# How Will I Be Graded in This Class?

This is a fair question, and part of it is answered in the syllabus. But let me get more specific here: you will be primarily graded in this class on your *understanding* of the ideas. You can illustrate your understanding by answering carefully-crafted multiple choice questions correctly, or in your written work by adequately paraphrasing and using sufficient examples. However, not every written assignment may require paraphrasing, so you should read the instructions for each assignment carefully.

Regarding multiple choice questions, in every category of quiz and assessment in all my classes, one to two will be dropped. This means that you get additional chances to improve your grade. And we will generally go over practice questions. Papers can also be rewritten. In online classes discussion boards cannot be rewritten, but you can show me an early draft and I will tell you if you're on the right track.

I also have a contract grading option in all my classes. Contract grading is what it sounds like: you make a contract with your professor (me in this case) to complete particular assignments. Let's say you just want to get a B: I have a contract that reduces your work load so you can get that B more easily. The same goes for a C or D.

There is no contract for an A, so to get an A you will need to complete the normal grading criteria from the syllabus. *But*, I do allow replacements for major assignments that may better fit your learning preference. I've had students do PowerPoint presentations before, for example, in lieu of completing an assessment. I am open to other creative ways you might show your understanding of the material— YouTube or TikTok videos, poems, stories, group presentations, etc. But if you would like to do something like this, we will need to talk about it and come to an agreement first.

*Multiple Choice Questions*

But as noted, two of the primary ways you'll be graded in this class are multiple choice questions and paraphrasing in your written work. We often hear criticism of standardized tests, many of which use multiple choice questions. Indeed, much criticism of standardized testing, in my view, is legitimate. For example, some have argued that tests like the SAT show cultural bias in the questions.[1] However, we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater—carefully-crafted multiple choice questions have been shown to be a valid measure of understanding.[2] Let me give two examples, one of a multiple choice question that requires memorization and another that requires understanding.

> Which of the following best characterizes a conversation about epistemology?
>   a. Some people discussing whether Obama was a better president than Trump.
>   b. Some people debating the existence of God.
>   c. Some people discussing differences between animal learning and human learning.
>
> Epistemology is…
>   a. The study of reality
>   b. The study of values
>   c. The theory of knowledge

The answer to both questions is C. The second question focuses on memorization since all you need to know is the definition of epistemology—you just have to memorize it. But the first question focuses on understanding, since it asks you to *apply* the idea of epistemology to different examples.

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[1] See Reese, R. (2013, April 23). Minority Testing Bias Persists [from *Huffpost*]. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ronnie-reese/test-bias-minorities_b_2734149.html

[2] Lewis, A, & Smith, D. (1993). Defining higher order thinking. *Theory into Practice*, 32(3), 131-137.

While some of the multiple choice questions in this class will require memorization (even doctors have to memorize the functions of different organs), most will require understanding.

*Graded Written Work*

As noted, your graded written work should generally show your understanding through paraphrasing. But not every written assignment requires paraphrasing so read instructions carefully (especially discussion board instructions if it's an online class). When it *is* required, here is an explanation of what I am looking for, with examples.

Paraphrasing is *not* summarizing or defining. *Defining* is merely giving the dictionary or textbook definition of a word or idea (though you may sometimes have to define terms in different ways, as discussed below). A *summary* is a very brief overview of a passage or idea. But *paraphrasing* is putting the essence of a passage or idea into your own words, which goes into more depth than a summary. Paraphrasing is giving a thorough explanation. Using examples while paraphrasing (either from the passage or your own) also helps to show your understanding.

For clarity, let me give examples of the difference between summarizing and paraphrasing. I will use the following passage from another course reader of mine:

> "A lot of what philosophers do on a day to day basis, however, comes down to reasoning through *arguments*. Even philosophers who have influenced the world profoundly (like the founder of communism, Karl Marx) began with arguments. Arguments are produced when we give a reason for thinking that a claim/statement is true or right. The reason given is called the *premise* and the claim being supported or proven is called the *conclusion*."

