

# Phil 535 Short Assignment Options

I want you to be able to get two things from these short assignments: first and most importantly, I want you to be able to engage seriously with a broader swath of the course material than the fairly narrow slice of it that you'd dive in to for a paper. Even though the assignments below are targeted at practicing other more specific skills, I'm still looking for thoughtful philosophical engagement with the course material in each.

Second, I want to give you the opportunity to do philosophy in a number of different formats, and to get feedback on kinds of things you wouldn't typically get feedback on. Philosophical work is done in far more diverse genres of writing than we often realize, and both for professional and philosophical reasons it can be *really* valuable to think about how these genres differ.

Some of the assignments below might seem *a little* gimmicky, but I'm very happy to work with you to customize (most) any assignment until it feels more helpful to you. The goal is to give you enough scaffolding to target the skills that you most want to practice. One final note: these are smaller assignments, but I still want you to treat them as (polished drafts of) finished products in the same way you might a term paper.

## Assignment Overview *(more details below)*

### Research and Writing Skills

- **Paper Proposal** - write a proposal for a full or mid-length term paper (**required for everyone**)
- **Motivating Questions** - explain the nature and significance of a question you'd like to answer.
- **Summary** - write a philosophically thorough, concise summary of a paper (or pair of papers)
- **Objections/Critical Response** - raise an objection, problem, or critical discussion
- **Constructive Engagement** - respond to a paper by extending, connecting, illustrating, or strengthening the argument.

### Engaging Others

- **Conference Comments** - write a reply to a paper in the style of (eg.) APA Comments
- **Referee Reports** - write a discussion of a paper in the style of a journal referee report
- **Calibrating Explanations** - explain an idea, view, or problem to four different audiences

### Research as Pedagogy

- **Syllabus Fragment** - design a fragment of an undergraduate course
- **Seminar Handout** - create a handout for a grad seminar
- **Writing Public Philosophy** - write a piece of philosophy for a public (or general) audience
- **Materials for New Audiences** - free space! write for an online resource, design an assignment design, draft a lecture, propose multimedia material, etc.

## **Writing and Research Skills**

Each mini-assignment in this category aims to provide you with something that you could (in one way or another) use as a springboard for a future paper. More generally, each assignment will give you an opportunity to practice some component skill of research writing in a more targeted way than usual.

In lots of what we're asked to write, we're taking on more than one of the tasks below at any given time. Although that is in many cases inevitable, my hope is that you'll be able to use these assignments to focus on really finessing specific skills within loose constraints. So, as much as possible, try to avoid letting these mini-assignments blob into general "response papers". (Imagine instead, maybe, writing a section of a term paper.)

### **A. Paper Proposal. ~1,500 words**

Every student enrolled in the course will need to submit a paper proposal *no matter which track you've chosen to complete*. Even if you haven't opted to devote your attention to a (short or long) term paper for this course, writing a paper proposal will help synthesize some of your thoughts on the threads we've been exploring, provide an opportunity for us to continue a conversation about the material, and lay a foundation for a paper you might write in the future. And, as with all of the other short assignments, the goal of this is to target other more general skills. In particular: writing a paper proposal like this will help you practicing motivating and explaining fledgling research ideas to a third party, and will hopefully help cultivate useful habits of recording ideas for the benefit your future self.

**In these proposals, I'm *certainly* not expecting you to have a fully worked out argument, but I'd like you to at least (i) explain and motivate the question you're interested in, (ii) sketch the structure of your argument or the approach you propose to take, and (iii) demonstrate familiarity with some of the core problems or literature you expect to tackle.**

For applied examples in this genre, think about: extended conference abstracts, write-ups for an advisor convincing them you're ready to pursue a paper topic, pitching an idea for a paper you don't have time to write *quite yet* to your future self, etc.

### **B. Motivating Questions. 1,000 - 1,500 words**

For this assignment, you'll explain the nature and significance of a question, problem, or puzzle. Why does it matter? Why is it interesting? Why is it hard? Who should care?

