

California State University, Stanislaus
Department of Philosophy
Assessment Plan and Report
2006-2007

MISSION

Our primary mission is to motivate an enthusiasm for rigorous philosophical study that promotes personal and intellectual growth, significant improvements in reading and writing, and personal investments in intellectual honesty and thoughtful analysis.

PROGRAM GOALS

1. Provide a sound philosophical education for majors, with an emphasis on the historical formation and contemporary analysis of classic philosophical problems.
2. Provide a suitable range of challenging courses in support of the general education humanities curriculum and other academic programs.
3. Involve students in humanistic methods of inquiry, emphasizing the development of self-reflective capacities in the service of critical reading, writing and analysis.
4. Promote an enriching and supportive environment for active engagement in the service of professional teaching, research, and scholarship.
5. Promote on-going philosophical conversations within the profession and contribute thoughtful analysis within the intellectual community of the university.

STUDENT LEARNING GOALS

1. Students will improve their critical ability to read and interpret primary texts, and to analyze and write effectively about philosophical problems.
2. Graduates of the major will show improvement in their understanding of significant developments and ideas in the history of Western philosophy.
3. Graduates of the major will demonstrate the capacity for in-depth reading and analysis of major thinkers in the history of philosophy.
4. Students will exhibit a reflective attitude toward philosophical practices and questions of value.

WHAT DATA WERE COLLECTED, AND HOW?

- A) Goal and objective chosen for assessment during 2006-07:
- 1) Improve the student's critical ability to read and interpret primary texts, and to analyze and write effectively about philosophical problems. (Goal 1)
 - 2) Philosophical Writing (Objective 3)
- The department developed an assessment rubric for assessing student writing and a narrative explaining the meaning of the rubric. The rubric rates student progress on eight dimensions we consider essential to successful philosophical writing.
- B) The assessment process for AY 2006-2007:
- 1) During Fall 2006 the Philosophy faculty met several times to review and revise the writing rubrics. We looked at draft rubrics of our own design and rubrics from other philosophy programs. We discussed these samples in relation to our practical experiences with student writing, and developed a working draft of the writing rubric with an explanatory narrative.
 - 2) During Spring 2007 we produced a consensus rubric with an explanatory narrative (see appendices). We implemented the final rubric at the end of the semester for all courses in the major.

- 3) In order to produce a comprehensive view of student writing abilities, and to test for consistency between raters, we rated a final paper from each class in the major for each student in the major.
- 4) Raters (the instructor who had assigned the paper) were instructed to fill out the rubric so data could be gathered, tabulated, and shared with faculty in Fall 2007.

HOW OUR FACULTY IS USING THE DATA? WHEN DID FACULTY MEET TO DISCUSS FINDINGS?

Since student writing is our primary form of assessment—providing developmental information about areas where we can improve our students' abilities to engage in critical analysis, along with summative information about student performance—we think about writing constantly. No doubt, our interest in this goal stems from the fact that assigning and grading student writing is such a central aspect of our professional work. The assessment activities that we conducted over the past academic year afforded us an opportunity to discuss student writing as a department faculty. While the specific numerical results have not surprised us, they do highlight issues we had not previously discussed as a department, and afford us an opportunity to consider specific actions to take in our continuing effort not just to *assess*, but also to *improve* student writing. The Department met to review the initial data in September 2007.

WHAT RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING STUDENT LEARNING WERE MADE?

A) Initial results:

