

WRITING ADVICE AND MARKING CATEGORIES

The following provides some detailed advice for writing papers for philosophy courses with Christina Hendricks, and a list of specific things I look for when marking. Please let me know if you have any questions!

Categories for Marking

The following categories encompass what I look for when marking papers. They are not presented in order of importance, though I tend to think of the first three as more important than the last three. Doing well in all six is necessary for a high mark for an essay. The questions in each category are examples of the kinds of things I look for, and may not be fully exhaustive.

Strength of your argument and textual analysis – Do you have a clearly-stated thesis that you go on to support well? Are there major parts of the thesis that are not supported? Are there inconsistencies in your argument that you do not address? Are there obvious objections to any part of your argument that should be discussed in your essay? Have you provided enough justification for your interpretation of the texts involved? Have you referred to the text where necessary to support or illustrate your points? Have you made claims about the texts that are questionable or inaccurate, without justification for these?

Organization – How well is your paper organized? Is there an introduction with a clear thesis statement? Are the points in the body of your paper ordered in a clear fashion to work together to support your thesis, with good transitions? Do you get off track at times? Is your argument hard to follow b/c your paper is disorganized?

Insight – What is the level of original thought you seem to have put into your paper? Does your paper appear to reflect careful thought about the texts and issues under discussion, or have you covered them only superficially? Do you provide an original, engaging thesis that could work to stimulate further ideas and inquiry in your audience?

Style & Mechanics – Are there mistakes in grammar, punctuation, spelling, clarity and style of language? Are the tone and vocabulary suitable for the audience of the instructor and your student peers, as well as the topic of the paper and your argument? Are there places where your sentences are awkward, such that the reader has to go back and re-read them and thereby interrupt the flow of your writing? Are your sentences varied in terms of structure, length and punctuation so that they do not all sound the same? It is not the case that points are taken off for every mistake, but numerous mistakes in this category can distract readers and even obscure your meaning, and this can affect your mark.

Topic – (may not apply; depends on the particular essay assignment) Have you addressed one of the topics and its questions, or does your essay go in a different direction and fail to answer the question(s) asked? Though you should make the topic your own, your essay must still address the main questions in one of the paper topics. Permission to do your own topic may be granted in rare circumstances.

Structure of Essays

(Explains the “Organization” marking category)

Thesis in the introduction: Each paper you write for this course should have a coherent, single argument – i.e., each should be centered around a single thesis that you then go on to support in the rest of the paper. State the thesis of your paper clearly in the introduction, and then direct the rest of your essay to supporting this point. You should be clear as to what your conclusion will be, so the reader has an idea of where the paper is going as s/he reads it. This may seem like giving away the game too early; but if your thesis is intriguing and original, the reader’s interest can be piqued as to how a case can be made for this and s/he will hopefully want to read on in order to find out if yours succeeds.

Parts of the paper: Be sure your paper has an introduction with a clear thesis statement, a body made up of points given to support the thesis that are presented in a logical order with clear transitions between them, and a conclusion that wraps the paper up into a coherent whole.

- * The introduction should work to draw the reader into the paper by showing why the issue and your argument are important, how they are interesting and meaningful for your audience (remember who that is). You can start in any number of ways, but avoid including introductory material that isn’t clearly related to your overall argument. *Avoid empty, over-general, and usually false statements like “Since the beginning of time, humans have pondered....”* Make your words count by making them meaningful and specifically directed to your ideas and arguments in the paper. Avoid lengthy introductions; bring the reader into the specific focus of your paper right away. The introduction should not contain parts of your argument for your thesis, rather, you should only give supporting arguments for your thesis in the body paragraphs.
- * In the body of the paper, make sure you guide the reader through your argument by providing *smooth transitions between your points*, so that the ideas and parts of the overall argument flow clearly together. If the reader feels like there are awkward jumps between the points in the body of your paper, or wonders why you have presented them in this order, they can get distracted and disengaged, and your meaning as well as the strength of your argument can get lost.
- * For the conclusion, strive to somehow bring the essay to closure, wrapping up your case. You may summarize your main points in a conclusion, but in a short paper like this, beware of this strategy sounding too repetitive—by the time a reader finishes your paper, it isn’t that long from when they read the introduction. So beware of repeating things from the introduction too directly. *The conclusion should usually not be used to introduce new points that have not yet been discussed in the paper*, though occasionally it can be effective to leave the reader with a comment or question that, if they reflect on it, may lead them to a better grasp of the importance of your argument. *Your conclusion should not contain any of your supporting arguments for your thesis; if it does, it should be a body paragraph instead, and you need to add another paragraph after it as your conclusion.*

Quotations: Knowing when to provide quotations and when not to is often a matter of trial and error and experience, because it depends on specific context. In general use quotations when the author’s actual words are important to the point you are trying to make. You could use them to draw the reader into interesting or significant passages that introduce your points, give an example of your points, or support your points. For example, you may need to refer to a sentence or passage from the text under discussion to support the interpretation you are giving, to support a claim about the meaning of an event or action in the text, etc. Do not let quotes take over your paper, though – the majority of the

paper should be your own words. Also, in many cases just giving a quotation is not sufficient; you will often need to discuss the passage and its significance to your point in the paper, unless this is quite obvious. For quotes that are over 4 lines long, indent the passage in your paper five spaces on the left and take out the quotation marks.

