second, I suspect that some students might be (mistakenly) interpreting my constructive criticism as a personal attack on their character or self-worth. (For example, when they read, “This is extremely unclear,” or “contains a number of confusions and mistakes,” or “the reasoning here is severely under-developed”, perhaps they interpret this as saying, “You are a terrible person, with no inherent value.” If so, then this is very unfortunate. None of my feedback should be interpreted in this way, or taken personally. Rather, I always write from an impersonal, objective standpoint, with my primary aim being to do as much as I can to help you to become a better writer, and a clearer thinker and reasoner. In order to do this, it is absolutely imperative that I point out each of the instances where there is room for improvement in your work. (Not to mention, I *also* regularly point out every instance of *excellence*. I regularly find myself writing things like, “This is beautifully written,” and “This is crystal clear,” and “This is extremely careful and well-argued”, etc.)

Third, students should keep in mind that I never simply write, “Unclear” or “Confused”, and leave it at that. Typically, my comments on papers average around 500 words, and often exceed 1,000 words. If some passage of a student’s paper needs improvement, I always take the time to explain *how* it can be improved.

- I penalize students for including their own, original ideas.

Reply: This simply isn’t true. In fact, I encourage originality, and it always earns some additional points. (In my upper-division major courses, I even *require* it.) However, what can sometimes happen is this: A student comes up with an original objection or argument, etc., and then writes a paper on it without consulting me first, and then they do poorly on their paper because their “new” or “original” idea turns out to reveal a deep confusion on the student’s part. (Whereas, when a student restricts their discussion exclusively to material from class, any potential confusions frequently go undetected.) For example, the “new” objection might make it evident that the student fundamentally mis-understands the view or argument that they are objecting to. For this reason, I typically encourage any students who want to pursue something totally original in their papers to come discuss it with me first, in office hours (where I can identify any potential confusions ahead of time, before the student has turned in their assignment), just to be safe.

- Students deserve an “A for effort”, even when their work is not excellent.

Reply: I could not disagree more. I absolutely do *not* assign grades based on the amount of “effort” or “hard work” that a student has put into an assignment. Rather, when I grade a student’s work, I assess *only* the finished product, and nothing else. There are some very specific things that I look for in that finished product – namely, clarity, accuracy, and evidence of critical thinking (and, in a senior seminar, also originality). But it is quite possible that one student might spend countless hours writing a paper, and still end up turning in something that is extremely unclear, inaccurate, and confused; while another student starts their assignment the night before it is due, and writes something beautiful in just a couple of hours. (I once had a straight ‘A’ student admit this to me after they’d graduated.) I have no idea how much work goes on behind the scenes, from student to student. The *only* information I have access to for assessment is the finished product.

I find this complaint very bizarre. No one levels it in, say, physics. I remember spending over 30 hours once on a two question physics take-home exam. I still received an ‘F’. (And so did almost everyone else.) The amount of effort I put in had no bearing on what grade I had earned. Either the answer is right, or it is wrong. (And, in philosophy, either your work is clear and carefully reasoned, or it is not.) There is no such thing as deserving an “A for effort”. And if any of your other professors are handing out A’s for effort without excellence of your actual work, then they are doing you a serious disservice.

One Final Critique

“He also made a few inappropriate jokes this semester that I could tell left the class feeling uncomfortable, for example, a discussion about 'motorboating tulips.’” (PHIL 308, S24)

Reply: This is my favorite complaint of all time. I want to frame it and hang it on my wall. I remember this. It was the day that I spent encouraging my Environmental Ethics students to go outside and really be present in the world, and appreciate the aesthetic qualities of even the smallest things in nature all around them. A sort of “stop and smell the roses” speech. But, don’t *just* smell them. Really get in there. Bury your face in those flowers! Inhale deeply! And then I started making motorboat sounds. Yeah! Motorboat that flower! (No joke, this is something my wife and I actually do every time we find a flower that smells really good.) If this offends you, then you probably should not take one of my classes. (Also, you should probably do some introspecting and look into working through whatever issue it is that is causing you to take offense here at something so innocent.) Anyway, I will never, ever stop telling this story, or stop encouraging my students to motorboat flowers. (Also, in the story it was wisteria, not tulips. Get your facts straight!)