I. Basic Guidelines

With any writing assignment, you want to make sure you understand the basic matters of when it is due, how you are to submit it, what the appropriate length is, etc. For the formal philosophical essays assigned in this course, the dates and times at which they are due are usually listed in the course syllabus or provided with the assignment instructions. Pay attention to these deadlines as you may lose points if your work is late. Your essay should be prepared in a standard word processing program. Keep in mind the following basic guidelines:

1. Essays must be typed and double-spaced. Use only standard fonts, font sizes, and margins. Put your name at the top of the first page and do not include a cover sheet or place your essay in a folder or binder of any kind.

2. Pay attention to the assigned length of each essay.

3. Refer to your student style manual for guidelines regarding quoting, paraphrasing, works cited, and other matters. Generally in the humanities, the preferred method for citations, etc. is the MLA (Modern Language Association) style.

4. Proofread your final draft before printing it out or handing it in. Deductions will be made for grammatical and spelling errors. Do not rely solely on spell checking programs as these will not catch all your mistakes. Take care to avoid common punctuation problems, fused sentences, sentence fragments, pronoun errors, etc. If you need help with the writing process and reviewing writing techniques, please make an appointment with the staff of the Writing Center in the Center for Teaching and Learning (located in the Humanities Center).

5. Generally, late essays will be accepted up to one week after the due date though points will be deducted for each class day that the essay is late. Any essay not turned in at or prior to the point at which they are collected in class will be considered late. After one week, no late essays will be accepted. No exceptions will be granted to this rule.

II. Some Writing Tips

1. Be sure you understand exactly what is expected of you. Most essay assignments will ask you to analyze and critically evaluate a specific philosophical issue. Make sure that you understand the issue that you are to analyze and that you focus on the right issue. A common mistake students make is to write an essay on a related but different issue.
2. Your essay as a whole should be clear, coherent, well-organized, and concise. Make sure both you and the reader know at every stage what you are doing, where you are going, and how what you are writing is relevant to the central task of defending your thesis. Know what you want to say; you should have a very sound notion of the point you wish to argue or the position you wish to support.

3. Philosophy essays usually take the form of a thesis-defense essay in which you formulate a thesis statement addressing the assigned issue and develop an argument in support of your thesis. What do you think? How can you defend your thesis? The thesis communicates your main idea, the one you are going to prove or defend in your essay. It should reflect your considered judgment on the particular assigned issue. It need not but may reflect any of the positions that have been presented in the class readings or discussion. Your essay provides evidence that a reasonable and unbiased person would accept for establishing the acceptability of your thesis. You have likely written these kinds of argumentative or persuasive essays for other college courses, particularly college composition courses. You want to demonstrate that you have thought carefully and critically about the issues presented in this course and in the readings included in each unit and that you are capable of crafting an argument that pertains to these issues.

A thesis is a statement that makes some clear, definite assertion about the subject matter under discussion. For example, if the topic of your paper is the morality of abortion, here are some of the many theses you might choose to defend:

- Abortion is morally wrong under all circumstances.
- A woman has an absolute right to decide whether to have an abortion.
- Abortion is morally right only to save the life of the mother.

Each of these is a clear, definite statement that takes a position on the morality of abortion, a position that the rest of the paper will attempt to defend. A statement such as “Abortion, pro and con” would not be an appropriate thesis for it doesn’t assert anything. Nor would the statements “Why I believe in a woman’s right to choose” or “I personally believe abortion is wrong” be appropriate. A philosophy paper is not a personal report of how you feel or what you believe. It is an argument for a thesis. Also, try to avoid picking a wishy-washy thesis that hedges your bets, like “There is much to be said on both sides of the abortion question,” or “There are good arguments for and against abortion.” The object of a philosophical essay is to move beyond merely reporting on the various perspectives on an issue. You should take a stand, plant your feet squarely on the ground, and argue for your thesis as well as you can.

4. The heart of a persuasive essay are the arguments that support the thesis. You have to come up with arguments that are designed to persuade your reader that your thesis is an acceptable one. Remember that there is a difference between mere expository writing, where you are explaining or summarizing or describing, and persuasive writing where your goal is to persuasively support a thesis with appropriate arguments.

