

Writing and presenting argumentative essays in advanced Philosophy courses

A handbook for students

Austen Clark, Professor of Philosophy, University of Connecticut

Second draft, September 2011

Contents

- I. The ideal essay
- II. Do's and Don'ts
- III. How papers are graded
- IV. What each letter grade means
- V. What some other marks mean
- VI. Presenting oral argument
- VII. How to read philosophy
- VIII. How to take an exam
- IX. Further references

Not everyone in this class will know what sort of thing is expected when one writes a paper for a 2000 or 3000 level philosophy course, so this document aims to lay out those expectations explicitly. Argumentative essays are rather different from papers written in many other disciplines, and there are some do's and don'ts that apply rather uniquely to philosophy. I find I repeat a lot of this stuff year after year in answering questions about papers and presentations, so I decided to write it all down and hand it out.

It is important to note up front that I view 2000 and 3000 level courses in philosophy as introductions to philosophical research at the undergraduate level. The goal is to get you to do some philosophical analysis and argumentation on your own. Such research does not proceed in a vacuum; it always starts with careful reading, description, and analysis of existing arguments--which then get improved as other philosophers think of counter-arguments. But even in a 2000 level course it is not enough simply to describe what someone else thinks; the goal is to get you to probe those arguments critically, and come up with your own reasoned reaction to the controversies at hand.

It is also important to note that the document applies only to my own advanced undergraduate philosophy courses. Other professors teach different sorts of material, with different goals, applying different criteria. So don't assume (for example) that the do's and don'ts, or the specific notes about grades, apply to other courses. Some of the notes probably are applicable, but some are not.

I The Ideal Essay

The ideal essay will do the following: (1) pick some contentious and interesting conclusion drawn by one of the authors in one of the readings; (2) clarify exactly what that conclusion means; (3) explain the argument which the author gives for that conclusion, including where necessary the sub-arguments offered for some of the premises, and, where

necessary, some of the objections and replies to that argument; and (4) give your own critical reaction to that argument, describing where you think its problems lie.

The claims and the arguments we will read are very complicated; most of them take a lot of work simply to understand, much less to debate intelligently. So most of the work in an essay is expository and exegetical: describing as precisely and simply as you can exactly what the author is claiming, and why the author claims it. In a six page paper this "exposition" will typically fill about five pages, and your own critical comments may be about a page or a paragraph long.

But it should be emphasized that mere exposition is not sufficient; the assignments require your own critical thinking about the arguments you read. A paper without any of your own thoughts about the issues cannot get an "A". This course is an undergraduate level introduction to how philosophers really work, how philosophy is actually done these days. It really does work by first, getting very very clear about the arguments about an issue, as they exist up to that moment; and then making some critical advance about some portion of the arguments somewhere, which others can then build upon.

What may surprise you are the standards of clarity and precision applied to the claims and arguments at hand. That's why it is a lot of work just to do an adequate exposition. But doing that work is also a great way to learn how very clear thinkers think.

A. Some implications of this ideal

First, it is impossible to provide anything near an adequate analysis of ALL the arguments in an article in a six to eight page paper. (To do the latter might require writing something the length of a book, or of a chapter of a book.) You have to pick one or two arguments at most. But that is fine; that is how it is done. It is much better to cover just one argument, perhaps one tiny passage, but do it thoroughly and precisely, instead of covering lots of ground in a haphazard way.

One implication: don't even try to summarize the entire article. Don't do a survey. Pick one argument, and dig into its details.

The actual text corresponding to "one argument" might be very small: a few paragraphs, or even just a few sentences. Of course to analyze it adequately you have to know something about its surrounding environment and its competitors; the counter arguments and replies that are also available. Those neighbors also furnish essential resources in understanding how key terms in the passage are used. So the small textual extent of your target does not imply that your reading can be similarly limited! Instead the converse is true: often the briefest arguments require the most extensive background before they can be understood.

The bulk of the paper will consist of your description of some contentious or interesting conclusion drawn somewhere in one of the

readings, and of the arguments for it offered by the author. (A good part of the work in philosophy is getting clear about exactly what is claimed, and then getting clear about exactly why the author thinks that is true; and as you will see these tasks can sometimes be quite difficult.)

So how do you pick which argument to write about? The answer to that is fairly easy: because I want you to actually do some philosophy yourself, on these topics--produce some critical commentary about the arguments at hand--if I were you I would just pick the argument or arguments in the reading that you find most interesting. Pick the ones that made you think "heh, wait a minute" when you were reading it (or re-reading it; see below). Those are the ones you will be most motivated to think about, so those are the ones that you will produce the best thought about.

