

Mastery: Explaining and Discussing the Ideas of Others

Philosophy papers and exams typically involve close engagement with, and critical discussion of, the ideas and arguments of the authors you are reading in class.

An essay prompt for a philosophy paper and an exam question for a philosophy course may have the same form. In each case, the question requires you to explain an idea you have encountered in the course and to engage critically with the reasoning used to support the idea. A basic form of these questions look like this:

Critically evaluate Rawls' argument for the two principles of justice.

In this question, the tasks are straightforward. First, you will want to make clear just what Rawls' argument is; then, you will want to critically evaluate the argument. We'll say more about how to "critically evaluate" below. Consider another example:

*"There are and can be only two ways of searching into and discovering truth"
(Bacon, *The New Organon*, 92). Discuss.*

This essay prompt is more ambiguous than the first, but the basic task will be the same: to make clear just what Francis Bacon claims in this passage, and to critically evaluate the reasoning he provides as support. Although the prompt ends with "Discuss," your paper should still provide a structured, argumentative treatment of Bacon's view.

In each case, the prompt is asking that you demonstrate **mastery** of the course material by articulating a philosophical position and unpacking the reasons the author provides for accepting (or rejecting) that position. Having done so, you are then expected to assess the position in question by evaluating the reasons used to support it. This might involve introducing a counterargument, providing additional reasons to accept the position in question, or even comparing the relevant position to a competing view to show why a reader should prefer one to the other.

EXPOSITION: WHY WE DO IT AND HOW TO DO IT WELL

As stated above, a philosophy paper or exam question typically requires you to demonstrate command of the course material. You should clearly articulate the main points the author in question is making, explain the reasons they provide in support of their position, and use this account to construct your own argument for or against the position in question. In courses in which you have spent considerable time discussing objections to the position in question, you may also be asked to assess the success of one or more of those criticisms.

When describing someone else's philosophical position, it is important you do so with **charity**. This means that you should provide the most generous account of the position you can muster *before* you advance arguments for or against it. It is important that you describe the ideas of others with charity to avoid building a "straw" version of the position that, while it looks somewhat like the position you will spar with, is a weak imitation. As far as possible, your exposition of a philosophical position should treat the

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position itself and the reasons advanced in support of that position with enough charity that someone who holds such a view would be willing to accept your representation.

Exposition of a philosophical position requires the use of **signposting** (e.g. “Collins’ first assumption is that...”) and **connective language** (e.g. “therefore,” “in virtue of this”) to make clear the logical relationships between the author’s points. This will sound like:

“Carnap holds that existence claims are either framework-external and thus meaningless, or framework-internal and thus either analytic or empirical.”¹

Notice that the sentence above sounds much different from the following:

*Nussbaum says **U, W, X**. When Nussbaum talks about **U**, she also says **Y**.*

The first passage is full of logical connectives (e.g. either, or, thus, etc.). In the latter passage, the reader gets no sense of the relevance of U, W or X to Y, other than that Nussbaum talks about U and Y at roughly the same time. Attempts at exposition that miss describing the *argumentative relationships* between an author’s points risk simply asserting the author’s view as if it were self-evident. Instead, your exposition should make explicit how each part of the author’s argument is related and how these points provide reason for accepting their view. This is true regardless of whether you will argue for or against the author’s view later.²

ACCURACY

Even though the person marking your assignment will have read the same course materials and perhaps delivered lectures on the topic of your assignment, your evaluation in a philosophy course will still hang, in part, on your ability to produce an accurate and well-supported representation of the positions you will defend or argue against. This is important both in papers that advance an interpretive thesis about a historical text and when you are arguing for or against a view held by a famous philosopher.

Whether you are making expository or evaluative comments about a philosophical position, you should aim to explain the author’s view in your own words, supported by citation of the relevant passages in their work as you go. Often, it will be preferable that you explain an author’s view in your own words rather than using an extended direct quote. You might have reason to use a direct quotation when the passage includes an especially effective or distinctive turn of phrase, or if a passage is so full of technical language that you are unable to rephrase it. You may also wish to introduce direct quotations to show you are not making up or misrepresenting a surprising claim.³

¹ Jonathan Schaffer, “On What Grounds What,” *Metametaphysics* 2009, 349n1

² Remember that your philosophy assignments should be narrow in scope. It is highly unlikely that you will need to describe the entirety of a philosopher’s argument. Usually a good philosophy paper will address just one piece of a philosophical argument and introduce other parts only where they are relevant to goal of understanding that one part.

