

PHL202: Reflective Writing Assignment Guidelines

Most of your grade this semester will be determined by your work on the Reflective Writing Assignments (RWAs). These assignments will give you the opportunity to develop both your understanding of the course material and your own ideas and arguments in response to it. The following guidelines will help you construct successful RWAs.

Division of labor

For all the RWAs, the class is divided into groups. Charts will be posted in Blackboard listing the group assignments for each RWA. (Note: the groups are different for each RWA, so be sure to check the group assignment for each unit.) Following the active learning model, each group will work together in class to help everyone understand the material for the writing assignments. However, the RWAs themselves must be individual work, not a group effort.

Two class meetings will be devoted to group work on your RWAs. For the first, you must bring a completed “**Prep Sheet**” (a template is posted in Blackboard) listing 6 quotes from your group’s reading and your interpretation of each; for the second, you must bring a rough draft of the argument you plan to develop in the reflection half of your RWA. You must bring printed hardcopies of the Prep Sheets and Rough Drafts to the class meetings when they are due in order to receive credit; hand-written, emailed or other electronic copies will not be accepted, and they will not be accepted for credit outside of class if you are absent on the due date. Failure to complete either the Prep Sheet or the Rough Draft will result in a deduction of one point from your RWA grade.

Group secretary and presentation

For each unit, one member of each group will volunteer to serve as the group’s secretary. The secretary’s function on the day the Prep Sheets are due is to compile the group’s consensus views on the most important passages in the reading. On the day when the Rough Drafts are due, the secretaries will circulate among the other groups, sharing the results of the previous class meeting. Everyone must serve as secretary once during the semester. When you serve as secretary, you are excused from submitting a written RWA for that unit, but you will receive a grade on the quality of your presentation and the effectiveness of your group leadership.

Related readings

Every RWA is linked to an assigned reading; the RWA Assignment Sheet will specify the reading each group is responsible for. All the readings are available as PDFs posted in Blackboard. The Assignment Sheet will identify the specific sections of the PDF you should pay careful attention to, but you should always try to read the entire document.

While there are many resources available online to help you understand the philosophers we will study this semester (and I will post recommended ones in Blackboard), your RWA will not be successful if you simply regurgitate information from Wikipedia, Sparknotes, etc. (see

the **Plagiarism** section below). Your paper should focus on your group's reading posted in Blackboard and include multiple references to details in the PDF you are assigned.

Constructing your paper

Each RWA has two parts: your summary of the assigned reading and your reflection on that material. Each of these parts should be broken into paragraphs to organize your thoughts. Note: you should not pad your paper with a title, an introduction paragraph or a conclusion paragraph: dedicate all the space in your paper to expressing your understanding of the reading and developing your reflective response.

Summary section

In your own words, summarize the main ideas the author develops in your assigned reading, being sure to address at least the specific sections highlighted on the assignment sheet. Your job is to identify the conclusions the author argues for and the supporting reasons provided. Make sure you use philosophical vocabulary correctly.

There should be no direct quotations in your paper! 'Summarize' does not mean "copy and paste"! You should refer to specific passages in the reading by supplying the page and line numbers in parentheses; for example: (p.3, lines 7-12). While it may be appropriate to quote specific terms or phrases the author uses, do not insert longer excerpts into your RWA.

This part of your paper should be about two pages long.

Reflection section

Second, develop a reflective response to one or more of the ideas in the reading by thinking about the reflection questions listed for your group. In general, your job in this portion of your paper is to discuss aspects of the reading that you think are especially interesting or important, or things that you strongly agree with or strongly disagree with. It is important that you do more than just state your reaction: provide relevant ideas and examples (from other philosophers, history, contemporary culture or your own experience) to *argue* for your position—that is, to make a good case that your position is a reasonable one that others should take seriously.

This part also should be about two pages long, bringing your whole paper to about *four full pages*.

Reference to another group's text

During the three class periods prior to the group work, we will have lecture and discussion of all the texts covered in the unit. On the day rough drafts are due, the group secretaries will present summaries of their groups' readings to the other groups. When you prepare your final draft, you must include—either in the summary or reflection section—some substantive reference to a point raised in one of the other group's

readings. Failure to include this reference will result in a deduction of one point from your RWA grade.

Grading

Your paper will be graded on a scale of 0 – 9, using the **Grading System and Rubrics** posted in Blackboard. Your paper must be typed, double-spaced, in 12-point Georgia font with one-inch margins all around; see the formatting guidelines below, or use the MS Word **RWA Template** posted in Blackboard.

Submitting your paper

RWAs are due on the date indicated on the **Semester Schedule**. You must submit your paper electronically through Blackboard on or before that date. Note that when you submit through Blackboard, only documents in Word (.doc) or PDF formats are accepted; do not try to upload Apple Pages documents, links to documents in the cloud, or documents in any other formats. If you have any questions about how to submit your paper, please speak with me before the due date! The window for submitting your paper in Blackboard will end at 9:30 a.m. on the due date. Late* or emailed papers are not accepted.