- 1) Three notable results emerged from our analysis of the data.
 - a) Issues with basic writing mechanics:
On average, scores pertaining to student skills are lower in dimensions related to writing mechanics, organization and focus (1-3), and higher in dimensions related to philosophical thinking (5-8).
 - b) Broad disparity in skills:
While some student papers were rated in the mid-range of the scale, significant numbers were rated on the high and low ends of the scale.
 - c) Need to revise the instrument:
While we found the rubric results somewhat informative, further revisions to the rating instrument should allow for greater subtlety in our ratings and more useful information.
- 2) Proposed actions:
 - a) Faculty members will utilize more class-time instruction to help students understand expectations with regard to written work, emphasizing the importance of disciplined grammar, organization and focus.
 - b) The department will develop a handout that addresses writing expectations and common problems in student written work. Last year we developed an explanation of the numeric categories for our rubric. This year we will develop a student-friendly handout covering the areas on the lower half of our rubric, explaining both common problems and successful strategies for avoiding those problems.
 - c) We agreed that providing more structure for writing assignments could help ameliorate some of the organizational problems we see in student papers. Faculty will begin experimenting with more structured assignments.
 - d) We will seek an appropriate book to “adopt” describing the basics of philosophical writing—one that includes instruction in grammatical focus and organization. While most of us currently provide students with supplementary material pertaining to effective writing practices, we agreed to make a more concerted effort to reference this information consistently and repeatedly. Our initial proposal is to adopt a book by Zachary Seech,

Writing Philosophy Papers, 4th edition, as our common point of reference, and to instruct students with writing difficulties to acquire and consult this book.

- e) The department will revise the draft “writing rubric” during Fall 2007, and will continue fine-tuning it until we are confident it provides accurate and meaningful information regarding student writing at an appropriately subtle level of detail. Such a rubric will not only facilitate communication with our students, but will also help us tailor our instructional strategies for specific clusters of students whose work reflects specific writing issues shared in common. This latter advantage holds particular promise for the improvement of student writing since it will help us fine-tune the precise character of writing assignments to address special group needs without sacrificing our expectations with respect to the ultimate written product (as a measure of student learning).
- f) We will continue to administer a “writing rubric” to students in the major at the end of each semester. This will allow us to assess for improvements in student writing over time. This longitudinal study will track the improvement of writing as a student moves through the major. Our other students, who comprise the bulk of our FTES, should benefit as well from these adjustments to our focus on writing instruction as we take successful strategies from coursework in the major and apply these to the larger range of courses we offer in support of the General Education program.

CONCLUSION

The development of the “writing rubric” has facilitated conversations at the department level reflecting broadly shared issues with student writing. The faculty are engaged by this particular learning objective, since it clearly represents an important and challenging aspect of our work. We can see how our rubric might provide useful information about student writing and allow us to target recurring problems we encounter in this area. Since philosophical thinking is primarily communicated through philosophical writing we are determined to keep our attention focused on this learning objective—revising the rubric, gathering and analyzing the data—until we are satisfied the instrument can tell us what we need to learn about the writing deficiencies of our students. We expect to continue administering this rubric for some time.

Our effort to articulate an agreed-upon measure for assessing student writing has revealed that we share similar experiences with regard to student writing abilities. But we also think it is important that our process not impose specific departmental writing standards or expectations on our faculty members. Such an imposition would undermine something we consider essential in high quality philosophical training, namely, exposure to different styles of thinking and to different expectations regarding communication. Nonetheless, in so far as our conversations provide a forum for discussing and sharing information about this critical aspect of our professional work, and in so far as the information we generate can provide useful tools for the ultimate improvement of student writing, the process has been and should continue to be of benefit to our students and faculty.

APPENDICES

- 1) Curriculum map: Philosophy Department Learning Goals Rubric
- 2) Assessment tool: Philosophy Department Assessment Rubric, Student Learning Goal #1, Objective #3, ‘Philosophical Writing’
- 3) Narrative explanation of the rubric categories

