

Paper #1: Topics and Guidelines

1. Assignment: Write an essay of 600-900 words (~2-3 pages), on some philosophical topic from unit one.

2. Due Date: A rough draft is due Friday, 10/7, by the beginning of class. By that time, please upload your paper on Blackboard. (Click *PHIL 150* → *Written Assignments* → *Paper #1 Draft* → *Start Submission* → scroll to *Submission* → add your file → click *Submit*).

You will receive comments on your draft (worth 5% of your final grade), and then revise your paper in light of them (worth 10%). Your final draft is due Monday, 10/19, by the beginning of class. (Again, please upload your paper to Blackboard.)

3. Late Penalty: Late papers will be penalized –10 points (out of 100) for the first day, and –2 points for each additional 24 hour period after that. Example: A draft turned in at 11:59pm on 10/7 receives –10 points; one turned in on 10/8 receives –12 points; etc.

4. Suggested Topics: In your paper, you will argue for or against some philosophical view presented in unit one. Below are some suggestions.

Note: You may design your own paper topic based on the material from unit one, but **you must first get instructor approval for any topic NOT listed below.**

- 1) **A.I. Consciousness:** Argue in favor of either functionalism or the biological view of consciousness, within the context of the question, *Could artificial intelligence ever be conscious?*

For example, you might first present Searle's Chinese Room argument, and then argue either that his argument is sound or unsound.

- 2) **Personal Identity:** First, present the problem of the persistence of personal identity through time. What explains our survival through time (if anything)?

Then argue for your preferred view of personal identity (e.g., argue in favor of the body, soul, or psychological continuity view, some hybrid, or non-survival).

- 3) **The Badness of Death:** First, present the case for the claim that death is never bad for the one who dies.

Then, argue either in favor or against this verdict; i.e., argue either that death is not bad for the one who dies, or that it is.

- 5) **Meaning in Life:** First, present the case for the absurdity and meaninglessness of existence if there is no God.

Then, argue for your preferred response (e.g., argue *against* this conclusion by arguing in favor of a non-theistic subjective or objective view of meaning; or argue in *favor* of it, and then recommend either theism or else a non-theistic embrace of absurdity and a response of either defiance, weakness, or suicide).

5. How to Begin: First, decide which of the above topics you want to discuss. Then decide what stance you will take regarding that issue. Did any particular topic or reading excite you? Do you feel passionate about any of these issues? Write about that.

Next, **you must read** [The Pink Guide to Taking Philosophy Classes](#), by Professor Helena de Bres (see the two tabs on writing; for a pdf version, go [here](#) and view pgs. 11-17). Also check out Jeffrey Kaplan's video tutorial, [Guide for Writing a Philosophy Paper](#).

6. Structure: After completing the preliminaries, you will write a paper where you (i) **introduce** and explain some philosophical thesis, argument, or problem. As you explain it, be sure to **motivate** it; i.e., make it sound plausible to the reader that it might be a sound argument, or that the problem is a legitimate and troubling problem, etc., *even if* you ultimately plan to refute it. Then, (ii) **critically grapple** with what you've presented by way of, e.g., raising an objection to the argument you've presented, or a problem for the view you've presented, or a potential solution to the problem you've presented, etc. You should always choose what you perceive to be the *strongest* response(s) to the view you are discussing. (iii) You will then **evaluate** the objection, or solution, by explaining why it is either successful or unsuccessful. Then, (iv) add a concluding remark, stating what **conclusion** the reader should draw from your discussion.

For instance, if you were writing on topic #1, you may want to use something like the following structure. (*Note: this is merely an example; the structure is ultimately up to you*)

Sample Structure for: Refuting Functionalism by way of Defending Searle's Argument

- (a) Write a brief **introduction** explaining what you are about to do. Be sure that your paper has a clear **thesis**. That is, you are trying to **persuade** the reader to agree with you about something.

(For instance, in this example, I'll argue that artificial intelligences could never be conscious by presenting and defending John Searle's "Chinese Room" argument.) [*Roughly 1-2 sentences*]

- (b) **Present the view** you are defending or refuting, or the problem that you are trying to solve.

(Here, I'll start by introducing the question of A.I. consciousness, and then presenting Searle's Chinese Room case, and the argument that he builds from it. I'll be careful to detail exactly *how* the case is meant to be analogous to A.I., and *why* it (supposedly) undermines the possibility of A.I. consciousness. I may also add some remarks to motivate the biological view of consciousness; e.g., by discussing simulations of lactation & photosynthesis.) [*Roughly 1 page*]

- (c) Provide the details of your favorite **objection** to the view that you have presented, or **solution** to the problem you have presented.

(Here, I'll present the objection that the Chinese Room case is not apt because the language terms are not appropriately connected up with things in the world. I'll argue that, if the room were installed into a robot with cameras and microphones for eyes and ears, it *would* have legitimate understanding of Chinese – what Searle calls "The Robot Reply.") [*Roughly 1 page*]

- (d) **Critically assess** the objection or solution. Do you agree with it? Why or why not?

(I'll argue that this objection is confused. If the audio-visual feeds are first converted into strings of symbols, the man in the room *still* will not learn Chinese.) [*Roughly 1/2 a page*]

- (e) Write a brief **conclusion** summarizing what you have just done.

[*Roughly 1-2 sentences*]

7. Grading Rubric: Primarily, I will be looking for two things when I assign grades:

- (1) Clarity: Do you explain yourself in a way that is **clear, concise, persuasive**, and **well-organized**? Imagine that you are writing for someone who has never taken a philosophy course. Your writing should be clear enough so that they would (a) easily **understand** you, (b) would **learn** something new about a philosophical problem and the ideas of a historical figure, and (c) maybe even be **persuaded** by you.
- (2) Critical Reasoning: Does your treatment of the view demonstrate your ability to think critically? It should be apparent that you have thought about the view and the objections **carefully**, that you **understand** their implications, and that you have **put some thought into** your response.

For a more detailed rubric of what I look for when grading, please consult the list of [writing do's and don'ts](#) in *The Pink Guide to Taking Philosophy Classes*. You may also find it helpful to review Questions #10 and #12 of [my FAQ](#). There, I detail some of the most common mistakes that students make in their papers, as well as some suggestions for how to improve on written assignments.

8. Academic Integrity: As per the syllabus, any student caught cheating or plagiarizing will immediately be issued an F for the course and a report to [the honor council](#).

Plagiarism is defined as any instance of presenting someone else's work or ideas as your own (e.g., by copying an internet source, another student's work or ideas, or any other source at all without citation). So, be sure to cite any and all ideas that are not your own.

*Note: Even with citation, turning in an exact copy or a slight re-wording of someone else's work is still plagiarism. Do not turn in a copy or a slightly re-worded version of the readings or my lecture notes. The purpose of this assignment is for me to be able to assess *your* ability to communicate clearly and persuasively, and *your* understanding of the material. So, your work needs to be put into your own words.*

In addition, it should go without saying that the use of Chat-GPT or any other A.I. to generate content for this paper constitutes plagiarism and is not permitted.