

Philosophical English

Tuesday, 9:50–12:15

School of Foreign Language and Literature, Video Room 4

Peter Finocchiaro

My office: Zhenhua Building, B533

My office hours: Wednesday, 14:00–18:00, and by appointment

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Course Description:

Our central goal in this course is to cultivate the ability to conduct philosophical research in English. To that end, we will focus on three components of that ability: (i) an understanding of key philosophical concepts and their application within Anglophone philosophy; (ii) a fluency in verbally discussing philosophical questions (in English); (iii) a competence in composing argumentative essays (in English). Our class sessions will feature an even mix of lecturing, discussion, and skill-building activities. Our assignments – two short papers and three conversational “podcasts” – will assess the extent to which we are able to demonstrate growth in (i), (ii), and (iii).

Texts: *For the Sake of Argument: How to Do Philosophy* by Robert M. Martin; *Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks: A Guide to Academic Publishing Success* by Wendy Laura Belcher; *The Elements of Style* (4th Edition) by William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White; *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace* by Joseph M. Williams (and Gregory G. Colomb as contributor)

In addition to reading portions of the above “textbooks”, we will also read several peer-reviewed philosophy articles. These articles are seminal works in contemporary Anglophone philosophy; anyone who wants to do philosophy should be familiar with them. These articles will act as introductions to the philosophical concepts we will cover. They will also act as models of philosophical writing (though, as we will learn, even they could be improved).

I will provide pdf files of all course material, including those of the texts mentioned above.

A note about the reading: For each class session, I will come prepared to discuss a specific aspect of the reading assigned for that day. That being said, in each class session we are free to explore whatever issues come to mind. You should, therefore, read all of the material labeled as **required**. Furthermore, if you “have the time”, I heavily encourage you to read all of the material labeled as **optional**.

Letter Grade Distribution: In this course I will use the following scale to convert between numerical and letter grades:

96.00 - 100.00	A+	70.00 - 74.99	B-
90.00 - 95.99	A	67.00 - 69.99	C+
85.00 - 89.99	A-	63.00 - 66.99	C
80.00 - 84.99	B+	60.00 - 62.99	C-
75.00 - 79.99	B	00.00 - 59.99	D

Grade Distribution: Your overall grade is calculated as follows:

Participation	30%
Podcasts	30% (10% each)
Papers	40% (20% each)

Course Goals:

As I said above, our focus in this course will be on three abilities that are essential to conducting philosophical research in English. I think it is helpful to dissect these complex abilities into smaller, more “visible” components. This dissection will (I hope!) aid us in the direction of our learning as well as the measurement of our growth.

(i) An understanding of a key philosophical concept requires:

- the ability to succinctly summarize the concept;
- the ability to apply the concept through the use of examples;
- the ability to explain how (Anglophone) philosophers utilize the concept.

(ii) A fluency in verbally discussing philosophical questions (in English) requires:

- an awareness of the discussion’s topic, including an awareness of what is *off* topic;
- the ability to actively listen to and understand what is said by your interlocutor;
- a willingness to seek clarification when appropriate;
- the ability to make lucid contributions to the discussion.

(iii) A competence in composing argumentative essays (in English) requires:

- an understanding of the purpose and structure of an argumentative essay;
- the ability to (efficiently) produce an intelligible draft;
- a comfort with receiving feedback on your draft;
- the ability to revise and edit your draft, especially in light of any received feedback.

Assignments

Participation: Philosophy is an activity that we do, and active participation in philosophy is the best way to learn to do philosophy. You are expected to interact with me and with other students inside and outside of class. It's important to note, though, that active participation is more than just being vocal; it requires carefully thinking through issues and engaging with peers, often by listening to, supporting, clarifying, or justifying their comments. Doing philosophy is not just about expressing your own ideas, but is just as much about engaging with the ideas of others. Metaphorically speaking, the ideal philosophical discussion is less like a game of ping pong and more like a soccer ("football") match. You will be graded on the extent to which you follow this model of active participation.

Podcasts: You will collaborate with other students in small groups to produce 10 minutes of philosophical conversation. Your group may choose their own topic to discuss or they may choose to have a topic assigned by me. Ideally, the conversation will address issues covered in class, issues relevant to current events or culture, or issues connected to your own philosophical interests. These conversations will be recorded and emailed to me. Overall, you will complete three podcasts, each with the same group of students.

Papers: You will write two short papers for this course. These papers may be done in any order and submitted at any time during the semester – but both must be submitted by the final deadline. Each paper will follow a "model structure" for an argumentative essay. You may choose your own topic or you may choose to have a topic assigned by me. But in either case I must approve the topic in advance, before you start writing.

"Reading List" and Schedule:

Below is a tentative schedule of the material that we will cover throughout the semester.

Acronyms:

- "FSA" = *For the Sake of Argument: How to Do Philosophy* by Robert M. Martin
- "WJA" = *Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks: A Guide to Academic Publishing Success* by Wendy Laura Belcher
- "TES" = *The Elements of Style* (4th Edition) by William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White
- "SCG" = *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace* by Joseph M. Williams (and contributions by Gregory G. Colomb)

- Week 1:** No Class
Required: None
Optional: None
- Week 2:** Introduction to the class; introduction to contemporary (Anglophone) philosophy
Required: FSA Chapter 1; FSA Chapter 2
Optional: FSA Introduction; FSA Chapter 3
- Week 3:** Necessary and sufficient conditions; knowledge; propositions; *a priori/a posteriori*
Required: Gettier's "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?"
Optional: FSA Chapter 9
- Week 4:** A brief history of western philosophy; the norms of professional philosophy
Required: WJA Chapter 2
Optional: WJA Introduction
- Week 5:** Philosophical dialogue; material/immaterial; ontology; nominalism; parsimony
Required: Lewis and Lewis's "Holes"
Optional: FSA Chapter 11
- Week 6:** Arguments; how to construct them; forms of inference; deductive validity
Required: FSA Chapter 5;
Optional: FSA Chapter 6;
- Week 7:** The elements of prose; fallacies (formal and informal); *reductio ad absurdum*
Required: SCG Chapter 1
Optional: FSA Chapter 4; TES Chapter I
- Week 8:** Thought experiments; physicalism/dualism; perception; qualia; knowledge-how
Required: Jackson's "On What Mary Doesn't Know"
Optional: FSA Chapter 7; TES Chapter II
- Week 9:** How to organize your writing; clarity; the SEP; the authority of a philosopher
Required: SCG Chapter 2
Optional: FSA Chapter 8, TES Chapter III
- Week 10:** Targeting an audience; personhood; permissibility; responsibility; supererogation
Required: Thomson's "A Defense of Abortion"
Optional: FSA Chapter 10; TES Chapter IV
- Week 11:** Technical philosophical conventions; crafting a paragraph; writing software
Required: SCG Chapter 3; WJA Chapter 4
Optional: WJA Chapter 5; TES Chapter V
- Week 12:** Philosophical significance; philosophical persuasiveness; professional productivity
Required: SCG Chapter 4; WJA Chapter 13
Optional: SCG Chapter 5; SCG Chapter 6