

A.1 Tips for the exams

General Information – From the Syllabus

There will be 8 exams, roughly every week and a half.

The *first seven exams* are non-cumulative. They will each be worth 10 per cent of your grade. They cover the material since the last exam, or the beginning of the class for the first exam. The first exam takes place on Friday, September 9. The exams will consist in 3 parts:

1. Part 1 : You will be asked to answer 3 questions that test your command of the course content. Your answer should not be more than 30 words long for each question.
2. Part 2: You will be asked to identify the philosophical point in a passage taken from the readings. Your answer should not be more than 30 words long for each question.
3. Part 3: You will be asked to write a mini-essay (no more than 200 words) on a topic related to the material covered in class

The answers in Part 1 will receive a letter grade. Your answer in Part 2 and 3 will be graded P (passing), U (unsatisfactory), or E (excellent). A P will raise the grade for part 1 by one step (B to B+ for example), a U will lower it by one step, and a E will raise it by two steps (B to A- for example).

The *final exam* is cumulative. It will consist in 12 questions, 9 out of the preceding exams, three on the material covered since the last exam. It will have the weight of three ordinary exams. *To pass the course, you have to pass the final exam.*

Make up exams will be given only in extreme circumstances, family death, severe illness, severe car accident, etc. *Proof of extreme circumstances is required in order to make up an exam.* Oversleeping is not an acceptable excuse, nor busses running late, stuck in detox, etc. Take extra precautions on exam days to avoid these problems. Exams not taken, for any reason, will receive a zero.

Tips for success – Part I

- *Most of your grade* comes from the three very easy questions in Part I. All you have to do is to study the readings and course notes to get an A !
- *Be careful to be precise in your answers.* Logic is precise, and so is philosophy. For example: the Cultural Differences Argument is **not** about *whether we can judge* values from other cultures, but about *whether there exists any objective moral values*. The answer to the question of whether we can judge is **not** tight to the question of whether there exists any objective moral values.

Tips for success – Part II

About the “philosophical point”: repeating what is in the text is **not** sufficient to pass: you have to explain how the passage fits into an argument for or against a particular philosophical thesis.

Example on the fingers:

- Unsatisfactory answer: “the point is that one can use his or her organ for a different purpose than the organ’s natural function”
- Not good, but better: “the texts relates to the question of whether it is wrong to use our organ for a different purpose than their natural function” (You’ll get a “satisfactory” for such an answer)
- Good answer: The text relates to the argument that homosexuality is morally wrong because it consists in using one’s organs for a different purpose than the organ’s natural function. The text shows that this argument fails in showing that the main premise is false: it is not generally morally wrong to use one’s organ for a different purpose than the organ’s natural function, as the example of snapping the fingers shows.

Tips for success – Part III

The key elements of a good essay:

1. A clear thesis;
2. A clear argument;
3. Concrete examples;

About the thesis: It is always better to make a clear and well supported small point than a vague and not well supported larger point.

About your arguments: Make them explicit and clear:

1. Remember: I don’t care about your beliefs and feelings, I care about what you can show is true.
2. Ban all terms such “evident”, “obvious” and the like: either it will speak for itself, or it is merely a way to hide a lack of argument;
3. Mere assertions don’t count as arguments;
4. Break up the logic of your argument: we tend to jump over logical links: make them explicit, and hopefully you’ll see the gaps
5. If you encounter a difficulty, don’t escape from it, don’t try to hide it (if you have seen it, chances are that we’ll see it too). *A difficulty is an opportunity to think*: confront it, state the problem, propose and evaluate solutions. If you don’t have any solution, it is better to say so than to ignore the problem!

6. In general, push yourself to think. Stating general ideas about the topic is not enough: *you are expected to be able to make use of the material covered in class to clarify your answer to the question asked !* It is simply unsatisfactory if you write the same vague and general essay as the one you would have written before class !

Examples – Examples are always very helpful. That said, you have to:

- analyze your examples seriously
- *show how your examples are relevant to the question under study*

In general, here is a rule: every time you assert something, you have to make it explicit how it relates to the topic.

Examples: Feelings vs. Reasons

“We grow up being educated and so we reason and act according to our education”
→ How is this relevant to the topic???? Nothing is said: this is too bad, because it could have lead to an interesting idea that some others had: feelings might well have a stronger influence on our action, but we may be able to educate them !

About the style: Keep it simple and straightforward.

1. No decoration in style: clear, concise and precise should be your only aim;
2. No value statements: they do not count as argument;
3. NO SENTENCE LONGER THAN TWO LINES: if you find one, break it up. Long sentences are most often the sign of a rushing line of thought. Break it up, check the logical structure