

Phil 3865, Spring 2011 – Second assignment

Assignment: Write an argumentative essay relating to a topic we have discussed in class. The paper should be no more than 3000 words (about 10 pages in Word with double spacing, etc.). Don't aim for 3,000 – that is the maximum length. Shorter is fine if you say enough to make a good point. You will have to write another paper for the final assignment and if you wish to expand on this paper for that assignment, that is acceptable.

This paper is due by the beginning of class on Thursday, April 7th. 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. Bear in mind that these instructions might not apply if you are thinking of your paper as a journal article for a wide audience. So don't think of your paper like that.

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. You should especially not start with “Since the beginning of humankind, we have asked ourselves, ‘What should we believe?’” or anything similar.

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 that is not widely known or especially terminology that might be variable, like “the reflection principle”, 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.

What you should not do is write about the Dutch Book argument and spend a page or two proving the Dutch Book Theorem. For this paper, that is not needed. However, if you are going to criticize a step in the Dutch Book argument, it will of course be essential to spell out the argument that you are criticizing and thus it will be essential to state the Dutch Book Theorem and might be helpful to point out things like what is needed for that theorem. You should also not spend a lot of time telling me what other people have said about Dutch Books. Unless you are going to criticize what they say – then at least say what it is you are criticizing.

Below are some suggested paper topics. They are described so that it is perfectly reasonable to write a paper of the required length. Some topics could be the source of an entire dissertation, but can also be written about succinctly. 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:

Does the Dutch Book Argument show that rational agents have credences that obey the axioms of probability? If not, what does it show?

Is there a general principle that tells us when it is rational to update your credences by conditionalization and when it is not? When you do not conditionalize, what should do you instead?

Christiansen argues that while synchronic Dutch Books can tell us that we are irrational if our credences do not conform to the axioms, diachronic Dutch Books can't show us that we ought to conditionalize. Is this difference justified?

What is the relationship between rational agents at one time and at another time? Is there a pragmatic reason to be "coherent"? Or an epistemic one?

What should a rational agent do when confronted with disagreement?

What should a rational agent do when confronted with disagreement from someone whom they consider to be an epistemic peer with respect to the question at hand? It is permissible under any circumstances (which?) to not adjust your credences at all in some proposition when confronted with disagreement from an epistemic peer?

What is the right answer to the Sleeping Beauty puzzle?

Do scoring rule arguments show that we ought to be probabilists?

Can there be a "purely epistemic" argument for probabilism or must all such arguments rely on pragmatic considerations?