What is an argument? To put it as simply as possible, an argument for a thesis is a reason for believing that the thesis is acceptable. When you are putting forward an
argument in support of your thesis, ask yourself, “If I didn’t already believe my thesis, would this convince me that the thesis is acceptable? Would it tend to convince a reasonable reader who is open-minded enough so that he or she is willing to listen to reasons?” If the answer is yes, then you have your hands on a genuine argument. If the answer is no, then leave it out of the paper and look for a better argument.

Your arguments should be well developed and thought out. The number of arguments in an essay is not necessarily as important as the quality of the arguments. It is often better to develop one strong, persuasive argument in support of your thesis than several weak and unrelated arguments.

5. Don't mistake common forms of discourse for arguments. Some examples:

- Asking a question without answering it is not an appropriate way to give an argument. For example: “What would happen if every woman who wanted an abortion got one?” is not an argument. “If every woman who wanted an abortion got one, millions of innocent lives would be lost” is an argument, or at least part of an argument.
- Merely citing an example is not an argument.
- Supporting a claim with trite or stock phrases or with clichés is not arguing.
- Simply stating your feelings or beliefs does not constitute an argument.
- Avoid merely reporting, summarizing, or describing other people’s views. Don’t summarize other philosophers’ views in your essay. Also don’t confuse describing your views with arguing for them. Merely describing or explaining what you believe is not sufficient to justify your belief and wouldn’t persuade someone who didn’t already agree with you.

For the purposes of the philosophy writing assignments you will be doing for this course, it is important to keep in mind what these writing assignments are not:

**Philosophical essays are not a matter of your feelings or mere opinions**
These writing assignments are not simply an opportunity for you to express your opinion or feelings. Philosophy is not generally about feelings or opinions but rationally defensible beliefs. Students often believe that philosophy is simply about the art of bullshit and that any opinion is as good as any other, but this is not true. Some opinions are more defensible than others and you are being called on to present evidence in support of your claims. As you grapple with the complex issues addressed in this course, your opinions are a good starting point—but they are just that, the starting point. Through further reflection, debate and discussion, and critical reading, you should refine your opinions and begin to develop an argument in support of your belief. As you do so, you move from mere opinion to supported belief.

**Philosophical essays are generally not solely about factual or empirical matters**
Many of the disciplines you are likely to encounter in your general education courses are interested in descriptive matters and conducting experiments in order to resolve empirical matters. Consider the case of Sandra Jensen, the woman with Down’s syndrome who needs a double organ transplant. Sociologists may be interested in people’s attitudes
toward those with Down’s syndrome. Medical doctors may want to know the state of her physical health. The general populace is surely interested in how many organs are available and how many are in need. Many people may believe that organs are simply distributed on the basis of who has the most money or influence. These are important matters but they are not philosophical matters. The student of philosophy is interested in the issue of whether it would be fair to deny Sandra Jensen her request for an organ transplant. The empirical matters may be relevant here but they are never sufficient for making the case regarding what is fair. Your paper ultimately has to wrestle with more than simply the facts and descriptive matters regarding what people do. You must address the prescriptive issue of what is fair in this situation. This goes beyond the facts and what people do and requires that you also wrestle with philosophical theories of justice.

Philosophical essays are not simply reports or research papers
The essays that you will be writing for this course do not require that you do any additional research, other than critically reading the assigned selections and the material providing background information. In your forum posts you will be asked to discuss what you think this or that philosopher might say in addressing a particular issue or how you might apply a particular philosophical theory to an issue. The final writing assignment for each unit asks you to develop your own response to a particular issue. These assignments are not designed for you to simply report on what some great philosophical figure said but to articulate and defend your own view on the matter. Let’s return to the case of Sandra Jensen for a moment. In addressing this case in your essay for this unit, it would be a mistake to write an essay in which you explain what John Stuart Mill would say or what John Rawls would say. In such a case you would no longer be addressing the issue of whether you think it would be fair to deny her request for an organ transplant. You would be addressing the topic of what Mill thinks or what Rawls thinks. And while it may be worthwhile to address these topics as part of your preparation for writing an essay about Sandra Jensen, this should not be the focus of your writing.