A few tips:

- (a) This will (of course!) involve some summarizing, but keep in mind that the goal of describing existing work in the context of *motivating* a problem may not be to provide your reader with a sense of *every* important twist and turn in the literature. Rather, you want your reader to understand enough of the *story* to see what is at stake, what is exciting, and why it might not be

obvious what comes next. It is a common trap (at least for me!) to become so concerned with doing justice to all of the relevant nuances of some debate *right* out of the gate, that you fail to make the question gripping to newcomers. (Nuance is important, but there are always choice points about where your reader should encounter it!) You can aim for *narrative precision* even if it means briefly postponing philosophical precision.

- (b) Notice that there are a few very different audiences you can have in mind when you're motivating a problem. For example, you might think of yourself as writing the introductory section of a paper: there, you're trying to get your reader excited enough to care about the progress you're going to make, but you're also speaking to a mixed audience of generalists and specialists. Or you might think of yourself as motivating the problem to someone encountering it for the first time: think about writing a paper that might be assigned in a graduate survey course, or for a venue like *Philosophy Compass*. For this assignment, though, you might find it most interesting to think about how to motivate the question to your future self: write something that (eg. two summers from now when you have free time, and dig up your notes from the seminar) will remind you why you thought it would be exciting and productive to pursue this problem further. (And give you enough context to dive back in!)
- (c) It may be that for this, you wind up motivating a problem that is connected to but isn't directly tackled in a paper we've read (eg. motivating a problem for a paper we've read), but it's also wonderful if you want to try to motivate a problem that the readings do address: not everyone cares about these questions for the same reasons, and often for these well trodden puzzles (eg. composition) it is tempting to skip the motivating step entirely. It is always helpful to practice motivating things that are assumed in the literature to be self-evidently interesting -- that kind of task is a huge part of (eg) motivating your research on the academic job market, but also keeping yourself excited in long-haul research projects.

### **C. Summaries. 1,000 words**

Summaries *seem* like they might not be as philosophically demanding as (eg.) coming up with a clever objection, but (I find!) they often require just as much creativity and care. Consider the challenges involved in:

- writing the section of your paper where you have only a handful of words to charitably capture the many moving parts of the paper you're responding to, or
- writing a summary of a paper that is important but not central to your dissertation, thorough enough that you won't lead your future self astray, but concise enough that you won't constantly have to re-read *every* thing in your bibliography.
- summarizing segments of the literature for a co-author, as you identify relevant sources
- Doing any of the above for literature you're not completely immersed in: think about summarizing historical sources, papers outside of your field or subfield, etc.

The aim of this task is to produce a concise, thorough, and accessible summary of the main argument(s) of one or two papers from the course (or a closely related one not on the syllabus). Think of these summaries as providing something you could pull from for a longer paper, or notes thorough enough for the latter two tasks above. Ideally, a reader should get a clear picture of the core contribution and structure

of the paper(s) from the first paragraph of your summary (see what you can do in < 250 words!), and then a birds-eye-view of the main moves in the rest.

The word limit on this one is an *upper* limit!

#### **D. Objections/Criticisms. 1,000 - 1,500 words**

This one (like E below) should be fairly straightforward: raise and discuss an objection or critical reply to an argument or view from our readings. You don't need to spend a lot of time summarizing the whole paper in this, just the bit that is relevant for making your critical point.

Be sure you aim your criticism at the strongest or most charitable version of the author's argument/view, and focus on laying out the *clearest* version of your criticism. If you have space, try to reserve the last bit of the assignment for (i) describing the available options for response, and/or (ii) saying what you think has gone wrong / should be fixed. For many of you this will be a really familiar kind of task: think of the final product as forming the core critical section of a response-based term paper, where you set up the exciting positive stuff you'll be doing later on.

If you decide to do this short assignment, I suggest taking some time to think about whether you could frame the same point positively/constructively (as below) rather than negatively/critically, and be deliberate about why this is the best way to frame your contribution.