(The same holds for presentations: don't try to summarize all the arguments pro and con, but just pick the one or ones you find most interesting for your side of the question.)

B. Elements of the ideal.

1. What "clarifying the meaning" means

So, start by trying to get very clear exactly what the conclusion claims. Unless you do this you won't know what has to be shown in order to show that the conclusion is true. You won't know why some apparent objections are not relevant, while others are.

Generally there will be technical terms employed in claims about the issues at hand. A claim might be something like "two individuals can be functionally isomorphic yet experience qualitatively different states when perceiving the same stimulus". One key task in clarifying meaning is simply describing precisely what these technical terms ("functionally isomorphic" and "experience qualitatively different states") mean. But clarification doesn't stop there. Most nontechnical terms are ambiguous and can mean different things. For example, the claim above uses the verb "can". Does this mean that this situation is something that could actually happen in our world? Or is it merely something that is conceivable? Or logically possible? And (as another example) what does "perceiving the same stimulus" mean?

A good way to determine which parts of a claim need to be clarified is to understand what parts of it have been disputed, and why. Those disputes and counter arguments serve eventually to fix the interpretation of some of the key terms in the claim; sometimes it is only by reading the counter arguments and replies that one can come to understand what some term in the original claim meant.

2. What "analyzing the argument" means

Roughly this means explaining the reasons why the author draws the conclusion that is drawn. More technically it is an analysis of the

premises from which the author draws an inference. (Some background in logic or argument analysis is definitely helpful here, which is why a 100s level course in philosophy is typically a prerequisite.)

To do this you isolate the premises until you get the group which the author thinks is sufficient to entail the conclusion in question. The central question is whether those premises so understood show that the conclusion, as written, is true. Or, technically: the central question is whether the inference from those premises to that conclusion is a valid one. If not, then even if all the premises were true the author still has not managed to establish the conclusion. The inference is such that all the premises could be true yet the conclusion false.

The actual work of philosophy is largely focused on the validity of inferences; progress comes when we learn what is wrong with some kinds of inferences, or how to patch up other kinds. But to give good reasons for believing a conclusion, the author must do more than present a valid inference: the premises on which that inference is based must also be true.

In addressing that question one descends into "sub arguments", or arguments whose conclusion is a premise of the main argument. To these arguments exactly the same procedure gets applied: first clarify the meaning of the claim (which now is one of premises), then analyze the author's reasons for holding that claim to be true. Clearly enough this process can continue forever, getting into arguments for premises needed to argue for premises needed to argue for premises needed to ... get to the main conclusion. Where do you stop? That's easy: when it stops being interesting.

(In fact in the professional journals what typically happens is that the main conclusions are nowhere in sight; the most interesting stuff is found deep down in some sub-sub-sub argument for a class of premises that everyone thought was OK, but then turns out to be problematic for some reason. If in your paper you want to focus on such a sub-sub-sub.... argument, that would be fine!)

3. What "providing a critical commentary" means

Basically there are two possible ways to dispute an argument: show the reasoning is such that even if all the premises are true, the conclusion wouldn't necessarily follow; or show that one or more of the premises are not true. Critical commentaries try to do one or the other or both.

Showing a failure in reasoning is considered to be more significant philosophically than casting doubt on the truth of a premise. The paradigm is to describe some possible situation in which all the premises are true but the conclusion is false. This is very difficult to do, typically, because most of the philosophers we read are very good reasoners, and they don't make logical errors very often. But there are other alternatives. One is to try to show that some of the premises used in one part are inconsistent with premises used elsewhere; that a

conclusion drawn in one part of the argument contradicts a premise used somewhere else; or that an argument equivocates on some term.

Not only does the author need valid inferences; all the premises must also be true, and commentaries about the latter are quite typical. Mostly you won't be able to show a premise is false; rather, like a defense attorney, you will at best establish that reasonable people can doubt its truth. A very useful analysis is to show that some term used in some of the premises is ambiguous, and that depending on how one reads it, a premise that seems plausible becomes much less so. (This is a variant of "clarifying meaning", and it too is a high-class variety of critical commentary.)

A good course in logic is an excellent way to learn more about how to analyze and criticize arguments; these notes barely scratch the surface.

II. Some Do's and Dont's

A. Content-wise

Don't try to summarize the entire article.

Adequate analysis of a single interesting argument takes a surprising amount of time and paper. If you try to summarize the whole thing, you won't have time or space to analyze any of its arguments at an adequate level of detail.