Paraphrasing: If you choose to talk about a particular action, event, or passage in one of the texts in your own words rather than using a quote, *you must still cite the source of the paraphrase in most instances.* Exceptions include: the point paraphrased is so general that no reader will wonder where in the text it came from, or it refers to passages of text that are so long that you can just cite a whole chapter instead of a range of pages, or the point is talked about in too many places in the text to list them all. The guidelines for citing paraphrases include: if you are talking about a specific incident or argument that a reader may not remember and may want to go back to the text to find, you should cite it; if you are giving an interpretation of the text in your paraphrase that others might contest, you should cite the page(s) so they can go back to the source and decide for themselves.

Content of Essays

(Explains the “Strength of Argument,” “Insight,” and “Style/Mechanics” marking categories)

Strength of the argument in your paper: Think about whether or not you’ve provided good reasons to support your thesis, and whether or not there are major parts of your thesis left without support. This does not mean you have to provide an absolutely rock-solid case for your thesis. Very few arguments are this strong! Just be sure to address the major parts of your thesis and defend them as well as you can. If you can easily think of an objection to your arguments, it is likely that your audience will be able to do so as well. At least bring these up and explain their nature, and rebut them if you can. Do your best to argue consistently throughout the paper, by trying to avoid claims that go against something you say elsewhere in the paper.

Interpretations of texts: The questions in the paper topics do not call for just one or a few “right answers,” such that all others will be deemed “wrong.” There are many things that could be said about these texts and paper topics, and numerous justifiable interpretations; but any and all of these should be defended if they are not obvious. I invite original interpretations of texts that differ from my own or those discussed in class, though recognize that controversial interpretations, or ones that seem to go against what was said in lecture/seminars, will require strong justification. Still, there are likely always going to be interpretations that are pretty clearly “wrong,” and this could harm your paper mark unless you present a very strong justification that makes a good case for why it should not be considered inaccurate.

Insight: Showing insight can help your grade considerably. This basically means that your essay shows that you have thought about the texts/topics in some depth, and have come up with some original thoughts on your own. The point in writing papers for this course is not to reproduce texts/lectures/discussions from class, but to make an argument about them that reflects your own ideas. The best way to accomplish this in your writing is to actually spend time with the texts and issues under discussion, giving yourself time to reflect before and during the writing process. An insightful thesis for a paper is not one that expresses something that’s fairly clear from reading the texts themselves. Try to come up with an argument for your paper that suggests a new way of thinking about the texts/issues under discussion than what a reader might generally have on their own, that gives them a reason to read the paper and be interested in it.

Style: Your writer’s “voice” and style will develop as you write, and will differ according to your audience. For this audience, it’s best to focus on making your meaning as clear as possible; we’re all striving to understand and work through sometimes difficult texts and ideas, and making them more obscure with language and sentence structure will not be helpful in most cases. If your readers cannot understand what you are saying because you are using too many unfamiliar terms and complicated sentence structures, they will not be able to get the point.

The tone of your writing should be generally professional and academic rather than very colloquial and informal, *unless* a different tone fits the topic and argument you are making. Pay attention to sentence structure and avoid overly long and complex sentences that are very difficult to follow. Vary sentence structures so they don’t all sound the same (e.g., use some short sentences to emphasize a point, start some sentences with “therefore” but put the “therefore” in the middle of a different sentence. Vary your punctuation (e.g., avoid having too many sentences with semicolons or none at all; be sure that not all of your sentences have lots of commas in them

Spelling, grammar and punctuation: I don’t take points off for every individual grammar or spelling mistake, but if you have a significant number of them, especially insofar as this makes the reader have to stop and think about what you might mean rather than just being able to read through smoothly, then this can affect your mark. Be sure to proofread your paper before turning it in, to avoid losing points for simple typos you could have easily fixed.

Editing

Giving yourself time to edit and proofread your paper before you turn it in is an extremely important step. Writing a great essay on the first draft is a spectacular feat not accomplished by most humans, including many extremely talented writers. Expect to produce at least two drafts of each essay you write (and ideally more than that, but I know there is time pressure in Arts One!)—the first one allows you to get your thoughts into words and figure out where they’re going. Then read through this first draft and see if your points all fit together and they still uphold your thesis. It may be that your paper has changed focused as you’ve written it (this is a common experience). Then fix any such structural and content issues with the second draft (as well as grammatical and typographical mistakes).

Outlining your paper: Some people find it easiest to ensure that their papers are clear and well-organized if they outline them, before and/or after writing. Doing so beforehand can help clarify your thoughts and prepare you to start writing (but be aware that the process of writing often changes what you thought you were going to say). *I also recommend trying to do a quick outline after you’ve done the first or second draft to help you see if your points in the body of the paper are presented in a clear order and that nothing important is missing.*