



PHL 100: Introduction to Philosophy

Final Research Paper Assignment: Detailed Guidelines

For your final research paper, you are asked to write a paper of 1700-words (minimum word count—any paper more than 150 words short of this minimum will not be accepted as a complete paper) to 2000-words (maximum word count—you may exceed this without penalty only if it is essential to attaining the purpose of your paper). Your paper must cite the work of **at least four philosophers** studied during the course; there is no upper limit on the number of sources you may use. You have the option of writing a **position paper** or a **comparison essay**, depending on whether your plan is to argue in favor of an original position regarding the work and thought of at least four philosophers covered in the course or to comparatively evaluate the work of four or more philosophers. The topics below may be approached using either strategy; you may find that some will better lend themselves to a position paper (also known as an argumentative essay) and some will work better as a comparison essay. Choose the topic that most interests you and the strategy that works best for you.

Topic Areas

- 1) Plato, Hume, Kant, and Russell: What is human knowledge?
- 2) Kant, Mill, Aristotle, and Kierkegaard: What is the ethical life?
- 3) Sartre, James, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche: What is an authentic, autonomous individual?
- 4) Descartes, Hume, Searle, and James: What is consciousness?
- 5) Plato, Kant, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche: What is truth?
- 6) Plato, Descartes, Hume, and Nietzsche: What is the soul or self (conceived as an entity that is purely mental, spiritual, or nonphysical)?
- 7) Sartre, James, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche: What is the role and value of religious faith?
- 8) Descartes, Kant, Sartre, and Nietzsche: What is free will and why does it matter?
- 9) Socrates/Plato, Russell, Sartre, and Nietzsche: What is the role and value of philosophy?

This assignment is broken into two parts:

Part I includes the following elements:

- Title of the paper (please do not create separate title page). Special note: DO NOT title your paper, "Final Paper." Your title is important; it should give the reader an immediate snapshot of what the paper will say and attempt to draw the reader in.

- Introductory paragraph (including your thesis). This is a very important part of the paper--it should not be too short or too long (but probably at least five sentences). Begin by introducing the general topic and providing the reader with some rationale for why this topic, and what you will say about it, is worth thinking and reading about. Good writers usually begin with a "hook" in the first line to draw the reader in. You might pose an interesting or intriguing question, bring in an apposite quote, or make a controversial or surprising claim—even one that seems to go against your thesis. You will soon bring the reader around to what your position is when you state your thesis, which is usually very near the end of the first paragraph. The introductory paragraph should also provide some background on the topic in question that leads into the purpose of the paper. Make sure that the issue that your paper calls into question is crystal clear. Your thesis statement (your position on the issue) may be simple and straightforward, with all development following in body of the paper, or you may choose to forecast in the thesis itself the claims you will bring forward in support of the thesis in the argumentation sections.
- An informal list of possible sources. Don't worry too much about precise formatting here; this will be expected in the final draft, but here, the point is just for the instructor to see if you are headed in the right direction and possibly recommend additional resources that will be useful to you.

Part II, which is your completed final draft (that is, the finished version), should include the following:

- An introduction that states the issue being debated, identifies the issue's two or more sides, and makes an explicit claim (thesis) that the position paper or argumentative essay will support.
- The body paragraphs, which will present your sustained argumentation in support of your thesis. In a comparison essay, you will be mainly concerned with first summarizing and explaining the various philosophical views or positions you are comparing and contrasting, and then showing why the comparative claim you make in your thesis is true, or at least to be preferred over others. In a position paper, you will be concerned to address at least one opposing or alternative claim to what your thesis states and to both show why your position is right and the opposing view is wrong, or at least less acceptable than the position asserted in your thesis. (See below for more details.)
- A conclusion that drives home your main point and looks to the future.
- A complete and properly formatted works-cited page or list of references.

Whether you choose to write a position paper or a comparison essay, your thesis is an essential element of the paper. Focus in on the specific and significant issue you wish to address within your selected topic area (an issue is any claim that may be called into question). Your thesis should state a specific and significant point of view or position on the issue (or set of related issues) you have chosen to write about. In a position paper, the thesis will make an argumentative claim (that is, a debatable or even controversial claim); in a comparison essay, the thesis will make a comparative claim. Your paper should include analyses and discussion of terms, concepts, principles, theories, arguments, etc., that are importantly related to your topic area.

Remember that you will need at least four citations from four different Required Readings (works by the four philosophers in your selected topic area). You may include citations from other works by your selected philosophers or by other authors in addition to the four course readings, but you do not need more than the four course readings for full credit. The point of this research paper is to go *deeper*, not simply to sample more relevant reading selections. The goal here is to demonstrate your grasp of the particular philosophical ideas you are addressing as well as your overall attainment of course learning outcomes.