Do pick one argument in which you are interested, and explain it thoroughly.

It is much, much better to analyze one tiny argument thoroughly than to summarize a bunch of them inadequately.

Do *read* all the counter-arguments.

Even though you focus your writing on one argument in one article, you have to read all the others cited in order to understand that argument: why it has the premises it does, how some of its words are to be interpreted, why its conclusion is important, etc. Without that background the argument won't make much sense, and it will be easy to tell that you don't understand its context.

Don't start with a long, flowering, (padding?) introduction explaining why the topic is important to the history of philosophy.

Introductions should be minimal. A perfectly adequate introduction can be completed in one sentence: "In this paper I will analyze Searle's claim that computational processes have nothing interesting to do with language processing, and show that his main argument for it is unsound."

Don't use secondary sources.

This surprises a lot of students. The idea is that you should not short circuit your own thinking about the texts by rushing off and reading what somebody *else* says about the texts. It is a much better use of your time to read the texts several times, very carefully, and think about them on your own, first. *After* you have done that, it can be valuable to read secondary sources, but not before. And generally, since this is not a graduate level course in philosophy, I don't expect many students to devote the time needed to do both those things. Thinking about it on your own is more important, so do that first. (This is one rule where other courses will differ dramatically; in a history course, for example, it is impossible to avoid using secondary sources.)

Don't use Webster's Dictionary as your source for the analysis of meaning.

Do explain any technical notions found in the conclusion or a main premise.

Don't launch into your own examples without understanding the ones already in the text.

Don't tell me your views without first giving a thorough analysis of an argument in the readings.

Sometimes well-motivated students jump right to the fun, critical commentary part of the paper, without first giving a careful analysis of the state of play prior to their paper. I get papers which start (and end) by telling me the author's conclusions, or views, or inclinations, about the topic at hand. This is understandable, but a mistake. Philosophical research always works by probing and improving existing arguments. Some of the best ones go back thousands of years. You can't get to the fun part without first doing your homework. This is what makes philosophy a logical discipline rather than a free-for-all in which we all just state our own opinions. It is also, by the way, why philosophy is a great way to learn how to think more clearly.

B. Mechanically

Watch your page length!

Some people read "five pages" to mean that you can stop as soon as a sentence slops over from the bottom of page four to the top of page five. (Woof, made it! Time to stop.) In fact anything less than a *full* five pages is almost certainly too short, particularly if you are creative with font size, margins, flowery introductions, and lengthy examples from personal experiences or from other courses. All that stuff is stuff you are doing *instead of* the work that needs to be done.

Too long is better than too short.

Pascal once wrote to a friend "I am sorry I am sending you such a long letter, but I did not have time to write a shorter one." This is true as well in philosophy! If you have a lot to say, it can be *very* difficult to condense it. In this course you don't need to do the difficult work of condensation; it's perfectly OK to hand in a paper that is longer than the stated limits.

Note the word count on the first page.

Aim at 2000-2400 words. Word counts are a much better measure of whether you're doing the amount of work expected, and also better for predicting how long a presentation will take. (2400 words is about the limit of a 15 minute talk, at least for me.)

Don't pad your writing.

You know what I mean. Sorry to spill the beans, but it is always *blatantly obvious*.

Do leave adequate margins, please.

Paper is expensive, but bigger margins make it easier for me to write legibly. Yet another reason why word counts are better than page length.

Quotes longer than three lines should be indented as a single-spaced, block paragraph.

Swaths of (expensive) paper filled with quotations from someone else do not count as your own writing, so be careful that you use long quotations only when necessary (or when your paper would be of the requisite length, even if all the long quotations were subtracted).

Citations can be in scientific style.

Footnotes are disappearing even in the humanities. Since we all know which readings are the readings for this course, a citation can simply be (author_name, page). Example: (Fodor, 334). A better practice, if you want to save your paper and later understand the citations, is full scientific style: (Fodor 1991, 334). Then at the end of the paper you have a list of references, which would include:

Fodor, Jerry A. (1991). Propositional attitudes. In David Rosenthal (ed), *The Nature of Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 325-338.

The page numbers allow someone to acquire just that text by inter-library loan. Even better: also cite the original appearance.

Fodor, Jerry A. (1991). Propositional attitudes. In David Rosenthal (ed), *The Nature of Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 325-338. Originally appeared in *The Monist* (1978) 61(4): 501-23.