6. Do not beg the question when arguing. Begging the question is a form of reasoning in which the conclusion of an argument merely restates the premise. Such an argument assumes or takes for granted precisely what it is supposed to establish. Consider the following:

I believe abortion is wrong. It is not right for people to have abortions. I think it is terrible that so many innocent children are being murdered.

This passage does not present any arguments. It is circular and repetitious, merely repeating the first statement with slightly different words. In other words, this passage begs the question and should convince no one that abortion is wrong.

7. Merely citing or repeating known facts seldom constitutes an argument. If you are opposed to abortions and wish to argue that abortions are immoral, merely citing the fact that thousands of abortions are performed weekly does not in itself constitute adequate support for your thesis. Facts need to be interpreted. They require a philosophical framework in which the reader is made to understand their significance.
8. It is perfectly all right to use an argument from a lecture you have heard or an essay or book that you have read, including your textbook. When you adopt an argument as your own, you take responsibility for it. By including it in your paper, you are saying that you believe it is a convincing argument. If you are aware of criticisms of the argument, you should attempt to address these criticisms when you adopt the argument. If you are paraphrasing or quoting remember to supply the necessary documentation.

9. Using examples and counterexamples can often be a good strategy in explaining your points and offering some support for your thesis. Be careful, however, not to rely too heavily on isolated examples. The mere fact that one person you know died from complications due to an abortion does not mean that abortions are unsafe nor does it adequately support such a thesis.

10. Do not introduce assumptions or speculations into your essay unless you can adequately defend them as reasonable and they are consistent with everything else we know.

11. Don’t wander from the issue that you are to analyze and don’t mix together materials that belong in different parts of the paper. Set forth your argument in logical order, supporting your thesis with arguments. Leave out anything that does not advance your argument or further your point. Don’t be afraid to edit your own work, deleting passages that do not advance your argument.

12. Don’t leave any important claims unsupported. If you argue that abortion is immoral because the fetus is a person with a right to life you need to support your claims that the fetus is a person and has a right to life. Any claims that may be controversial and not accepted by most reasonable people should be supported. Any claims or arguments that have already been discussed and criticized in class must be supported if you introduce them into your essay.

13. End your paper with a summary and a conclusion that briefly reviews your main argument and leaves the reader with the essay’s most important points. It is seldom appropriate to introduce new points, material, or arguments in the conclusion.

14. Try to use language as precisely as possible. Vague words like “stuff” or “thing” are evidence of a sloppy mind. Your prose should be proper to the subject—not forced or stilted, not full of words you would never use except in a philosophy paper, but nevertheless carefully chosen.

III. Standards for Essay Evaluation
The following scale provides a general list of expectations for college-level writing. Students should also refer to the grading guidelines set forth in the syllabus or in an accompanying rubric.
### WRITING A PHILOSOPHY ESSAY

