

Phil 2890 – First writing assignment

Assignment: Write an argumentative essay relating to a topic we have discussed in class. The paper should be between 1000 and 1800 words. This means that double-spacing with reasonable font and margins you should be aiming for 3-5 pages. And yes, the length does matter for grading purposes.

This paper is due by the beginning of class on Thursday, March 3rd. You must email a copy of the paper to me (PDF or Word, or an easily readable text format) by that time. Ideally, you will come to office hours to talk with me about your paper or schedule an appointment to meet with me some other time though this is not a requirement.

Writing instructions that apply to all professional writing apply. Carefully proofread your paper. YES, I care about spelling and grammar. But don't be a slave to silly grammar rules. Grammar rules are meant to make sentences more clear and more easily understood. If you need to break a rule to be more clear, do so. For example, most grammar books will say that "more clear" is a mistake in the previous two sentences. I think it sounds better than "clearer" here, so I am using it. The defense that "it sounds better to me" will sometimes work (if the reader agrees with you) but you are always safe using the proper construction and outside this class I would recommend "proper" grammar if you care about things like your job.

All word processors have spelling and grammar checks built in and if you don't use them you are just embarrassing yourself. But be sure to independently check the spelling and grammar on your own. Sometimes the checkers are wrong and they are guaranteed to miss certain kinds of errors (like using "their" instead of "there").

Writing instructions that generally apply in philosophy apply here. It is especially important to be very clear and precise. Say exactly what you mean. The "beauty" of the prose is not that relevant. The logical structure of the argument and its readability are much more important.

There are many resources available online for how to write a good philosophy paper. Here are three that I have read and largely agree with:

<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

<http://www.sfu.ca/philosophy/writing.htm>

<http://www.uwm.edu/~cbagnoli/paperguidelines.html>

With regards to this particular paper, since it is a short, argumentative paper, a few special instructions that do not always apply, do apply

1) Do not bother writing an introduction. Get right into your argument.

That being said, it should be clear throughout your paper what you are arguing for and precisely where you are in your argument at any given point in the paper. If I am

halfway through your paper and do not know your conclusion, this is bad news. If I finish your paper and have to go back to figure out your conclusion, this is especially bad news. So “introduce” your argument and conclusion right away.

2) Do not introduce your topic. You are writing about something we have read for class. You have done the reading and I have done the reading. You don't need to report to me what it says.

But be reasonable – if you are discussing a controversial topic that people disagree about, it is perfectly acceptable (and likely required) to carefully spell out the important claims. Similarly, if you are using technical terminology, like reductionism, you should define your terms. On the other hand, you don't need to give multiple examples so that I know exactly how to apply the term in various situations. It is often tricky to know how much exposition should go into the paper. This is going to depend on context so all I can say is try to be reasonable. Another student in this class should be able to read through your paper easily without asking many questions about what you mean.

Below are some suggested paper topics. They are described so that it is perfectly reasonable to write a paper of the required length. You are welcome to write about other topics (related to the course). If you have a topic in mind but are not sure if it is appropriate or if it is too specific or general, please ask me about it. It can't hurt to talk to me about your paper; it can hurt to write an inappropriate paper.

Suggested topics:

Ariew and Lewontin's *The Confusions of Fitness* suggests that there cannot be a single concept of fitness that is a scalar value due to worries that different values will be required in different circumstances. Is this right? Is it true that if you are clear about your question and the context, then in that context, there will be an exact value for fitness?

How could a theory of natural selection and adaptation such as Robert Brandon's respond to a paper like Ariew and Lewontin's?

Is there a way of characterizing the gene's eye view of evolution which allows a plausible argument that natural selection always acts at the level of the gene?

What is the gory details argument against reductionism and does this argument show that mendelian genetics cannot be reduced to molecular genetics? Does it show anything more general about scientific explanation?

What is a gene? Is there any reason to have a single concept/definition of gene?

Does the existence of altruistic traits show that selection must sometimes act at multiple levels?