

## Philosophy senior project requirements and guidelines

The purpose of this document is to help students to clearly understand the process and expectations around the philosophy senior project. These requirements and guidelines are meant to help you take full advantage of the freedom you have in the project, not to limit that freedom in any way. Nor are they meant to impose a single mold on the admirable diversity of philosophy projects. Finally, they are not intended to function as a substitute for regular communication with your advisor, which is absolutely essential to success in the project.

### Purpose of the senior project

The purpose of the philosophy senior project is to engage in a sustained and focused exercise in philosophical writing. We do not expect you to produce a significant piece of scholarly work suitable for publication. We do expect that you will practice philosophical modes of reading, writing and revision and become a better, more thoughtful reader and writer.

Writing a senior project is very difficult. You are attempting to produce a much longer and more complex piece of philosophical work than you have ever done before. You will also find yourself struggling with the freedom of defining and shaping the topic and the bibliography. In addition, it can also be difficult to sustain your interest and enthusiasm for your topic over a long period of time. All of this is normal.

When you hand in your project, you should feel proud of the work you have done, the things you have learned, and the intellectual and emotional growth you have undergone. Sadly, students do not always feel this way: students often feel frustrated or disappointed, on the grounds that they did not accomplish in the final project what they initially hoped or expected. The best way to prevent these regrets and to feel good about your completed project is to 1) set reasonable goals; 2) have a plan to execute them; and 3) stick to the plan as well as you can. Note that you will almost certainly revise your goals and your plan a great deal as you work on the project. This is also normal. Your advisor will help you to figure out what reasonable goals and a workable plan will look like at each stage of your progress.

### Question

The single most important part of your project is your *question*. The question will set the agenda for your project. It defines what your argument needs to show, what evidence will count as relevant, and what opposing arguments you need to consider. A question is different from a *topic*. Here are some examples of topics:

- T1. Nietzsche
- T2. Nietzsche's *Gay Science*
- T3. The death of God in Nietzsche's *Gay Science*

These topics are great, but they are not yet questions. A question focuses and organizes your investigation of a topic, by raising a doubt or problem about the topic that your project will aim to resolve. Examples of questions are:

- Q1. Was Nietzsche an atheist?
- Q2. Does Nietzsche's *Gay Science* espouse atheism?

Q3. Is the idea of the death of God in Nietzsche's *Gay Science* a formulation of atheism?

Notice that these questions invite different answers: to each of them, some might say yes, others no. In this way, a question naturally opens a dialogue between opposing points of view, in a way that a topic by itself does not. This invitation to dialogue is essential, because some form of disagreement will be the lifeblood and rationale of your project. Notice also that a more focused question, such as Q3, sets up a more focused investigation concerned with a well-defined body of evidence. A more focused question generally produces a richer project.

You should not expect to formulate your question and then start work on the project. It often takes considerable time and effort on the project to define and clarify your question. You may begin with a rather broad question such as Q1 and then refine your question over the course of working on the project so that it looks more like Q3. Again, all of this is normal. Since you have never written a project of this scope and ambition before, one of the things you are learning as you work on it is how to frame a suitable question for a project of this length, written over this amount of time.

Here are some other examples of questions that philosophy students have recently written successful senior projects about:

- Is Kant's notion of a "thing in itself" incoherent?
- Is Hegel inconsistent in the different definitions he gives of freedom?
- Is Dewey's philosophy of education still relevant today?

As these examples reflect, many students choose to write their projects on major historical figures such as Nietzsche, Kant, Hegel, or Dewey. You are welcome to do so, although you should keep in mind that such figures are often very complicated and difficult to write about. When working with figures like these it can be especially hard to define a clear and tractable question. Note that the program does not require you to write about a historical figure of this sort, and we have had many students who have written terrific projects on non-historical questions, such as:

- Does the phenomenon of implicit bias support a "two-system" view of the mind?
- Are philosophical and poetic modes of writing fundamentally opposed?
- Is there a clear line between the literal meaning and the pragmatic effects of an utterance?

Regardless of the question you pursue, defining a bibliography of sources that you will use to pursue the question is very important. You should think about your project as a contribution to an ongoing conversation, keeping in mind that many different conversations can be had about the same question. What conversation, with what conversation partners, priorities, standards and common points of reference, do you want to contribute to? Finding the community you want to be in conversation with is key to the success of your project.