| 59 points or less | • There is no clear thesis developed.  
• The essay ignores the assigned issue and does not meet the basic requirements for the assignment.  
• The essay contains serious factual errors.  
• The paper is incomprehensible due to errors in language or usage. |
|---|---|
| 60 - 69 points | • The essay states a thesis but little support for the thesis is offered or the thesis does not adequately address the assigned issue.  
• The arguments are poorly developed and weak.  
• Important claims are left unsupported.  
• There is no attempt to develop a philosophical position or framework.  
• There may be factual errors or misunderstandings.  
• The essay contains majors errors in grammar, mechanics, spelling, etc. |
| 70 - 79 points | • The essay states a clear, well-defined thesis and mentions arguments that only weakly support the thesis or are not fully developed.  
• Irrelevant or inconsistent issues may be raised.  
• Obvious objections to or criticisms of the thesis or main supporting arguments are not mentioned.  
• Important claims are only weakly supported.  
• No clear philosophical framework is apparent from the loosely organized arguments.  
• Essay is free of major errors in grammar, spelling, usage, mechanics, and punctuation, or there are only errors in one or two of these areas. |
| 80 - 89 points | • The essay adequately states a thesis and develops some basic arguments that offer some support for the thesis and suggest some creative effort.  
• Essay does not depend on clichés, stock phrases, slang, or jargon, but instead shows some originality in thinking.  
• The arguments are loosely tied together to suggest a philosophical framework that demonstrates the writer’s knowledge of and consideration of the topic.  
• Important claims or claims central to the main argument are not left unsupported.  
• Obvious objections are mentioned but not adequately addressed.  
• Irrelevant and inconsistent points are avoided.  
• Minimal errors in grammar, spelling, usage, mechanics, etc. |
| 90 points or more | • The essay states and defends an original, clearly well-thought out thesis.  
• The essay develops complete arguments that demonstrate a grasp of relevant philosophical theories while avoiding generalizations, wordiness, and vagueness.  
• The arguments suggest creative effort and original thought and offer strong support for the thesis.  
• The arguments are tied together to suggest a clear and relevant philosophical framework.  
• The essay addresses obvious criticisms.  
• Essay is FREE of errors in mechanics, grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc. (Exceptions made for absolutely minor and noninhibiting errors in an otherwise superior work.) |
## IV. A Basic Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation Criteria</th>
<th>Exceeds Expectations</th>
<th>Meets Expectations</th>
<th>Approaches Expectations</th>
<th>Below Expectations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>I. Thesis</strong></td>
<td>The thesis is presented in the introduction and is a clear, unambiguous statement that responds to the appropriate issue. The main argument is introduced with the thesis.</td>
<td>The thesis is presented in the introduction and is a clear, unambiguous statement that responds to the appropriate issue.</td>
<td>The thesis is presented in the introduction and responds partially or fully to the appropriate issue but is equivocal or ambiguous or stated indirectly.</td>
<td>The thesis does not respond to the appropriate issue or is not presented in the introduction or is not presented at all.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>II. Claims</strong></td>
<td>The essay introduces a series of reasonable and relevant claims in support of the thesis. Claims are either acceptable at face value or are supported by sub-arguments. Claims employ clear and unambiguous terms that are not emotionally charged.</td>
<td>Most of the claims are as described in the column to the left. BUT: One or, at most, two claims are described in the column to the right.</td>
<td>Most or all of the claims are unacceptable at face value or are not supported with cogent sub-arguments. A reasonable person would not accept the claims without further evidence and no evidence is given. Claims employ vague and ambiguous language or are emotionally charged. Claims are only minimally relevant to the thesis.</td>
<td>There are few if any claims offered in support of the thesis. The author often begs the question, simply reiterating the thesis statement in slightly different terms, or employs rhetorical questions. Many claims simply restate facts from the writing scenario or reiterate general ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>III. Support</strong></td>
<td>The essay offers a series of claims that provide strong support for the thesis. The arguments are well developed and internally consistent. The essay anticipates possible objections and counterarguments.</td>
<td>The essay offers a series of claims that provide adequate support for the thesis. Claims are presented in a logical order and establish a clear chain of reasoning, but there are missing links or otherwise under-developed arguments. The essay doesn’t anticipate possible objections and counterarguments.</td>
<td>The essay has only weak support for the thesis. Arguments are poorly developed, with many missing links or logical failures. The author may argue from largely anecdotal evidence. Obvious objections and/or counterarguments are ignored.</td>
<td>The essay offers little or no support for the thesis. Claims are presented in a seemingly random order. There is no apparent order establishing a logical argument. Serious errors of reasoning are made. There are obvious objections and/or counterarguments that are not addressed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IV. Theoretical Framework</strong></td>
<td>The arguments and claims collectively reflect a single, well established coherent theoretical framework. The framework is relevant to the main issue of the writing assignment. The author demonstrates a command of the relevant philosophical concepts and arguments. Claims attributed to specific philosophers or philosophical theories are accurately and charitably made.</td>
<td>The arguments and claims collectively do not reflect a single, well established coherent theoretical framework. Claims may be somewhat inconsistent and arguments are presented drawing on divergent theoretical frameworks. The author fails to demonstrate a command of the relevant philosophical concepts and arguments. Claims attributed to specific philosophers or philosophical theories may be inaccurate.</td>
<td>The author relies on a weak or conceptually flawed theoretical framework. The author fails to demonstrate a command of the relevant philosophical theories. The framework relied upon has obvious deficiencies not addressed in the essay. Claims attributed to specific philosophers or philosophical theories are misleading.</td>
<td>There is no coherent, well established theoretical framework in the essay. The author relies upon loosely related claims and/or an idiosyncratic framework that is unacceptable. The essay mostly summarizes key facts of the writing scenario and engages in little or no analysis. Claims attributed to specific philosophers or philosophical theories are obviously wrong.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>V. Organization</strong></td>
<td>The essay has a clear concise introduction that establishes the thesis and briefly reviews the core argument. The body of the essay presents a linked series of linked claims.</td>
<td>The essay has a concise introduction that establishes the thesis. The direction of the core argument is not clear. The body presents a series of linked claims.</td>
<td>The essay has an introduction that rehearses relevant details of the assigned issue. The direction of reasoning in the essay is not apparent and it.</td>
<td>The essay has an overly long introduction that doesn’t clearly introduce the thesis and doesn’t indicate the direction of argument. The body presents ideas in...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
WRITING A PHILOSOPHY ESSAY