#### **E. Constructive Engagement. 1,000 - 1,500 words**

This one (like D above) should be fairly straightforward. Replies to existing literature can take many forms, and needn't always be purely negative. For example, you might advance the conversation by (a) re-presenting the author's arguments with more minimal premises, (b) showing that the argument handles more (or different) cases than they anticipate, (c) connecting the argument to ideas in another field or subfield, (d) providing a better motivating case or illustration of the view, etc. Again: you needn't summarize things that aren't directly relevant for your point, and you should think about the final product as forming a kind of seed-core for a future paper.

If you decide to do this short assignment, I suggest taking some time to think about whether you could frame the same point negatively/critically (as above) rather than positively/constructively, and be deliberate about why this is the best way to frame your contribution.

## **Engaging Others**

The idea for each short assignment in this section is to begin thinking about other genres of philosophical work and writing. In particular, they focus on environments where we engage with each others' work: in giving comments at conferences, writing referee reports for peer-reviewed journals, explaining ideas to colleagues from different backgrounds, and collaborating/communicating online. Here's where things might seem a little more gimmicky, but the hope is to take the edge off of some of the interactions that can feel very high-stakes for early career folk, but about which we get very little explicit guidance.

### **A and B. Conference Comments and Referee Reports.**

We're frequently called on to formally engage with others' work in two different settings: in comments at conferences or workshops, and in referee reports for journals. You're likely to have a few opportunities to do the former throughout graduate school, and ideally won't be called on to do the latter until later on.

Both formats involve engaging with authors with different aims in mind than when we engage in eg. Q&A and written work. In giving comments at a conference, we're asked to (i) help the author, (ii) help the audience, and (iii) set the stage for a productive Q&A. In writing a referee report, our first job is to help the editor come to an informed decision on a submission, while also providing charitable and constructive feedback to the author. In the former case, you're responding to the author in front of a (potentially) large and varied audience. In the latter, you're (in principle) anonymous to the author. Navigating how these differences might tempt you to handle the task differently and thinking about when and whether they should is important -- not just for contributing to a collegial professional environment, but for helping you understand what you're putting in to and getting out of this kind of engagement.

In the "Advice Pile" document (available on Canvas), there are links to some great guides and discussions of both -- I encourage you especially to read the guide from Lewis Powell ("Referee Reports: A Beginners Guide").

#### Comments:

As if you have ten minutes (eg. APA) to deliver your comments; aim for between 1,000 and 2,000 words. (I think 2,000 is a little long, but since the papers you're reading for this class are substantially longer than what you'd usually be asked to give 10 minutes of comments on, its ok to push it a little!)

#### Referee Reports:

See Lewis Powell's guide for advice about length. However, for this assignment, keep it around 1000 words. I'm going ask that you only write reports for published papers (none of the manuscripts we're reading, unless they're by me -- in which case, critical feedback is always fun!). That means your recommendation will be a little artificial, but it may be a helpful exercise to think about how even highly-polished, published papers might be improved! (And perhaps reassuring to realize that everyone has a different (and more or less unreasonable) metric for when something is "done".)

**C. Calibrating Explanations.** 1,000 Words (roughly ~250 each)

This assignment is broadly inspired by [this video](#) (and this [series](#) more generally).

We frequently have to introduce ideas in a huge variety of contexts, to *very* different audiences, with *very* different resources and time constraints. (At social events and conferences, new acquaintances will ask you what you're working on or thinking about. Your peers, students, and faculty will ask you to describe a paper you read recently. In written work, you'll sometimes have space to spend 750 words laying out the motivating puzzle, but other times you won't be able to spare more than 250 (#PacificAPAstruggles) -- and so on.) These are all *radically* different audiences and contexts, and demand different things of us both philosophically and stylistically.