Anthologies can be hard to find, and this will pin the text to some more universally available appearance on paper. In this course is OK to trust the editor of the anthology to be accurate about the details of the original appearance. (Philosophical scholars are taught not to do this, however, since editors can be unreliable.)

III. How papers are graded

An argument is a structured entity, and the set of all arguments is a vast structure of structures, with what might seem to be infinitely recursive levels of detail in the layers of sub-arguments, counter-arguments to the sub-arguments, replies to those, and so on. The big cutoffs between grades reflect how much of the relevant structure you've managed to assimilate and understand. The full codebook for each grade is given in the next section, but here are some summaries to help you understand what is expected.

The University tells us that A means "excellent", B means "good", C means "fair", and here (roughly) is how these translate in a paper about an argument:

- A All the relevant structure is there, the claims are crisp and precise, and we have an interesting reply. Easy to recognize!
- B Most of the structure is well understood, but there are some minor gaps. The conclusion is correctly understood, and all the major premises are present and accounted for, but some subsidiary premises and details are in less than perfect focus.
- C Some major gaps in the structure. Perhaps the conclusion is mis-stated, or a major claim is missing.
- D The paper is mostly gaps; most of the *structure* is missing, though we may have lots of claims floating around in a disconnected way.
- F Not a glimmer. Most of the claims aren't even recognizable.

An analogy: a layer cake is a structured entity, with each layer having its own ingredients that have to be put together correctly. Filling and icing are essential, and the whole thing is put together with icing between the layers, on the sides, and on the top. Here is how one might assign letter grades to layer cakes:

- A These are obvious when you encounter them. A perfect cake!
- B The ingredients are there, and most of the structure is there, but there are some minor flaws in the structure. (It's definitely a cake, but it is a little lopsided or the icing has some gaps.)

- C The ingredients are all there, and the author clearly has the idea that structure is important, but there is a major hole in the structure. (The second layer is missing or the icing is gone. It is, though, recognizable as an attempt at a cake.)
- D Most ingredients are present, but there is little discernible structure. It is a heap or pile of stuff; a messy half-baked glop of flour, eggs, sugar, egg shells, etc.
- F Not a glimmer. No ingredients, no structure. (Something green from the back of the refrigerator: Is it meat, or is it cake?)

By the "structure" of the argument I mean specifically its inferences: the links forged by the author connecting specific sets of premises to particular conclusions. The "ingredients" are the claims themselves, and the concepts and definitions (and counter-claims) that give them meaning. A perfect cake has all the ingredients necessary, put together in just the right way. It's fun to bake cakes. It's even more fun to learn how to argue well.

IV. What each letter grade means: The full codebook

Here are the full details; this codebook is also part of the syllabus of the course. Your presentation and papers will be graded by the extent to you demonstrate critical reasoning concerning the arguments found in the readings. Letters can serve as a handy abbreviation for assessing that reasoning. Below is a description of what those letter grades will mean for the paper and presentation.

- A** A clear understanding of the argument analyzed: clear identification of its premises and conclusion, and awareness of the background arguments re truth or falsity of premises. No significant mis-statements, misattributions, or logical errors. Sensitive to conceptual nuances and counter-arguments introduced in the reading and discussions.
An insignificant number of misspellings, grammatical errors, or other mechanical problems. (Just a few in the entire paper.)
An insignificant number of sentences that display faulty semantics, violate logical grammar, or are incomprehensible as written.
Clear evidence of understanding subtle points in the reading and of effort to think critically on one's own about them.
A relevant and well-argued response.

(The above diagnostic criteria for an "A" are CONJUNCTIVE; that is, strung together with "and"s. Letters subsequent to an "A" signify a failure to satisfy one or another of those criteria, so the following lists are all DISJUNCTIVE: i.e., strung together with "or"s.)