How to Write a Position Paper

This is a research paper in which you will address a particular issue related to a more general topic area. The paper should be written in a formal style, in the third-person voice, and it will present your original, considered solution or unique approach to solving the problem or settling the issue in question. It will be your considered opinion, but the main point of writing a position paper is not only to let others know your opinion or point of view on an issue or particular topic, but also to lay out, in a clear and logical manner, the reasons why you hold this point of view. The presentation of your “reasons why,” in other words, the sum total of evidence you can bring forward to support your position, plus a statement of the position itself, comprises what philosophers call an “argument.” A position paper is also known as an “argumentative essay.” As a quick reminder: A philosophical argument is simply giving reasons (the premises of the argument) for why a particular claim (the conclusion of the argument) should be taken as true.

The introductory paragraph should present the issue in question and include a clear and precise statement of your thesis, which is your position on the issue. Another essential element of the position paper or argumentative essay is a consideration of **at least one alternative position on the same issue**, and this is typically an opposing view. So in this paper, **you will assert and defend your own position, and you will also consider at least one opposing or alternative position on the issue and the argument(s) in support of that view**. Finally, you will show why you reject any opposing or alternative position and instead hold the one you do. For this assignment, if you do a position paper, you will be taking a stand that in some way connects all four of the philosophers you are covering. For example, you may think that only one of the four thinkers gets it right on some important philosophical question. In this case, your thesis might assert your agreement or approval of a particular theory or account, and your arguments will provide the reasons why you made the choice you did and why you rejected the alternative views. You might agree with a point on which all four agree, and your thesis would indicate this; you might also disagree with all four, and then your thesis would be that they all get it wrong, and your argumentation shows why, and so on. In a position paper, you will likely be arguing in favor of the view or views with which you agree most.

There are several different ways of organizing a position paper, but, after you have introduced your topic and given some background on why this topic is worth thinking and writing about, and then stated your thesis in the introduction, often the opposing view(s) are fairly presented first, and then your understanding of the issue follows. Your own position is then asserted and shown to be superior to the opposing view(s). This can be done in “block” or “point-by-point” fashion: use the organization style that best suits your purposes. You may also choose to present your positive argumentation first; just use the strategy that works best for your purposes. The conclusion of your paper will re-state your “expanded” thesis, setting it back into its more general framework with a look forward toward related concerns. Your conclusion should be brief, but it should leave the reader with the belief that your position satisfactorily settles the issue, solves the problem, and leads to a better state of affairs. You may also want to use descriptive headings for each of the major sections of the paper. But don't use the section heading, “Introduction” above your introductory paragraph: the title of your paper serves that purpose. And for the conclusion, don't just use the word, “Conclusion”; instead, just as in any other section heading, encapsulate the essence of the content of that section. Section headings are optional (but in a paper like this, which includes discussion of four different thinkers, it might help the organization of the paper).

Note that this is quite different from an informational report, an expository essay, or even a commentary or critique of a report or informative essay. **You will be writing about at least two sides of an issue** (usually the “pro” and the “con” positions), developing supporting evidence for both sides, analyzing, evaluating, and refuting competing arguments, and showing and explaining why your argument and the conclusion it supports (your thesis) is superior. So, for example, if your thesis is the assertion that Philosophers A and B get it right but Philosophers C and D get it wrong, you must consider at least one credible opposing side to this claim, and show why it may be safely rejected. For an excellent and detailed explanation (with

illustrative examples) of how to write a position paper or argumentative essay (the document uses the term “argument essay”), please read Pearson Publishing’s chapter on “Position Papers,” which is linked in the Final Research Paper module. It tells you everything you need to know, and if you follow the instructions here to the letter, you are sure to get a high mark on the paper, and you will have gained valuable knowledge about to construct an important and respected style of academic essay. Also linked in the course are two shorter documents, “Writing a Position Paper,” from Simon Fraser University (6 pages), and “Argumentative Essays,” (2 pages) from Purdue Online Writing Lab, a website that provides a wealth of helpful information about all aspects of academic writing.

How to Write a Comparison Essay

The method of comparison and contrast may be used to analyze, understand, and evaluate the ideas, theories and arguments of a philosophical thinker. In a comparison essay, you will consider both similarities and differences between different philosophies. You will begin with a brief formal analysis of the four views or philosophical approaches you are comparing and contrasting. Then add another level to the discussion by pointing out, analyzing, and interpreting relevant similarities and differences between or among the ideas and theories in question. Remember that the comparisons you make should make a point--the comparison is headed toward establishing something you observe or interpret about the ideas, theories, and approaches in question. You will also be stating your thesis in the introduction, but in this case, your thesis will make some claim (which is, of course, debatable) that relates the work of the four thinkers included in your topic area in terms of how they compare to each other on some specific issue. Your comparative thesis may focus more on the specific similarities and differences in the work and thought of each of the four philosophers in relation to a specific issue or philosophical idea or problem without deciding who “gets it right” or with which view you most agree.

