Grading Rubric

‘Inspired or advanced work’

A Tightly argued and focused paper, written in an efficient and effective style. Overall structure clearly presented to the reader. Original or creative lines of argument, explanation or analysis that are convincingly and substantively articulated and defended. Very few (if any) grammatical or spelling mistakes.

‘Strong attempt with minor flaws’

B Overall paper well structured and coherent. Thesis clearly stated and argued for. Presentation of coherent, relevant, and well-argued lines of justification, explanation and analysis. Arguments articulated clearly and well defended, with some level of sophistication and depth of analysis. Demonstration of a good understanding of the material and assignment. Few grammatical or spelling mistakes.

‘Satisfactory work’

C A cohesive and structured paper that may include some obscure or confusing lines of argument, but with an overall arc arguing for some coherent thesis. The majority of the paper is doing work in the overall argument, i.e., few (if any) sidetracks or irrelevant paragraphs. Arguments are presented, explained, and defended. The assignment is appropriately satisfied, with a sufficient level of understanding of the material demonstrated. Significant grammatical or spelling mistakes, but still largely coherent and legible.

‘Substandard’

D Unclear or poorly articulated thesis. Lack of overall structure in the paper. Superficial analysis or depth of argument. Assignment not fully addressed or completed. Poorly constructed or articulated arguments or explanations, with weak or no defense. Major grammatical and spelling mistakes.

‘Unacceptable’

Fail Failure to appropriately answer the questions or meet the requirements of the assignment. No demonstration of an understanding of either what qualifies as a philosophy paper, the basic gist of the assignment, or the material at hand. Incoherent or indecipherable grammar or form.
IRRELEVANT CRITERIA

Contrary to (what seems to be) popular opinion, grades in philosophy are not subjective — at least not in the sense students often take this to mean. What I am most interested in is how effectively you are able to articulate and defend particular philosophical positions. Your papers are graded based on the criteria listed above. It is also not true that in philosophy there are “no right or wrong answers.” That there may be more than one right answer does not entail that there are no wrong answers.

I am happy to discuss your paper grades with you. Please bear in mind, however, what is relevant to your grade (i.e., see above criteria). Here are some examples of considerations that are irrelevant to the evaluation of your paper. And yes, these are examples that students routinely ask me to take into consideration.

1. Effort

“Putting a lot of effort” into an assignment does not entitle you to a good grade on that assignment. (Though it may increase your chances of getting a good grade!) The amount of effort you put into an assignment is irrelevant to how I evaluate it. I expect everyone to work hard, and assume you all will. People in this class have a variety of skills and backgrounds. Some of you will be able to get by without putting too much effort into any given assignment (though it’s unlikely you’ll excel). Others may have to put a lot of work into each assignment. That’s just the way things are. I’m not judging you on how much work you put into each assignment; I simply evaluate the final product.

2. Future Plans

You want to go to med school? Law school? Graduate school? That’s great! I’m glad to have students in my class with high aspirations and a strong work ethic. However, let’s not get confused about causal direction. That you want to go to some kind of graduate school does not mean you are entitled to getting a high grade in my class! Students who ask me to consider their future plans when assigning their grades do themselves no favors. If I were to take seriously their request, then I would hold them to an even higher standard given my responsibility to honestly and accurately assess them for a particular graduate program. If you want me to grade you harder than everyone else in class, I suppose I would, though I don’t think this would be a wise strategy.

3. Personal Problems (at home, at work, etc.)

Though personal problems are irrelevant to how I evaluate your work, they may be relevant to your performance in the class. I am more than willing to make appropriate accommodations if you give me advance notice. I’m happy to do this, but you NEED TO LET ME KNOW UP FRONT! There may be some issues for which I will ask you to go to Center for Disability Services or to the Dean’s office so that we can work out an arrangement that is the most fair to you.
HOW TO DO WELL IN THIS CLASS

If you speak to former students of mine, you are likely to hear the following two things: (i) that I have complicated grading systems; (ii) that I am a hard paper grader. Both may be true (though I don’t think I’m that hard of a grader), but I design my courses so that the former will help blunt the impact of the latter. You will notice that there are many components of this course that are not graded yet factor into the overall grade. One intention is to provide a transparent way to reward hard work and attendance in class. (A second intention is to make the class more interesting by tailoring it to what piques student interest.) In short, to do well in this class you should do all the work and pay attention to the grading criteria.

MINIMAL CRITERIA FOR ‘B’ PAPERS

The following are necessary, though not sufficient, criteria for getting a grade of ‘B’ on a paper:

- Mastery of basic grammar;
- Sources cited correctly and appropriately;
- Coherent structure (i.e., your paper has an introduction, body and conclusion);
- Discernable thesis and argument for that thesis;
- Understanding the distinction between necessary and sufficient conditions.

The difference between getting a ‘C’ or a ‘B’ on a paper is writing well; the difference between getting a ‘B’ or an ‘A’ on a paper is writing well philosophically. A typical ‘B’ paper will be well written and contain coherent, competent arguments in support of the main thesis. A typical ‘A’ paper will be well written and contain insightful, original, or exceptionally clever arguments.

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

I am more than happy to write letters of recommendations for students. However, I want my letters to be meaningful to admission officers, so that they will have the most positive impact for students for whom I write letters. As a result, I will be very honest with you if you want a letter from me, and let you know if I don’t think I can write you a strong letter. If you want to keep open the possibility of getting a letter of recommendation from me, here are some guidelines:

- Attend every class, arriving before class starts. Success in graduate school is as much about diligence, hard work, and earnest participation as it is about intelligence and mastery of skill. If you can’t be bothered to attend all of my classes, do not expect a strong letter;
- Receiving an ‘A’ in my course does not entitle you to a strong letter; nor does a ‘B’ preclude it. There have been many students who I have given an ‘A’ to who would not receive a strong letter on my behalf, but there are also many students who have received ‘B’s that I would be comfortable writing strong letters for.