

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

Procedures: Master's students are regularly assessed on the basis of coursework (short papers, term papers, and essay exams). This coursework assures adequate coverage of historical figures and contemporary issues. In addition, and crucial to the program's goals, each Master's student writes a thesis which is read and orally examined by a committee of at least three faculty.

For purposes of assessment and program goals and outcomes, the main thesis advisor, on the basis of the student's thesis and oral examination and in consultation with the thesis committee, evaluates the Master's thesis on the two dimensions of:

- 1) Significant critical thinking, communication and writing skills, including but not limited to:
 - a) The student writes with clarity and accuracy;
 - b) The student displays care and insight 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;
 - c) The student shows sophistication and insight in the analysis and evaluation of arguments;
 - d) The student proceeds critically in examining his or her own presuppositions and assumptions.
- 2) Knowledge and understanding of content, including but not limited to:
 - a) The student's work displays a deep grasp of central concepts and terminology and their importance;
 - b) The student's work shows a mastery of main trends and theories in the areas under consideration;
 - c) The student understands and can effectively explicate historically important positions and figures where relevant;
 - d) The student's thinking on the issues shows significant coherence, breadth and depth.
 - e) The student's thinking is making a solid contribution to the current state of knowledge on the issues under discussion.

The advisor 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.

To explain these numerical evaluations, the advisor provides a brief summary of where the student's thesis needs improvement and where it displays positive outcomes. These results will be shared with the faculty.

Quantitative assessment of student work by MA advisors: We had six successful MA thesis defenses since the previous assessment report.

Dimension 1 (communication skills and critical thinking), average rating: 2.17

Dimension 2 (knowledge and understanding of content), average rating: 2.17

Summary of results and suggestions for improvement from the MA advisors:

The MA theses defended and currently in progress were, by and large, well-written and displayed mastery of the relevant academic literatures. They put our students in a position to be competitive for admission and funding at good PhD programs.

Feedback:

* The writing is clear and full of rich examples. It clearly engages with the main views in the relevant literature and then develops a novel account of the relevant concept. Areas for improvement: More focus. This student tends to want to go in many different directions and explore a lot of ideas, which can be good. But it makes it difficult for him to engage in a question with the level of philosophical sophistication I would expect from a graduate student.

* The thesis, presentation, and defense were nicely done. More emphasis was put on the nature of the art than in exploring any philosophical issues that might arise that could be distinctive about the art of X...While the presentation was accurate, it was not groundbreaking, but a rather straightforward application of well-known old theories to a specific case of great interest to him. I would hope that he would explore more thoroughly other art forms for which similar issues arise.

* His analysis of arguments and his examination of his own assumptions are strong; the thesis sometimes does not rise to this level in terms of clarity, particularly in laying out the positions he is discussing and criticizing. He covered a lot of ground involving a difficult literature. His understanding of the issues discussed is both broad and deep. He strove to carve out an original position against this background; these efforts were interesting but not as clear as might have been hoped. Where exactly he disagreed with his targets sometimes remained elusive...This is a mature and ambitious project, and he carried it out with energy and intelligence. Where he was less than clear, some of the "blame" can go on the complexities of the area and vagueness in some of the literature.

* He was able to convey the main argument of his view effectively. The thesis argued for a largely coherent and basically original view concerning the value of X that was quite ambitious in scope, ranging over some major topics in value theory. His arguments made contact with the

extant views in the literature, although these views could have been presented in more detail and it ought to have been clearer how his own view differed from them. The wide-ranging scope of the project also came at a bit of a cost, insofar as much of the substance of the view would have benefitted from more development. The writing was generally clear, but some places in the thesis could still use improvement in clarity and in precision. Overall, the thesis showed a good grasp of the literature and made an ambitious foray into defending a substantive, promising, and wide-ranging view...

* He clearly has read and analyzed some of the literature relevant to the topic of his M.A. thesis. Most of these authors are not considered historical figures, but that is to be expected given the novelty of the domain. Given the novelty of the area, there are limited works on the subject with which to compare this work. Indeed, for that reason, it is unclear whether there are “trends”. The thesis clearly has breadth but is lacking more in depth. This project makes some useful contributions to the debate on [redacted], including demarcating it from related notions like [redacted]. His prescriptive claim that we ought to use X in a way that promotes action to...is a useful principle someone taking up his project could adopt. Generally, as with the clarity of his writing, his thesis could have greatly benefitted from earlier, more consistent discussions with committee members.

* Areas for continued improvement:

- * Students should be encouraged to submit work periodically and in small chunks to get timely feedback and direction before the student is too far along.
- * Students should be encouraged to present portions of their research to the department or at conference in order to gauge their progress and to get better at explaining their projects. To some extent, this is already done with our students, but it could be improved.

This feedback will be delivered to all who are supervising Master’s theses.