In the body of the paper, you will be arguing for your comparative thesis. This means that you will be providing grounds (your evidence or support) for the comparative claims you make. A successful comparative essay will be strong in two areas in particular: (1) the originality and depth of the comparative claim(s) and (2) the quality of argumentation you bring forward to support those claims. A comparison essay that presents little more than a “laundry list” of features attributable to each of the four philosophers’ views will not receive high marks. You must go beyond this to say something specific and significant based on the comparative evidence. Please note that comparison essays often compare and contrast only two things; the challenge in this assignment, should you decide to use the comparison essay strategy, is to compare and contrast FOUR things—the views and ideas of four different philosophers. That said, it may make sense for you to put the four thinkers you are discussing into two categories (and this could mean that the four divide into two neatly divided positions, with two philosophers on one side and two others on the other side, or it may make sense to divide the four into a one-to-three ratio, with one philosopher on one side of things and three others on more or less the same page. It is possible that all four philosophical views are so disparate that there can be no less than four sides to the issue in question. If the four thinkers you are considering are all this different, it would likely be better to use the position-paper strategy.

Comparisons may be organized in block (also called “text-by-text”) or point-by-point style, sometimes called “lumping” and “splitting.” In using the block, or lumping, method, you will discuss all the details and aspects of interest in the work of one of your four philosophers, then move on to the work of the other three you are including in your comparison. As you move from the work of one thinker to another in the discussion, be sure to refer back to those already discussed. You are not simply writing a series of descriptions here; you are showing that something is the case about the ideas, arguments, or theories in question by comparing and contrasting them. In the point-by-point, or splitting, method, you alternate your discussion to focus on, for example, what each of the four has to say on a particular point or aspect of the issue in question. So you will be going through what each one has to say on a particular point in the same paragraph, and then move on to cover how each of the four weigh in on another point or element integral

to the issue in question.. Use whichever method works best to accomplish your expressive and analytical goals. It is crucial to keep in mind why the comparison contained in your thesis is revealing or illustrative of something important you have to say that relates the work and thought of the four philosophers in your topic area. There are three documents linked in the course that provide more details and helpful guidelines and suggestions for writing a comparison essay or comparative analysis: “How to Write a Comparative Analysis,” (2 pages) from Harvard College, “The Comparative Essay,” (2 pages) from the University of Toronto, and “Comparative Analysis” (14 pages) from Mississippi State University.

Organization and Formatting

It is important for you to state your thesis clearly and unequivocally at the beginning of the paper. Note that if you are doing a position paper, you may adopt some sort of “middle-ground position,” as opposed to taking a strictly “pro” or “con” stance, but you will have to carefully explain and delineate such a position since simply saying that both sides get some things right and hence they also get some things wrong could lead to your supporting a logically inconsistent view. It also risks being an insignificant thesis. A strong thesis is one that is both specific and significant: this means that the claim you are making, the position you are defending, is one with which an informed thinker may disagree. If your thesis merely states the obvious, or asserts what most people accept as common knowledge, it is not significant. This is a relatively short paper, so be sure to appropriately narrow the focus of your thesis so that you can accomplish what you need to do in the space allowed.

As noted above, the paper should be somewhere between 1700 and 2000 words, or about 5-6 typewritten, double-spaced pages (not including title page and works cited/references page). Also, to reiterate what is said above, to earn full credit for this assignment, your position paper or comparative essay must include at least one citation (probably more than this) from each of the four philosophers in your selected topic area, and this citation must be from the course Required Readings. So this is a minimum of four sources that must be cited in the paper for satisfying the basic assignment requirements. There is no upper limit. Just be sure you use credible and clearly traceable sources.

In addition, you are free to bring in personal experience if it is relevant to your argument. This means that you may use the first-person voice if it makes sense in your exposition. Otherwise, stick to the third-person voice; avoid use of the second person (“you,” “your,” etc.—note that these assignment guidelines *do* use the second-person voice, which is appropriate for such purposes).The paper should be typewritten and double-spaced, using MLA, APA, or CMS documentation style, with a type font similar to Times New Roman, 12 point. Be sure to cite all sources both within the text of the paper as well as on a works-cited page (MLA), list of references (APA), or bibliography (CMS). Avoid fancy fonts and flashy document-template formats, but you may include images, graphs, charts, or diagrams if they help establish a point. Be sure you have included all of the elements essential to writing strategy you have selected.

Review Rubric and Proofread before Submitting

It is essential that you carefully review the Final Research Paper Rubric (link is provided in course) both before you begin writing the paper and again, once you have completed it. It lays out, in specific detail, the criteria your paper must meet to achieve the highest possible score. If you fulfill all of the criteria in the “Outstanding” column, you will have written an “A” paper. If you feel that what you have written fails to meet the criteria you are attempting to satisfy, then it is time to go back and think things through more carefully and edit your paper accordingly. Finally, do not submit your paper without proofreading it. It is indeed a rare occasion when the first draft is perfect, or even the best one can do. An experienced writer will tell you that the paper gets better with every review and revision.