As you begin to think about your project, consider not just topics of interest to you, but also the sorts of questions you might ask about them. Starting with a topic you have some previous familiarity with, either from the philosophy research seminar (PRS) or another course, is often the best way to go, since you are more likely to be able to formulate a clear and answerable question about it that will guide your research effectively from an early stage.

## **Structure**

Philosophy projects do not have a set structure. The traditions of our program encourage experimentation in the organization and writing style of your project. A brief introduction and conclusion, however, are strongly recommended. Writing these documents is often very useful as a way to articulate clearly and concisely, to yourself and your readers, what your question is, how you answered it and why. Chapters are not required, but many students opt for a structure of two or three chapters of 12-20 pages each. Breaking your project down into smaller units helps you to organize your work and aids your reader in following your argument. A bibliography is required. We strongly recommend that your bibliography contain a combination of primary literature (e.g., works by a major historical figure) and secondary literature (e.g., recent scholarly writing about that figure).

## **Length and format**

Your final project should be at least 50 double-spaced pages, using a standard font (e.g., 12-point Times New Roman) and 1” margins on all sides. The project should be a single work, not a collection of independent pieces. The only quasi-exception to this is in the case of certain joint projects, e.g., in philosophy and written arts, where the project might consist in a piece of fiction followed by a philosophical reflection on it. But even in this case, the two pieces should be in very close conversation with each other. Your project should consist wholly in new work written for PHIL 401 and 402 only, not work previously submitted for any course, including the PRS. Your project can of course build on previous work, but this should be substantially revised. Citations should be in a standard format, such as MLA or Chicago. Page numbers are required.

## **Advisor**

In the semester before you start the project, you will make a formal request for an advisor. You should request an advisor that you will feel comfortable working closely with over a long period of time. Most members of the philosophy faculty have advised projects on many different topics, so don't feel constrained by your sense of what advisor fits best with a given topic. If a faculty member feels that they cannot advise you on a given topic, they will let you know and will suggest alternatives. Your advisor should be a member of the philosophy faculty, although in rare cases faculty outside the philosophy program have advised philosophy projects. You should request a first- and second-choice advisor. Advisors are assigned by a collaborative process among the faculty, taking student requests, but also balance and fairness in the distribution of advisees, into account. You will likely receive your first-choice advisor, but you may not, due to scheduling constraints or the need to distribute advisees relatively evenly across program members. Don't panic if you do not get your first-choice advisor. If you do not get your first choice, you will almost certainly get your second choice. In almost every case, the same advisor will work with you during both semesters of the project. Rarely, students may have different advisors for the two semesters, e.g., if their advisor goes on leave.

## **Weekly meetings**

You are required to attend weekly meetings with your advisor. At each meeting, you and your advisor will review the work toward the project you have done that week and develop an agenda for the following week (for example, to read an article or book chapter and write a response to it). You are required to follow through on that agenda. The toughest thing about the weekly

meetings is to use the time productively. Many students lose valuable time in disorganized or noncommittal reading, especially in the first semester. As an antidote to this, start writing early. You should be discussing with your advisor at least one single-spaced page of writing every week, starting early in the first semester. Writing will help you to engage with your reading more actively, and thus to begin clarifying your question and argument at an early stage.

### **Midway materials**

Students are required to submit the following materials for their midway board: 1) A writing sample of 15-20 pages that represents the kind of substantial work you will do in the finished project. Students often conceptualize the writing sample as a draft chapter. Keep in mind that your sense of what the chapters are may change as you continue to work on the project. 2) A "précis" or abstract of the project, i.e., a brief statement, in clear and accessible prose, of what the project's question is, your planned argument at this point, the main sources of evidence you will use, and a brief description of an opposing argument you might consider and how you would respond to it. 3) An outline of 1-2 pages that provides an overview of the structure of the project, including brief descriptions of all of its main parts (introduction, some detail about the internal flow of each chapter, conclusion). 4) A bibliography listing all sources you plan to use in the completed project, even if you do not cite or refer to them explicitly in your other midway materials.