PHILOSOPHY MAJOR Learning Goals Matrix	High (primarily evaluative) relevance (H), moderate (primarily developmental) relevance (M), and little or no relevance to listed courses (blank). Key assessment methods are indicated for high relevance.	LOGICAL ANALYSIS	HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS	CORE PROBLEMS	READING & ANALYSIS	ADVANCED READING, WRITING, & ANALYSIS	CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS	VALUE INQUIRY	CAPSTONE PAPER
Learning Goals	Learning objectives	PHIL 2100 (Logic)	PHIL 2200 (Ancient) PHIL 2230 (Modern) PHIL 3100 (Introduction to Continental Philosophy)	PHIL 3300 (Knowledge) PHIL 3400 (Ethics) PHIL 3500 (Mind)	PHIL 3000 (Reading and Analysis)	PHIL 4200.001 PHIL 4200.002 (Advanced Studies) Two Sections Required	PHIL 4150 (Phenom.) PHIL 4260 (20 th) PHIL 4300 (Language) PHIL 4960 (Sen. Sem.) Two course minimum	PHIL 4050 (Envi. Ethics) PHIL 4450 (Eastern) PHIL 4500 (Art) PHIL 4600 (Feminism) PHIL 4700 (Latin Amer.) PHIL 4800 (Nature) Choose One	Senior Capstone Paper
1. Improve critical ability to read and interpret primary texts, and to analyze and write effectively about philosophical problems.	Logical thinking and argumentation	H Exams/Assigned Writing		M					
	Critical reading skills and philosophical comprehension		M	M	H Assigned Writing	H Assigned Writing	M	M	M
	Philosophical writing	M	M	H Term Paper	M	H Term Paper	M	H Term Paper	H Capstone Paper
	Ability to ask and respond to thoughtful questions		M	M	M	M	M	M	H Capstone Paper
	Ability to motivate, frame and develop a philosophical issue		M	M	M	M	M	M	H Capstone Paper
	Comparison & evaluation of philosophical positions		M	H Term Paper			H Assigned Writing	M	
2. Improve understanding of significant developments and ideas in the history of Western philosophy.	Contextual knowledge of the history of philosophy		H Assigned Writing		M	M	M		
	Knowledge of historical and contemporary articulations of philosophical issues & ideas		M	H Assigned Writing			H Assigned Writing	M	
	Ability to track a philosophical problem through its historical development		M	H Term Paper					M
3. Demonstrate the capacity for in-depth reading and analysis of major thinkers in the history of philosophy.	In-depth knowledge of at least two major thinkers in the history of philosophy		M		M	H Assigned Writing	M		M
	In-depth analysis of a philosophical problem		M	H Term Paper	M	M	M	M	M
4. Exhibit a reflective attitude toward philosophical practices and questions of value.	Reflective orientation toward philosophical practices			M	M		H Term Paper/Class Assign./Discussion		
	Reflective orientation toward value questions			M				H Term Paper/Class Assign./Discussion	

**Philosophy
Writing Rubric
Spring 2007**

Paper Title _____

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Level	Writing Mechanics	Organization /Structure	Focus/ Framing	Addressing the Assignment	Links to course material	Supporting Reasons for Claims	Depth of Analysis	Critical Engagement
3	Clear	Well-organized	Excellent	Complete	Creative and strong	Convincing reasons	Interesting and compelling	Substantial
2	Minor errors	A few gaps	Good	Nearly complete	Competent	Some, but needs more support	A noticeable effort	Some
1	Several errors	Several gaps	Vague	Some significant gaps	Minimal	Not compelling	A minimal effort	Little
NP	Significant errors	Significant problems	Lacking	Incomplete	Haphazard/ inaccurate	None	No discernable effort	No critical engagement
Additional Comments	Grammar	Title	Thesis/focus		Content		Explanations	Methodological self-awareness
	Spelling	Transitions	Introduction		Accuracy		Implications	Evaluation of evidence
	Proofreading	Flow of ideas	Conclusion		Summaries		Complexities	Potential objections
	Citations	Voice	Stakes		Supporting references		Exploration	Awareness of own assumptions
								Awareness of text's assumptions
Other comments:								

**PHILOSOPHY
WRITING RUBRIC NARRATIVE
SPRING 2007**

Three

1) *Mechanics*

A well-written paper with clear language.

2) *Organization*

A well-organized paper with an engaging title, a logical flow of ideas, natural transitions, and an appropriate voice for the intended audience.

3) *Focus/Framing*

The paper has a clear and meaningful thesis statement, an obvious introduction and conclusion, and clearly communicates what's at stake. The paper has a creative and interesting title.