that logically develops the key arguments, and a conclusion that ties everything together.

series of claims supporting the thesis and introduced in a reasonable manner. The conclusion ties things together and addresses any relevant remaining points.

supporting the thesis but the order of claims and direction of reasoning is not clear. The conclusion largely reiterates relevant points from the introduction.

is not clear how the author transitions from one paragraph to another. There is no conclusion or it simply repeats points made in the introduction.

an unorganized fashion. The conclusion repeats statements from the introduction.

VI. Style
You should strive to present your ideas clearly and concisely, avoiding vague and ambiguous language, using well-defined terms and examples, and avoiding informal or colloquial language.

The author demonstrates a sophisticated command of language. Ideas are presented clearly but could be more concise. Language is occasionally vague, ambiguous, emotionally charged, or overly colloquial. Key terms and examples are left undefined. Irrelevant content is included.

Ideas are presented clearly and concisely. Language is occasionally vague, ambiguous, emotionally charged, or overly colloquial. Key terms and examples are well-defined. No irrelevant content is included.

Ideas are not presented clearly but could be more concise. Language is occasionally vague, ambiguous, emotionally charged, or overly colloquial. Key terms and examples are left undefined. Irrelevant content is included. Word choice is often poor.

Ideas are presented poorly, are neither clear nor precise. There is repetition of ideas and many passages that could be condensed. Much of the language is vague and ambiguous. Much of the content is irrelevant.

VI. Mechanics
Your essay should be free of problems related to spelling, punctuation, grammar, and syntax, and should reflect an academic writing style.

There are no errors of spelling, punctuation, or grammar. The author employs college-level sentence structure in accordance with standard English.

There are minimal errors of spelling, punctuation, or grammar. The author mostly employs standard college-level sentence structure with no serious deviations from standard English.

There are a few errors of spelling, punctuation, or grammar. The author employs simple sentence structure with deviations from standard English.

There are several errors of spelling, punctuation, and grammar. The author employs minimally basic sentence structure. There are distracting deviations from standard English.

V. Quickmarks for Grading
If a number is written down on your paper it refers to one of the tips above that you failed to take into consideration in writing your essay.