- B** Aware of the structure of the argument analyzed, and no major misunderstandings of it, but some minor ones: vagueness, imprecision, conflation, minor errors of interpretation. Some weakness in the response: Dogmatic or uncritical assertion, begging the question, blurring some distinctions, irrelevancy, invalidity, inconsistency, missing the point slightly, considering only weak counter-arguments, or failing to consider a counter-argument found in the readings.
Understood the main points of the reading, but insufficient effort to think critically about them or to consider background arguments and distinctions. Some insensitivity to issues raised in the readings.
More than a few misspellings, grammatical errors, or other mechanical problems.
More than a few sentences that display faulty semantics, violate logical grammar, or are incomprehensible as written.
Clearly did the reading, but not as carefully as needed.
- C** Major misunderstanding of the claims, arguments, or conceptual distinctions advanced in the reading or discussion. Missing a large chunk: one major gap or hole.
Weak grasp of the structure of the argument or the relevance of subsidiary claims.
Attributing to the authors claims they explicitly deny, or which contradict other of their views. Attributing consequences which do not follow from their views.
Failure to give a critical response: mere summary or description instead of analysis, or assertion instead of argument.
Logical errors.
An unacceptable number of misspellings, grammatical errors, or other mechanical problems.
An unacceptable number of sentences that display faulty semantics or are incomprehensible as written.
Unclear how much work was put into the assignment, or whether all the reading was completed. May have just picked up arguments from class and a superficial reading.
- D** More than one major hole or gap in description of the premises. Minimal awareness demonstrated of the structure of the arguments. Ingredients are present, but no links between them.
Logical howlers (ie grossly fallacious reasoning)
An insulting number of misspellings, grammatical errors, mechanical problems, or semantic errors.
- F** Failure to address the requirements of the assignment.
A clearly inadequate amount of effort put into the assignment.
Work below the standard needed to remain in a University.
Plagiarized work (see the syllabus).

How these are actually applied

Why not tell you this? I start by assuming, optimistically, that every paper is an A. Then if or when I start noticing problems, I start notching the assessment downwards. Oops, we have a slight misreading of an important premise. It's not an A paper anymore. Is it a B? Going, going, gone? I start hitting slight misreadings of other claims: the B starts notching downwards. Oops, a major premise just missed, or the conclusion misstated: we're in the C range now. And so on. Sometimes I get to the end of an otherwise excellent description and analysis of an argument, and the paper just stops. Boom, done. There is no critical reaction to the argument at all. (This happens too often!) Oops, it can't be an A paper; it is in the B range at best.

Usually, D's and F's are usually easy to recognize; the hard part of grading is to give you an accurate assessment of where the paper lies within the A-B-C range, if that's where it is. Usually I know the grade when I get to the end of the paper, and I will write a note explaining why. Sometimes if I have a lot of papers on the same question, I will double-check my assessment by ranking them against one another, and then checking to see if the grades correspond to the rankings.

V. What some other marks mean

I write comments on papers as I go, marking the targets of commentary with parentheses, and writing the comment either directly above or in the margin. I make other marks in the margins or near the text, and here is what they mean:

- X: Wrong. You have said something wrong about what the author of the text said; you have misattributed something to the author in question. You can't be wrong (or at least, it is hard to make a mistake) about what your own opinions are, but you certainly can be wrong about the claims or conclusions of the authors we read. Too many X's can knock you down from B to C range.
- ~ (Tilde) More or less, but not quite. (It means "approximately equal to" in mathematics.) Usually this means that you could be a little more precise in your statement of what the author claims; your statement of it ignores some distinction made elsewhere in the reading, or is ambiguous or vague. So it could be interpreted in a way that is wrong, even though it does not imply something that is clearly wrong. Tildes can knock you down from an A to a B range.
- ? I don't understand what you mean here. Usually indicates a "mechanical" or syntactical problem with the writing. Not good to see!
- 0 (a circle around some text) Indicates a spelling or grammatical error. Too many of these also can knock down a grade, even if the analysis and understanding are perfect.

- () (parentheses around a clause or sentence) Target of a comment. Underlines also flag some specific phrase that is worth looking at some more.

VI. Presenting oral argument

The content of a presentation is basically parts one to three of an ideal essay (see section I). Aim at presenting just one well-developed argument. By "well developed" I mean that you describe the conclusion and what it means; give a series of premises; explain what each means and why it is worthy of belief; and show how they yield that conclusion.

One major difference, though: the paper (but not the vetting) must always include some critical commentary of your own about the argument in question. Vetting presentations stop with the description of the argument, and leave it to the other side (and to questions) to raise objections.

It is perfectly acceptable to present on the affirmative side of some question, and then hand in a paper on the negative side. (In fact it often improves papers to work this way: try to present the best possible argument for the other side first, and then work out your paper.)

A second difference is that vetting sessions always include answering questions from the class, and the content of those is unpredictable; they will come from every angle. You will soon see that being ready to answer questions from your classmates is the harder part of preparing for a presentation. There's nothing personal about it, but if you are unprepared, it will show, rather obviously, when you try to answer questions.

Your response to questions is a major component of the grade you get for the vetting (and this is why it is graded separately from the paper, even if you wind up simply reading parts of your paper). Conversely, some people are much better at explaining things in person than in writing, and they may get a better grade for the presentation than for the paper, even if their presentation also is nothing more than reading parts of the paper. (If this happens to you, it is actually good news, because the problem with your writing is relatively easy to fix, and I offer some suggestions on it below.)