³ For more detailed information about Academic Honesty and how to paraphrase effectively, see the **Academic Integrity** portal on the McMaster University website.

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ORIGINALITY

Occasionally, philosophy students are worried that they are expected to produce highly original insight into ancient philosophical problems. While philosophy is a highly creative discipline, you should not take your assignments and exams to be asking for entirely new theories. Instead, you can expect to be evaluated on your demonstration of mastery of the texts you have read in the course.

A strong philosophy paper (or exam answer) can be highly creative while demonstrating mastery of the relevant course material. Rather than simply restating the conclusions of the readings in your course, you might come up with a thesis that makes a novel criticism or provides new support for the position in question. You might also suggest an interesting way to read a historical work, or a new and valuable example that sheds light on the position you are unpacking. Thinking critically and independently about readings in this way shows you have a strong grasp of the course content.

HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

The papers you write in a class on the history of philosophy will have a slightly different form from those you write in other philosophy classes like Epistemology or Bioethics. Briefly, you may be asked to provide an answer to an interpretive question (e.g. what should we think lamblichus means by this passage?) rather than an argument for or against the position itself (e.g. is lamblichus' argument convincing?).

It is tempting to provide significant context when writing a historical paper, drawing in comments about the biography and historical situation of the author in question. This is not problematic in itself, but must be done with care in an undergraduate assignment. You will typically be better off making very brief remarks about the author's context at this stage of your philosophical career, because you are primarily being assessed on your ability to demonstrate **mastery** of the course material. Before drawing in contextual information, consider carefully whether that information makes a significant contribution to the interpretive point you intend to make. If it does not, consider leaving it out.

READING PHILOSOPHY: A FEW STRATEGIES

To write philosophy papers and answer philosophy exam questions effectively, you should make sure you have read carefully and understand the key readings in your course. Unfortunately, these readings might not be models of clear, accessible writing. Here are a few approaches to reading works of philosophy:

Active reading

While working your way through a course reading be sure you do not *just* read but rather do something active that requires and reflects understanding of what you are reading. For example, you might underline or highlight key concepts or remarks, or take notes as you go along. Be especially careful to keep track of the **assumptions**, **definitions**, **premises**, and **claims** the author puts forward, as these are the tools the author will use over the course of the reading to support their position. These will also be good places to apply pressure in a critical examination of the author's argument (e.g.

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the author might make unwarranted assumptions, introduce definitions that are too broad, or draw big conclusions from questionable premises).

Look for structure

Because philosophy papers (usually) follow a logical structure, it can be helpful to briefly stop to check your understanding at the end of each section of the reading, and even at the end of each paragraph you read. As you move from one paragraph to the next, consider writing one bullet point that sums up what happened in the paragraph, so that by the end of the section you have a structural view of what the author accomplished. The same goes for sections of a paper. Describing what happens in each section of a paper in your own words will lay out the author's big moves over the course of the reading and will give you accessible notes when you revise for an exam or assignment.

You might also consider **drawing a diagram** like a flowchart to represent the steps of the argument being advanced. If you are lucky, the reading will be arranged into sections that have one or two jobs, which will lend itself to creating a simple diagram.

Take notes in your own words

It might be tempting to simply copy the phrases you have underlined and save them together in a large document. By doing this, however, you are putting off the harder work of unpacking what the author has said. Instead of taking notes primarily in the form of direct quotations, try to take notes in your own words to help you to distill and digest what the author is arguing. The same goes for your philosophy lectures. This will also help you to avoid the trap of placing a very effective turn of phrase from your notes into a paper, only to find out it was a direct quotation from the reading!

Look for argumentative language

Take special note of places where the author uses **signposting** language ("I have argued that ...," "next, I will ...," "we will see that," etc.) as the author is likely using these to indicate the argumentative structure of their paper.

Keep an eye out for **connectives** ("however," "for example," "therefore"), which are used to show the relationship between clauses and sentences. Connectives play an especially important role in philosophy papers, as they usually indicate important logical relationships between the ideas being introduced or summarized.

Keep track of your questions

You may read a passage and think "that doesn't seem right," "I don't understand what this means," or "how could they possibly think that!" Keep track of these questions in the margins of your reading or in a notebook, with enough information for you to recall the basis of your question. You may find that your questions are answered as you proceed (perhaps even in the same paragraph)—but sometimes they are not. These are often great things to raise in tutorial. In addition, keeping track of your questions and reactions is helpful once it comes time to write your term papers, as you will be able to review what parts of your readings you wanted to challenge or explore in greater depth.