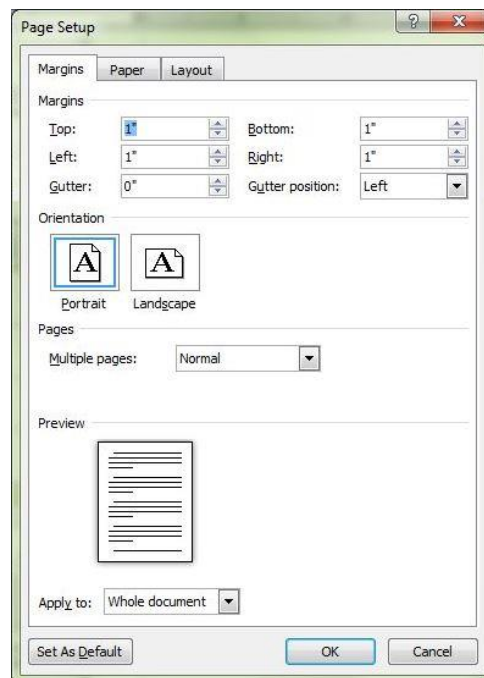
* See policy in the **Course Outline**.

Formatting

Use these guidelines to format your RWAs. *Note that these guidelines apply only to my classes; professors in your other classes may have different expectations.*

Page Layout

Set all four margins to 1 inch.



Heading

The heading of your paper should appear in the top left corner of the first page, and should contain only the following information:

- Your Name
- Course Number
- RWA Number
- Group Number

There should be no extra space between these lines, and there is no need for excessive spacing between the end of the heading and the start of the body of your paper. You do not need a title for your paper.

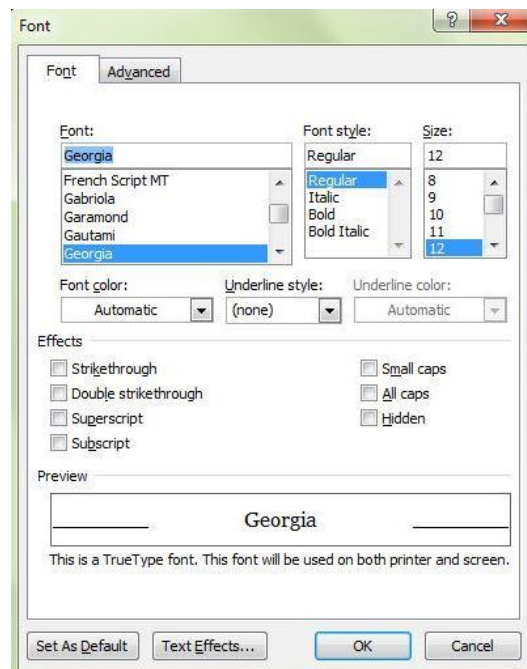
Example:

Rebecca Ramirez
PHL101
RWA #4
Group #3b

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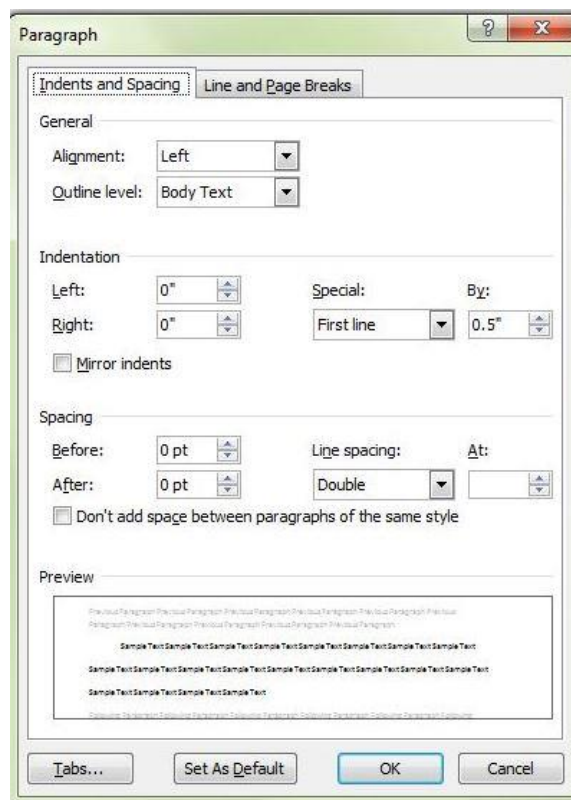
Font

Select Georgia as your font; it is a serif typeface that is readable yet conveys the seriousness of academic writing. Select 12 point size, and use effects like italics and bold sparingly.



Paragraph style

Format your paragraphs with the first line indented 0.5", double-spaced, and no extra space before or after.



Plagiarism

The RWAs are not research projects. There should be no need for footnotes or a works cited page for your projects. Your job is to grapple with the readings, discuss them with your groups, produce your best understanding of the philosophers' arguments and develop your own arguments in response. All of that must come from your own mind and effort, not from a Google search.