Here is a summary of the passage: "Basically, philosophers use rational justifications called arguments to express their ideas."

Here is a paraphrase of the passage: "The professional life of a philosopher, or lover of wisdom, is focused on reason. And reasoning is about arguments, which are lines of logic that provide justifications (called premises) for the final point (called the conclusion). Good arguments prove or support their conclusions. Although it may seem strange, even famous and influential philosophers like Ayn Rand use arguments to get their ideas out there."

Although the summary captures the general idea of the reading, it does not go into the detail necessary for paraphrasing. There are a few things to notice in the paraphrased passage. First, the paraphraser sometimes uses different examples (like Ayn Rand), but the new examples do not change the meaning of the passage. Second, the paraphraser sometimes uses new phrases that are not used in the original passage, but that mean the same thing as phrases used in the original passage—for example, the paraphraser uses "line of logic" to mean the same thing as "argument." Third, the paraphraser moves ideas around so as not to imitate the exact order of the ideas in the original passage. And all of this is accomplished while maintaining the essence of the original passage.

In my face-to-face classes (but not online) some assessment questions ask you to compare and contrast different ideas: in this case all ideas should be accurately paraphrased, not simply summarized. On the papers and/or discussions (discussions are only in online classes), you will sometimes need to paraphrase an entire argument, as well as counterarguments presented by the author. On papers, your paraphrasing should be even more in depth with even more examples when necessary.

*Creating and Using Definitions*

If you do not define terms appropriately in your graded written work, you may lose points for clarity. This applies primarily to assignments

that require paraphrase, as outlined above. Defining terms can be easy if you're, say, defining something like *capitalism*. You only need to look up the definition and cite it. But sometimes definitions can be more tricky, like with *abortion* or *terrorism* or *person*. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein famously pointed out the difficulty of defining the word *game*.[3]

One reason for seeking a definition is to know the word's meaning, or the *lexical definition*. One can find such a definition by looking in the dictionary, as with the capitalism example above. Dictionary definitions are usually analytical in the sense that they specify the characteristics something must have for the term to apply. For example, a mouse is a small rodent that typically has a pointed snout, relatively large ears and eyes, and a long tail.

Sometimes we are using a word that is too vague, so we have to make the definition more specific. This is often called a *stipulative definition*. We stipulate what we are referring to. For example, I might say: "By *suffering* I mean when people are clearly starving to death or dying before the age of 10." In other words, I can define something by simply pointing to what I mean. But one could also create a stipulative definition that's analytic.

Whatever definitions you use (if you use any), make sure they are not *rhetorical definitions*, which are problematic definitions crafted specifically to support one's point of view. For instance, abortion is sometimes defined as the murder of an unborn child. Socialism is sometimes defined as free money for all with no responsibility. Clearly, definitions like this do not help us to think critically since they make use of the biases true critical thinkers try to eliminate. But sometimes rhetorical definitions are fun, as can be seen at the *Urban Dictionary* website.

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[3] See his argument throughout this book: Wittgenstein, L. (1973). *Philosophical Investigations* (3rd ed.). G. E. M. Anscombe (Ed.). London, England: Pearson.

*Classwork, Homework, and Assignments not Graded for Content*

Classwork applies primarily to my face-to-face classes, though in my online classes we may do classwork exercises in Zooms or discussion boards. Whatever class you are in of mine, classwork is never graded for content—you will just get credit for completing it. For example we often do freewrites in face-to-face classes, and I will never look at them or collect them. In-class group work I may look at, usually just to make sure that you did it, but it will still not be graded for content. In my Phil 103 classes, homework is required but again I will not grade it—there is an answer key on Canvas. I will just give you credit for having done it. In all my online classes, there are online discussions that are not graded for content so—to repeat again because it's important—make sure you read the instructions carefully.