4) *Addressing the assignment*

The paper fully addresses the required topic, covering the main aspects of the assignment completely and accurately.

5) *Links to course material*

There are excellent and/or creative uses of course materials/ideas, accurate summaries, and strong supporting references.

6) *Supporting reasons for claims*

The paper provides convincing reasons for its claims, with strong support that leads to a definite conclusion.

7) *Depth of analysis*

The paper successfully explores several points in depth, and/or explores interesting implications, consequences, and complexities.

8) *Critical engagement*

The paper exhibits methodological self-awareness, critically evaluates evidence and reasons, and addresses several potential objections.

Two

1) *Mechanics*

There are only a few minor grammatical, spelling, proofreading, or citation errors.

2) *Organization*

The paper is generally well organized, ideas flow smoothly, and there are only a few gaps in the reasoning. The title is appropriate to the topic. The intended audience will be able to comprehend the paper, although the paper may assume a little too much background knowledge.

3) *Focus/Framing*

The paper has a satisfactory thesis statement, introduction and conclusion, and competently addresses the importance of the issue.

4) *Addressing the assignment*

The main aspects of the assignment are covered well and accurately. Only a couple of significant points are missing/incomplete.

5) *Links to course material*

The paper uses course material competently, including relevant summaries and some supporting references.

6) *Supporting reasons*

The paper provides several credible reasons to support its position.

7) *Depth of analysis*

The paper makes an effort to explore some points in depth, and also touches on some of the complexity and implications of the issue.

8) *Critical engagement*

The paper makes some effort to evaluate its own reasons and evidence and to address potential objections.

One

1) Mechanics

There are several and/or significant grammatical, spelling, punctuation and/or citation errors.

2) Organization

There are several gaps in the reasoning, and/or transitions may be abrupt, but the paper is still fairly comprehensible. The title may not be imaginative. The target audience isn't directly addressed, and/or they will have a difficult time finding access to the material.

3) Focus/Framing

The thesis statement is descriptive and/or vague, and there may be only a partial introduction and conclusion. What is at stake in the issue may not be clear.

4) Addressing the assignment

The response addresses some aspects of the assigned topic, but there are some significant gaps in the response as well.

5) Links to course material

A minimal amount of course material has been included and the summaries may have inaccuracies; references are not helpful to the argument.

6) Supporting reasons

An effort has been made to provide supporting reasons, but they aren't convincing, and/or evidence/examples are restricted to practical considerations.

7) Depth of analysis

The paper only offers sporadic details about one or two main ideas and doesn't explore the complexity or the implications of the issues.

8) Critical engagement

Very little evaluation of the reasons and evidence provided; potential objections are not addressed. No methodological self-awareness, and little awareness of assumptions in the text.

Not Passing

1) Mechanics

There are significant problems with the grammar, spelling, and/or proofreading that make the ideas in the paper difficult to understand. There are significant problems with citations. The paper doesn't meet college level expectations for writing mechanics.

2) Organization

There are significant problems with the organization, flow and transition of ideas such that the paper is difficult to understand and doesn't meet college level expectations. The title is inappropriate, misleading, or uninteresting. The target audience won't be able to understand the topic, or the reason why this topic is an issue. The writing won't capture their interest or attention.

3) Focus/Framing

The paper doesn't have a thesis statement, and/or lacks an introduction and conclusion. Also, the paper doesn't address what is at stake in the issue.

4) Addressing the assignment

There are several significant gaps in coverage and/or some key ideas have been misunderstood, or the paper doesn't address the assigned topic.

5) Links to course material

References to course material are haphazard/inaccurate.

6) Supporting reasons for claims

The paper has no supporting reasons for its position, and/or reasons are primarily statements of the author's opinion.

7) Depth of analysis

The paper doesn't successfully explore the details of the material.

8) Critical engagement

The paper contains no evaluation of reasons and evidence, and there seems to be no awareness of assumptions, or potential objections.