Using some else's ideas without attribution is *plagiarism*, a form of academic dishonesty that is considered a serious offense in higher education where the free pursuit of knowledge and truth is a paramount value. The most egregious form of plagiarism is "copy and paste" – taking someone else's work word-for-word and passing it off as your own. But this is not the only form plagiarism can take; using someone else's ideas or phrases is just as plagiaristic as copying and pasting (for example, paraphrasing a Wikipedia article without alerting the reader that you are doing so is no better than copying a paragraph from the article.)

It is fine to consult other sources to help you make sense of the readings (suggested links to quality sources are posted in Blackboard) but everything you submit in the final draft of your RWA must be your own words, work and ideas. If I determine that you have plagiarized any of the material in an RWA, you will receive a **0/9** for the assignment with no chance to make it up. A second offense will result in a final grade of **F** for the class. ***Please note that the "SafeAssign" feature in Blackboard will automatically screen your work for plagiarism.***

Common Writing Errors

Although this is not an English composition course, the writing in your philosophy papers still should be clear, serious and appropriate for a college-level course. Philosophy involves the attempt to think clearly about difficult ideas, and clear thinking is helped by clarity of language; learn to use the writing process as an aid in helping you clarify your thoughts in an assignment. Avoiding grammatical errors will help you avoid logical confusion in your thinking; avoiding stylistic missteps will help you to convey your thoughts in an academically serious way. **Words matter:** be mindful of what they convey!

There are several guides to grammar and usage available on the internet or the College's VLC. I like Prof. Paul Brians' very clear and accessible [guide to common errors in usage](#); Purdue University's [Online Writing Lab](#) is another popular resource.

Be sure to give yourself enough time to proofread your paper thoroughly or to seek assistance at the Writing Studio located in the LRC.

Here are some of my writing “pet peeves”—common errors that you should avoid:

- * Using “feel,” “feel like” or “feel as if” instead of “think.” For example, don’t write “I feel like Kant’s moral theory is sound” when you mean “I think Kant’s moral theory is sound.” [This piece in the NY Times](#) explains why the difference matters!
- * Don’t use such phrases as “In my personal opinion...” or “Personally, I believe....” (1) There is no such thing as having an *impersonal* opinion or belief; (2) philosophy is about developing reasonable positions and arguments, not sharing purely personal feelings or attitudes. Use the simple phrase “I think...” when introducing your own ideas.
- * Avoid using the word ‘mindset’ (e.g., “I agree with the utilitarian mindset of Mill.”). It is a very vague term, which could cover anything from the mood you’re in when you wake up in the morning to the ideology of your socio-political class. Philosophy deals with statements, explanations, arguments, theories; if you mean to refer to one of those things, say so.
- * Don’t use colloquial terms such as “a lot,” “okay” (or, “OK”) in academic writing; they are imprecise and do not communicate much about what you think.
- * Don’t use texting abbreviations and other shortcuts (for example: *i* instead of *I*; *ur* instead of *your*; *legit* instead of *legitimate*; etc.
- * ‘Bias’ is a noun; ‘biased’ is an adjective (example: “John is *biased* in his views on immigration.”)
- * ‘Conscious’ is an adjective; ‘consciousness’ is a noun. Neither is the same as ‘conscience’.
- * Avoid confusing ‘then’ and ‘than’.
- * “A part” is not the same as “apart.”

- * Learn the difference between “if” and “whether.”
- * Learn how to use apostrophes when forming possessives.
- * Don’t use the word ‘ideology’ (which means the political theories and values that characterize a sociopolitical group or class) when you simply mean “ideas” or “way of thinking.”
- * Avoid describing a philosopher’s position as “agreeable” (which means *pleasant*) when you mean to say that you *agree with* the philosopher’s position.
- * Avoid interjecting the word ‘yes’ in academic writing (example: “While, yes, I agree with Descartes’ rationalism, I don’t think his argument for God’s existence makes sense.”).
- * Don’t use the illogical phrase “based off of”; instead, use “based on.”
- * Avoid the phrase “we, as humans...” (e.g., “We, as humans, should take our civic responsibilities seriously and make sure we vote.”). Unless you are dealing with topic in which the distinction between humans and nonhumans (aardvarks? robots?) is important, ‘we’ implies that you are talking about human beings.
- * Avoid using “business speak” terms such as ‘proactive’, ‘incentivize’ and ‘impactful’.
- * Avoid the legalistic use of ‘said’ when ‘the’ will do.
- * Use double quotation marks (“ ”) to capture a word or passage from a source; use single quotation marks (‘ ’) either (1) to identify a quotation within a quotation (example: Maria said, “Johnny shouted ‘No way!’ as he stormed out of the room.”) or (2) to refer to a word rather than its meaning (example: ‘Philosophy’ has four syllables.).
- * Titles of books should be italicized (e.g., Kant’s *The Critique of Pure Reason*); the titles of essays or journal articles should be put in double quotation marks (e.g., Nagel’s “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”). The first letters of each word — except for prepositions, articles and conjunctions — should be capitalized.