

24.00 Fall 2023, First Paper Assignment

Instructions. Write a 1,250 to 1,500 word paper on one of the topic questions overleaf.

Deadline. 11:59pm EST, Tuesday, October 3rd. A paper loses 1/3 of a grade per day it's late. (e.g. an A- grade paper will turn into a B, if it's two days late.)

Submission. Do not include your name on the submission. Please type your student ID #, the full topic question you are answering, and the word count at the top of your paper. This text doesn't count towards the 1,250 to 1,500 words. Please email your TA a copy of your essay by the deadline, and include somewhere in your email (e.g. in the subject line) your MIT ID-number.

Citation/plagiarism. See the syllabus for the class's plagiarism policy. All writing must be your own. Any text that's lifted verbatim from a source must appear in quotation marks and be appropriately referenced. Any text paraphrased from a source must be referenced too – changing the way something is worded does not make it your own writing. Citation style doesn't matter, provided it enables the reader to find the source you're using.

Grading

Your instructors will be looking for:

Clarity

They will ask: At a sentence by sentence level, is the paper clearly written and easy to follow? At a structural level, is the paper well organized?

Accuracy

They will ask: Has the paper accurately represented the arguments given and positions taken in readings and lecture?

Engagement

They will ask: Is the author of this paper thinking through the issues for themselves (as opposed to, e.g., only repeating what was said in readings and lectures)? If so, how successful is the author?

Writing Help: The MIT Writing and Communication Center (WCC) offers free one-on-one professional advice from communication specialists with advanced degrees and publishing experience. The WCC can help you learn about all types of academic and professional writing and further develop your oral communication skills. You can learn more about WCC consultations at <https://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center/> and register with the online scheduler to make appointments through <https://mit.mywconline.com>.

Questions

[1] Anselm attempts to prove that God exists. Carefully reconstruct Anselm's proof in premise/conclusion form. (Make sure your argument is valid.) Identify the premise you think is the weakest, and present what you take to be the best objection(s) to that particular premise. Do your objections defeat the argument?

[2] According to Roger White, the fact that the universe is the sort of place whose physical laws allow it to contain living creatures like ourselves provides significant evidential support for theism. Reconstruct his argument and describe what you take to be the best objection(s) to it. Do any of them defeat the argument?

[3] Louise Antony argues that there is (probably) no good reason that an omnipotent, morally good being could have for allowing the suffering we see in the world, and so there is (probably) no omnipotent, morally good being. Reconstruct her argument and describe what you take to be the best objection(s) to it. Do any of them defeat the argument?

[4] Korman (following Pascal) argues that believing in God has greater expected utility than not believing in God, and so you should believe in God. Reconstruct his argument. Describe what you take to be the best objection(s) to his argument. Do any of them defeat the argument?

Writing Advice¹

Introduction (circa 200 words max). You want to do 3 things in the introduction.

- i) Give the reader some idea of what the question or issue is.
- ii) Give the reader a sense of why it is interesting.
- iii) Give the reader a preview of what you will say about it.

Exegesis (circa 400 words). In this section you will do your best to reconstruct an argument or position set out in the readings or in class. You can put it in premise and conclusion form if you like, though you normally don't have to do that. Tips: Try to be accurate. Try to be charitable. If, for example, on your reconstruction of the argument, one of the premises is obviously false, then you have probably not been charitable.

Assessment (circa 600 words). In this section you will assess whether or not the author is right. Is the author's argument sound and persuasive? What are the best objections to the argument? Do they work? Why or why not? If the author's argument is sound and persuasive, what are its further implications? If not, why does it appear sound and persuasive?

Conclusion (circa 50 words). Briefly recap what you have said.

¹ Thanks to Caspar Hare

Some Dos and Don'ts

Do:

- Use the first-person pronoun 'I'
- Make a *single, well-developed* argument (rather than many short arguments)
- Signpost (“I just argued blah”, “I think Antony’s argument fails, and here’s why:...”).

Don't:

- Start your papers with ‘since the dawn of time, philosophers have been wondering whether God exists’ (or words to that effect)
- Use a thesaurus – no need to be fancy
- Bite off more than you can chew – you’re not going to prove God doesn’t exist in 1250 words
- Plagiarize

Resources

Jim Pryor on writing philosophy: www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html

Helena de Bres *Pink Guide to Philosophy Classes*. (See, in particular, the sections “How to Write” and “Writing Dos and Don'ts”):

<https://sites.google.com/a/wellesley.edu/pinkguidetophilosophy/>

A sample philosophy paper from Angela Mendelovici here:

https://prezi.com/z4h1_fwilbxj/a-sample-philosophy-paper/

Kevin Dorst has helpfully given me some extra writing advice to share, plus two sample papers. They're on the Canvas website.