A. Tips on formulation

The affirmative gives the best argument they can for a "yes" answer to the question of the day. The negative gives the best argument they can for a "no" answer. It is totally up to you what argument you consider to be the best argument for the question. But here are a few tips on formulating an argument when you know that it is to be presented orally.

Remember that your argument is to be presented *aloud*. Ideally it should be clear enough that someone just listening to it can follow it and at every moment understand exactly what you mean. So here is a tip to those who can more easily say something complicated than

write something complicated: to edit your sentences, just *read them aloud*. Somehow this simple trick makes it easy to pick out those which are clear and those which are not. Edit your writing until it is something that you might naturally say. (This is why you often hear professors mumbling to themselves in their offices.)

It's perfectly OK to refer to the text in the course of the vetting.

You can read passages from the text under discussion--and often it will help. (I usually prepare a kind of index of page numbers of critical passages that might be useful.)

Have some fall-back arguments for your premises. Premises should be reasonable, but if you're challenged on one, be ready to back it up with its own little argument.

Arguments and claims made in prior readings are *always* fair game. Your classmates will use them. We are a social and competitive species, so be ready!

B. A few tips on public speaking

Your first public speech can be unnerving. Here are a few notes on making it less so. It is reassuring to notice, first, that everyone in the class is in the same boat, since I very much doubt that anyone in the class has ever before vetted a philosophical argument. ("Vetting session" was invented by yours truly in 1999, and I doubt the practice has become widespread.) The key is to learn to relax: to talk in public more or less just as you would if trying to explain something complicated to an intelligent friend. (Then, ideally, learn how to write just as you would if you were talking to that friend.)

I can almost guarantee that in this course you will see some of your classmates presenting a complicated argument in a completely relaxed and natural fashion. Some just have a natural gift, which is a wonder to behold. If, like me, you do not have it naturally, then it must become an object of deliberate study. The best way to learn how to argue better in public is to notice those who do it well; try to figure out why they do it well; then imitate them, shamelessly.

Here are a few tips that can ease your entry into this vital domain.

A good speaker starts and maintains eye contact. Step up to the podium and arrange your papers, while looking down. When you are ready to start talking, look up. Look at your audience. Pause. Look from face to face. Count to ten. It will seem like an eternity, but the eye contact and silence will *seize* their attention.

Once you have their attention, start with a zinger. Don't be tentative. Tell them the conclusion you have reached, with as much force as you can muster. (It is useful to have your opening memorized, at least, so that you can look them in the eye while delivering it.)

Speak up! People in the back of the room want to hear you too. (There is a certain amount of acting in speaking, and even if you do not feel confident, it is good to *act* confident. Pretend to be the speaker that you want to be, and you'll find that eventually you can become that speaker.)

Pay attention to your own gestures. Unless you are conscious of how you are gesturing, and gesturing deliberately, it is best to leave your hands still (on the podium, or at your sides). Otherwise what tends to happen is that you will, quite unconsciously, make repeated nervous gestures that are quite distracting to the audience. (Tapping fingers on the podium for ten minutes, for example. Playing with a pencil the whole time. Etc.)

A yogi trick: if you feel nervous, try to keep your body calm. Take deep steady breaths, concentrate on your muscles, and let all the tense ones relax, so that you are as limp as possible. Oddly, this calms the mind!

Many of you will be able to explain complicated thoughts more clearly in speech than in writing. It is hard though to talk entirely without notes. The most useful sorts of notes are in outline form, with critical claims written out verbatim, in case you need them. (These might include the exact conclusion you want to support, any direct quotes that you use, definitions, etc.) Know the examples you want to use and just name them in the outline. The outline indicates structure and transition points, and with a more or less memorized beginning you will find it is surprisingly easy to do something other than simply read your paper.

When you answer a question, it is perfectly OK--in fact, it helps to focus the attention of your audience--to pause first and think for a few seconds. You don't need to rush in with whatever first pops into your mind.

Another simple technique is to ask for a clarification of what the question means. (Usually the question will be somewhat obscure, so this isn't just a delaying tactic.) But it does give you some time to think.

VII. How to Read Philosophy: Some Suggestions.

Philosophy reading is very difficult. It requires tremendous concentration and mental effort, so you should only try it at the time of day you are most alert. You will find that you will need to read each text at least two or three times (and take notes) before you fully understand it. Here are some other suggestions, drawn from Manya and Eric De Leeuw's *Read Better, Read Faster*, which has been reprinted at least 21 times now by Penguin books (ISBN 0-14-020740-6). I recommend it.