In this assignment, you'll chose a problem, case, puzzle, or debate from the course and introduce it:

- (i) to students in your Phil 101 course, in a hallway after class
- (ii) to a mixed group of philosophers in an elevator at a conference
- (iii) to a metaphysician you know who hasn't read this literature recently
- (iv) in a paper with a tight word limit (eg. Analysis)

There will of course be overlap between these, but the goal of the assignment is to get you think hard about how the questions you focus on, the examples you use, and the jargon you introduce (or presuppose) will differ in each case. Eg. the most exciting thing about the problem of material constitution for a metaphysician might really different from what is most exciting about it to your students. **(You're welcome to submit audio recordings for (i) - (iii), if you like.)**

(Tip: You might find it easier to work backwards.)

## **Research as Pedagogy**

One of the things you'll sometimes hear about graduate survey courses is that they aim to expose you to enough material to prepare you to teach an undergraduate course in the area. If that is part of what you'd like to get out of this class, the short assignments in this section will help you begin to think about how to build materials for undergraduates on the basis of what we've covered.

More generally, though, the aim of the assignments in this section is to push you to think about the philosophical work that goes in to different sorts of pedagogical projects (including public philosophy). As in the "Calibrating Explanations" assignment above, it can be really challenging to find a thread through complex material that is audience-appropriate without being misleading. And ultimately, the task of developing materials for students isn't very different from what we do when we write papers or give talks: in both cases, you're trying make something *hard* seem compelling and intelligible to an audience that is both less invested in and less familiar with the topic than you.

Finally: because these assignments are a bit harder to map to word count, talk to me if you're planning to do one!

### **A. Syllabus Fragment.**

Design a fragment of a syllabus for an undergraduate course on the basis of what we've covered in (some part of) this seminar. (For example, you might use our first few weeks as a jumping-off point to develop a 4-week unit on the metaphysics of material objects in a 200-level course, or our last weeks as the foundation for a unit on Social Metaphysics, or on Philosophy and Social Science, etc.) Try to be thoughtful about what kinds of readings and assignments will be appropriate for your target students.

(I'll note that although this seems a little gimmicky, designing sample syllabi is a fun but difficult part of creating a job market dossier, so it can be valuable to try your hand at it early on.)

### **B. Seminar Handout.**

This one is pretty self-explanatory, and likely a familiar kind of task for many of you. For this assignment, you'll create a handout as if you were leading seminar discussion on one of the papers assigned for the course. The main thing to focus on here is being *really* thoughtful about the way a seminar handout might differ from a handout in a conference presentation. You'd likely include critical remarks and questions of your own, but the main focus is on setting up a clear and accurate path through the paper. If done well, creating handouts like this can often be helpful prep for writing a paper, and a good source of note for your future self.

If you decide to do this short assignment and are willing to draft your handout in advance of the

session where we discuss the paper you're covering, it would be awesome for you to lead discussion, but of course that is not required.

### **C. Writing Public Philosophy. ~1,000-1,500k**

Increasingly, there is a demand for philosophical writing for a public audience (that is; for interested readers outside of the traditional university or classroom environment). There are plenty of great examples of this genre, especially in fields like ethics, aesthetics, and social and political philosophy. Writing about metaphysics for a public audience brings its own challenges, but can be a really exciting way to learn to see the literature in a different way, to practice important pedagogical and writing skills, and to think (again!) about what makes these questions interesting. For this assignment, you can write about any puzzle, problem, question, topic (etc) from the course, as if writing for an adult audience outside of the university. For inspiration, you might check out articles on AEON: one of my favorites with a metaphysical bent is "[What Constitutes an Individual Organism in Biology](#)".

### **D. Materials for New Audiences.**

This is a bit of a free space: if you think of something you'd like to try (balanced for workload with the other short assignments) broadly connected to creating materials for an undergraduate or public audience, I'm super happy to let you do that. Some things you might consider trying: writing a section of a scholarly resource (like IEP, the SEP, or Philosophy Compass) aimed at upper-level undergraduates or first year graduate students, developing an assignment or handout for an intro course, sketching a proposal for a multimedia resource (eg. like [WiPhi](#), [History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps](#), or [PhilosophyBites](#)), drafting part of an in-class lecture, etc.