

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 emphasize this: 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.

While the above points are generally true for all my classes, you should of course pay attention to specific guidelines/prompts, which will differ in some ways from my online to my face-to-face classes.

Multiple Choice Questions

Let's begin here, because 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.

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.

- 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.

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 show your understanding through paraphrasing and the use of examples. Paraphrasing is *not* summarizing or defining. *Defining* is merely giving the dictionary or textbook definition of a word or idea. 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 earlier in this chapter as an example.

“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.

So let me repeat: all your graded, written work in this class should illustrate an understanding of the ideas in question, best achieved through accurate paraphrasing and the use of examples.

On written assessment questions that ask you to compare and contrast different ideas, all ideas should be accurately paraphrased, not simply summarized. On the papers, 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 on your written work, you may lose points for clarity. 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.

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

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.

Classwork

There is written work in the class that is not graded (this section applies only to those of you in my face-to-face class). Freewrites are just for discussion and reflection, so I will never look at them or collect them. But group work I will look at, usually just to make sure that you did it. It is very important to note that I generally do not grade group work for content. Group work is for practice, and is pass/no pass. Thus, you should use the group work as one tool to help you understand the material. I will still expect you to write more complex answers that show your understanding through paraphrasing on the graded written work.