The trick that most people don't know is that it is most efficient to make multiple passes over the text, with the different passes having different purposes and proceeding at different depths and at different speeds. You will not spend the same amount of time on every sentence in the text. It is a *very bad* idea to start at the beginning, read word by word, and when you get to the end, think that you are done. It also wastes your time and is not a very efficient way to read.

Some passages are not that important and you might skim them quickly, and never revisit them (perhaps it gives an example, which is obvious on first reading). The most important passages are statements of

definitions, of premises, and of conclusions; and on those you might spend ten times the effort you do on other sentences. (I'm not kidding!) In those central passages you have to understand the exact claim being made, what the terms mean, and how they connect logically to the other central passages. That is where note-taking is helpful. One goal of this method is to pick out the really important parts quickly, so that you can concentrate your efforts on them.

Start by skimming the whole piece. Read the first paragraph and the last paragraph, then read the first sentence in every paragraph. Read any summary paragraphs or lists of conclusions very carefully. Try to get a sense of the main claim and the overall structure of the supporting argument. Try to get a sense of where the central passages are located.

Go back to the beginning of the piece and re-read the initial paragraphs very carefully. Try to assess whether your initial impression of the main claim is correct. Ideally, before you even start to read all the details, you already know what the conclusion is. This helps enormously in structuring your reading.

Read the whole piece. Even here it is a bad idea to read straight through, word-by-word. Instead you should read actively and critically. You need to hop around, re-reading some parts slowly and carefully, speeding up elsewhere. The two central questions are always:

1. What exactly is the claim being made? (What do the key terms mean? Can you give your own formulation? What is an example?)
2. What are the arguments in support of the claim? (Here you need to be aware of the organization of the piece. What parts does the author take to be unproblematic, and what parts are taken to follow from them?)

Read critically and reactively. Try to anticipate the arguments. Be alert to any apparent inconsistencies between your understanding thus far and what you've just read; you may then need to back-track. Are any of the claims ambiguous? Is the argument logically sound? Can you think of counterexamples?

One simple heuristic for picking a topic is to try to remain fully conscious while reading, and notice which parts you find particularly interesting. Develop an argument just about that topic. (The hard part in applying this heuristic is the bit about remaining fully conscious.)

Use your common sense. You're bound to come across parts of the article which make you think "wait a minute, that doesn't follow!" or "but he's assuming that ..." or "that's just wrong! what about the case of ..." or "what a muddle--it confuses P's and Q's!". Tune in to these responses; trust them; develop them. They're clues that something may be awry in the author's argument. The places where you get these kinds of feelings are good places to focus when you start to formulate your own critical response to the argument. Trust your instincts! That's what they are for.

On a third pass, take notes selectively. Concentrate on assimilating the precise meaning of key claims and on the overall structure of the argument. To get a claim precisely and firmly in mind, it helps to write it down as formulated by the author. Philosophical readers of all ages find outlining a very useful way to understand the structure of arguments.

I strongly recommend that as you think about the topics, try to store your thoughts in digital form. Brainstorm on your word processor. This is a habit difficult to acquire, but the long run payoff is enormous.

VIII. Some hints on taking essay exams

Some of these hints will not be relevant if the exam is a take-home exam. Some are relevant to all final exams.

When you arrive in the exam room, try to sit as far away as possible from others. Spread out. If you sit right next to someone, you will probably find it gets distracting. It gets very irritating if your neighbor's eyes start roving. (If that happens just cough or do something to get the attention of the examiner. Cheaters are flunked for the semester and their names sent to the Dean.) Know beforehand if there is a working clock in the room. If not, wear a watch.

When you receive the exam, skim the entire thing first to get a sense of the type of questions and the time needed for the different parts. Get a sense of how much each part is worth in the overall score, and try to allocate your time by those proportions.

If there are explicit time recommendations for each section, pay careful attention to them. A key to doing well in exams is budgeting your time efficiently. Watch your time. You don't want to waste any time, and you want to allocate it roughly by the point values of questions.

When you skim you should also try to get a sense of which parts are hard and which easy. It is always smart, if possible, to do the easy questions first. Rack up as many points early on as you can. This gives you more time at the end for the hard ones.

Read the instructions for each part very carefully. If it says at the beginning of a section "For each question you should describe an argument from the readings" be sure to do that in every answer you write in that part. And try to get a precise sense of what is needed to "describe an argument". If the instructions say that this can be done simply by listing and numbering the main premises, drawing a line, and writing the conclusion, then just do that.