| ER | Errors | Your paper has one or more spelling or grammatical errors that you must identify and correct. Have you employed your word processor’s spell check feature? |
| WW | Wrong Word | You have chosen the wrong word for a particular context. |
| UC | Unclear | This claim or passage is vague or ambiguous or confusing. If it is vague make your language more precise and direct. If it is ambiguous rephrase the passage so it can only be interpreted one way. If it is confusing simplify or rephrase the passage to clarify the train of thought. |
| C | Condense | You should condense this passage or material. Are the points you are making in this passage necessary? Do they serve some purpose in terms of your core argument? |
| Sum | Summarizing | This section of this essay may be too heavy on summary. How might you revise this to engage in more analysis and less summary? |
| EC | Emotionally Charged | You are employing language that is emotionally charged. Do you need emotionally charged language in order to make your point? Consider whether neutral language would be more appropriate here. |
| AKW | Awkward | You are employing an awkward sentence structure or writing style that deviates from standard English. Try reading your writing aloud and listen to how it sounds. Does it read smoothly? Logically? |
| O  | Organization | This part of your essay or argument is poorly organized. What is the overall structure of your essay? Consider the order of points you are making and whether your essay might be revised to improve the logical flow of your ideas. |
| T  | Thesis | Your essay lacks a clear and well-defined thesis or your thesis is not appropriate to the specific writing task. Does your thesis directly address the core issue of the writing assignment? |
| D  | Develop | You have made a good point that needs to be further developed. Your ideas may be expressed too elliptically to be fully intelligible. Keep your reader in mind and consider how you might try to revise your writing in order to more fully and clearly express your thoughts. |
| NC | Not clear | The point or claim you are trying to make is confusing or not clearly made. Review your writing and ask yourself how you might express your thoughts differently and more clearly. |
| IS | Issue | You have strayed from the assigned issue. Keep your core issue in mind, as defined by your thesis, and consider whether the point you are making is relevant to that issue. |
| S  | Support | A claim you have made is not acceptable at face value and may need support in the form of a subargument or further clarifying claims. What is your evidence for a claim? Is there additional support you might bring to bear on this point? |
| B  | Begs the question | A claim you have made begs the question, simply reiterating in slightly different language the thesis of your essay. Are you really advancing your argument in this case? |
| W  | Weak | An argument that you have made is weak; the claims are either unacceptable or provide little support for your conclusion. Would this argument persuade an objective and fair-minded person? How might you revise it to make it more persuasive? |
| LA | Language | Your tone and style are not appropriate for an academic paper. You need to remove slang, colloquial expressions, emotionally charged language, and extraneous phrases such as “What I’m talking about is...” or “I would also like to add that...” |
### VI. Resources for Additional Help

There are a number of excellent resources available to help you become a better writer. First and foremost of course is your philosophy professor. I am always willing to meet with you and work with you on your writing skills. You need to take some initiative, though, and request an appointment to meet in my office and discuss your work. The Center for Teaching and Learning is also available to provide additional help. I encourage you to use their Writing Center and their Writing Tutors. Please feel free to take drafts of your written work to be evaluated by their Writing Tutors. Many college writing centers also offer extensive help through their web sites. Here are a couple of recommended links to online writing centers where you can get help on writing strategies, adopting a process approach to writing, grammar and style issues, and other matters.
Additionally, there are many fine online sites with helpful guidelines on grammar and writing style, including:

**The Elements of Style** by William Strunk
From the website Bartleby.com: Asserting that one must first know the rules to break them, this classic reference book is a must-have for any student and conscientious writer. Intended for use in which the practice of composition is combined with the study of literature, it gives in brief space the principal requirements of plain English style and concentrates attention on the rules of usage and principles of composition most commonly violated.

**Guide to Grammar and Style** by Jack Lynch

There are a number of books available that focus specifically on writing philosophy and three of the best guides are:

Hugo Bedau: *Thinking and Writing About Philosophy*, Bedford/St. Martins

Brian David Mogck: *Writing to Reason: a Companion for Philosophy Students and Instructors*, Blackwell Publishing

Zachary Seech: *Writing Philosophy Papers*, Wadsworth

In addition to these guidelines, there are a number of excellent online resources for writing a philosophy paper. These include:

- Douglas Portmore: [Tips on Writing a Philosophy Paper](#)
- James Pryor: [Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper](#)
- William O. Stephens: [How to Write Philosophy Papers](#)
- Evan Thompson and Duff Waring: [Essay Writing Handbook for Philosophy Students](#)

For students who might want some help on developing persuasive arguments, there are several web sites that provide good background on the fundamentals of arguments. These include:

- [Arguments and Their Evaluations](#)
- Garth Kemerling: [Arguments and Inferences](#)
- Hong Kong University’s Critical Thinking Web Site: [Argument Analysis](#)