

**Academic Assessment Report**  
**Department of Philosophy, Fulbright College, University of Arkansas**  
**Philosophy BA Degree**  
**May 2025**

Procedures: All Philosophy majors are required to take PHIL 4983 (Capstone Course for Philosophy Majors) or write an honors thesis. Majors are assessed on the basis of written work (including a lengthy final paper) and class participation. For purposes of assessment of program goals and outcomes, papers collected by the instructor of PHIL 4983 receive detailed comments and students are numerically rated along the following dimensions and learning outcomes:

- 1) Increased critical thinking, communication and writing skills, including but not limited to:
  - The student writes with clarity and accuracy;
  - The student displays care in understanding positions with accuracy and fairness and in presenting his or her own ideas clearly and in ways that are relevant to his or her main points;
  - The student shows ability and sophistication in the analysis and evaluation of arguments;
  - The student proceeds critically in examining his or her own presuppositions and assumptions.
- 2) Increased knowledge and understanding of content, including but not limited to:
  - The student's written work displays understanding of central concepts and terminology;
  - The student's written work shows a grasp of main trends and theories in the areas under consideration and their application;
  - The student understands historically important positions and figures where relevant;
  - The student's thinking on the issues shows significant coherence, breadth and depth.

The instructor assigns a numerical score of 0-3 to each of these two dimensions, using the following scale:

- 0) Does not meet expectations;
- 1) Minimally meets expectations;
- 2) Meets expectations well, with room for improvement;
- 3) Exceeds expectations.

He or she will summarize these numerical scores and write a brief report on where in general students' written work needs improvement and where it displays positive outcomes. These results will be shared with the faculty.

### **Quantitative assessment of student work by instructor:**

Seventeen graduating majors were assessed on the basis of: ~1 paragraph discussion board posts on one of the week's readings; a 5-7 page paper in response to a paper directive I provided (students had options among the directives); a revision of the 5-7 page paper in accordance with detailed feedback from me; and a ~3,000-word paper on a topic of their choosing (but which was required to engage substantially with at least one course reading and at least one related philosophical reading that was not required for our course).

Dimension 1 (critical thinking, communication and writing skills), average rating: 1.94

Dimension 2 (knowledge and understanding of content), average rating: 2.41

Many students wrote very good papers; these were well structured, engaged charitably and accurately with the selected arguments, demonstrated a keen sense of what is of importance in the relevant debate, and contributed to the debate in a novel and interesting way. Additionally, most students wrote on central issues of genuine philosophical interest to action theory. In many cases, though, the writing left significant room for improvement. I suspect these students failed to heed advice to get started on the final paper early. In fact, many of the students' final papers included easily correctable errors, and a handful of them produced obscure logical structures and/or changed the topic of their argument in the course of the paper.

I will flag that my expectations for Dimension 1 are higher than for Dimension 2; I deem this to be appropriate. The skills assessed in Dimension 1 are foundational for philosophical thinking in general and this was the capstone course, after all. On the other hand, I do not presume that everyone is independently interested in philosophy of action, and so my expectations for Dimension 2 (substantive understanding of course topics) are lower. I hope that adequately explains the disparity.

### **Summary of results and suggestions for improvement from the instructor:**

Overall, the students were very good. Their discussion board posts often reflected excellent engagement with occasionally challenging concepts and arguments. The students as a whole were particularly impressive on Fridays; classes on Fridays were devoted to answering in small groups a set of questions I provided, some of which tested understanding of material and some of which were more critical in nature. The discussions on those days – both what I overheard and what we discussed when we reconvened as a class – were often admirably reflective and involved astute critical discussion of the arguments. (While this doesn't directly concern their written work, I wished to document it nonetheless.)

Many of the students also wrote very good short papers. They did quite well in responding to a rather detailed directive; most of these papers were well organized, well written, and showed both robust comprehension of the topic at hand and creative engagement with the relevant argument. Furthermore, a couple of students did a genuinely extraordinary job revising their short papers. They showed an impressive ability to make substantial improvements in both the structure of their arguments and the demonstrated comprehension of the course material.

My reflections immediately following the average ratings of the two dimensions above had in mind the final papers. Some of them were a joy to read. These accurately and clearly presented the targeted philosophical views, evidenced robust comprehension of the relevant issues and concepts, responded creatively to those views, and lucidly communicated their analysis and evaluation.

With respect to room for improvement in this class's writing, I have four main concerns.

First, from the final papers, it became clear that some students struggled to coherently organize their thoughts when they aren't responding to a pre-given directive. They ought to utilize outlines or construct a paper directive for themselves to correct this in future long-form writing. (I'm sure there are other fixes; these are two obvious ones.)

Second, some students exhibited insufficient appreciation for how to responsibly engage with another's argument. Occasionally, a mere paragraph was devoted to reconstructing a complex argument that used technical terms in its premises. Unsurprisingly, the resulting discussion of that argument failed to accurately and appropriately engage with it.

Third, a puzzling number of students failed to motivate the claims they made in response to a given argument. For example, they might claim that theory X failed to explain claim Y, and so conclude that we should reject theory X (or prefer theory W to theory X). But they provided no explanation for why claim Y needs to be accommodated or ought to be a desideratum on that kind of theory.

Fourth and finally, some students were negligent in editing their papers. If the error is one of care, they should read over their work more closely. If it is one of skill, they should read more long-format English works, irrespective of subject. I recommend Charles Dickens.

This feedback will be reported to all 100% appointed faculty who are teaching 3000 or 4000-level courses during AY 2025-26.