Read each question carefully. Be sure you understand exactly what each question is asking. One of the big killers for many students is the non-responsive answer: one which simply doesn't answer the question asked.

In philosophy a question is not an excuse for writing whatever comes into your head about the general topic. Behind each question there are specific requirements which some answers meet and some

do not. The better you understand exactly what those requirements are, the better you will do. If the question asks "What is Locke's argument for X?" be sure that you have described an argument, that it is an argument written by Locke, and that its conclusion is about X, not Y.

In fact exams are even more precise than this: for each of the requirements the examiner will have specific criteria to rate when one answer is better than another. (I grade with a checklist and rating scales: here is the minimum needed for a D, a C, a B, etc.) So for example, to describe Locke's argument for X, you will need to describe the premises of Locke's argument (and the conclusion). It is better to describe *all* of the premises in the argument, not just some of them. Be sure they all really were Locke's premises. Don't mix in Berkeley. Don't mix in examples from the lecture as if Locke wrote about them. Don't use language from other authors. Don't advance claims Locke explicitly denied. So your first task when you read a question is to grasp the requirements for a successful answer. If you start to write before doing this, you are leaping blindly into the dark. I personally do not enjoy rappelling off of rock face in the dark. Much safer and generally more successful is first to find a clear target, then aim for that.

Think a minute before you start to write. Try to organize your essay. A brief scribbled outline is a great idea. You can do this right in the blue book if you like.

Get right to the point. Don't use long flowery introductory sentences; in fact don't use introductory sentences at all. Don't start by repeating parts of the question back to me. (I know what the question is!)

A mechanical suggestion: try to write as legibly as you can. Don't crimp your writing. Leave ample margins. If you run of space, just ask the examiner for another blue book or more paper.

Pens usually require less hand pressure than pencils, so are easier to use for a two or three hour exam. One that rolls well can save you from hand cramps. Bring several of your favorite writing implements, so you have a backup if one fails.

On short answer questions, if you know exactly what the question asks for, you can stop when you have answered it. If the question is "Name or describe an inductive argument for the existence of God," a perfect answer is simply "Argument from design." Three words will do. A bad (but correct) answer would be (and was): "An inductive argument (as opposed to a deductive argument) is one in which the premises possibly, but not certainly, support the conclusion. For example, the teleological argument has purported examples of design in nature to come to the generalization that we were products of design too and thus we have a creator who created us in this--we are like a watch with intricately put together parts." This answer is bad (but correct) because it rambles, answers questions that were not asked, and gobbles up time.

On the other hand, you do need to be sure you have answered the question. Remember that it is your responsibility to show the

examiner that you know the material. If to the same question you answered "Argument from analogy" the answer is not (and was not) sufficient. There are many different arguments from analogy, and this does not identify which one you have in mind. Here it would have been safer to add a bit more description to make it clear that you know which argument you are talking about. Remember that the examiner cannot read your mind.

Watch for "overflows" and "underflows". If you find yourself spending too much time, or you find your writing spilling over the allocated space, you are probably not following directions sufficiently. On the other hand, if you write just two sentences for questions requesting a page, or you finish *much* earlier than in the time recommended, you can be sure that you are not answering the question adequately.

Remember that the main purpose of an exam is to test your knowledge of the readings. Essay questions should be treated a little differently than short answer questions. If while writing an essay you remember some detail or some example in the reading, it proves you did the reading, and it is germane to the question, it never hurts to add it. Writing more rather than less can help an essay, as long as it helps to prove your knowledge of the readings, and you do it within the suggested time. If you know it, flaunt it.

IX. Further References

Clark, Austen. *Philosophy and Logic: A Self-Paced Course*. A good, cheap way to teach yourself some logic. Written for Philosophy 102, printed by the UConn Coop, sold at cost.

Cook, Claire: *Line by Line: How to improve your own writing*. Houghton Mifflin, 1985. ISBN 0-395-39391-4. Written by a copy-editor for the Modern Language Association, this is the best book I know on how to edit your own writing. Many tenured professors could learn something from it.

De Leeuw, Manya and Eric. *Read Better, Read Faster*, Penguin books (ISBN 0-14-020740-6). No gimics, but sound ideas on how to read more efficiently. Reprinted at least 21 times.

Weston, Anthony. *A Rule Book for Arguments*. (Indiannoplis: Hackett Books). A short but clear primer on writing philosophical essays.