Of these documents, 1) is by far the most important. The work of writing and revising the writing sample is what contributes most to advancing and deepening your project. Most of the discussion at your midway board will focus on it. The other documents are helpful as a way of quickly orienting your advisor and other board members about your plans for the completed project.

### **Midway board**

The midway board is primarily an advising session. It is not graded. (Your advisor will give you a grade of "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory" for PHIL 401. After the project is completed, your final grade becomes your grade for PHIL 401 and 402.) You are encouraged, in advance of both the midway and final boards, to talk with your advisor about what questions are likely to be asked and how best to prepare so as to get the most out of each board. Do not be surprised if your advisor takes somewhat of a back seat during the midway board; your other board members will be excited to talk with you about your project and this is your only chance to talk with them while your project is still developing. Listening and taking good notes during the midway board is essential. Common questions you should be prepared for are: What is your project's question? What work have you done to answer that question this semester? What is the strongest counter-evidence to your thesis? What is the next step in the development of your project? What might you do between semesters to keep your project developing?

### **Board members**

You will request two members for your midway board in addition to your advisor. These are typically members of the philosophy faculty, although here too, in some cases faculty from other parts of the college may be requested, especially if they have expertise that is relevant to your project. E.g., if your project is about Plato, a faculty member from Classical Studies or Literature may be helpful. You and your advisor should discuss appropriate board members. Usually the same faculty members sit on your midway and final senior project board. This is often a good

idea, since everyone will have seen some of your work already and have some prior understanding of your project. But in some cases board members for the final board may be different, e.g., if one of your prior board members is on leave.

### **Final senior project board**

The final board has a more formal structure, reminiscent of moderation. When you arrive for your final board, you will greet the board members and then be sent out of the room, while your board members discuss your project. You will then be called back into the room and asked if you wish to take the project pass/fail or to receive a letter grade. This choice is entirely up to you and does not affect your board members' view of you or your project. Then you and the board members will have about 30 minutes to discuss the completed project. Common questions you should be prepared to answer are: What question did you answer in this project? How has the project changed since the midway board? What do you feel is the most valuable thing you learned by working on this project? If you were to continue working on this project, what would you add to or change about it? At the conclusion of your board, your board members will again briefly send you out of the room. When they call you back in, your board will tell you whether you have passed.

### **Senior project grading**

Policies about the grading of senior projects are set by programs and vary across the college. In the Philosophy program, we do not give letter grades to students at the final board. Instead, we assign senior project grades through a collective process that takes place soon after the last board of the semester ends. You should receive your final grade from your advisor shortly thereafter. Your grade may reflect not only the intrinsic quality of the completed project itself, but also your engagement, effort and progress across the two semesters. The factors we consider in senior project grades are:

Question: Does the project formulate and respond to a clear and philosophically significant question?

Argument: Does the project make a sustained, well-supported argument in response to the question?

Evidence: Does the project support its argument through careful consideration of relevant evidence, including primary and secondary sources?

Opposing arguments: Does the project engage substantively with other points of view on the question, including in-depth consideration of their arguments? Does the student discuss in depth evidence that significantly challenges his or her argument?

Clarity, organization and coherence: Is the project clearly written and accessible to a philosophically-minded reader who may not be previously familiar with the topic? Is the organization of the project clear and helpful in tracking the argument? Is the argument coherent throughout?

Meetings: Did the student attend weekly meetings regularly and come well-prepared, having done significant written work before each meeting?

Boards: Was the student able to explain their work clearly and concisely at the midway and final boards? Did the student's midway materials (writing sample, abstract, outline, and bibliography) demonstrate significant work completed on the project in the first semester? Did the student benefit significantly from the advice given by the board at the midway? Was the student engaged

(e.g., taking notes, offering relevant and substantial responses to questions, asking their own questions) at both boards?

### **Conference**

Every spring the philosophy program hosts a senior project conference. Participation in the conference is open to all students who have successfully completed a senior project in philosophy over the course of the year. (Students who finish projects in the fall are invited to return to campus to present their work as part of the spring conference.) Participation in the conference is optional but highly recommended. Many students describe the conference as one of their favorite parts of the entire process. Students present their projects in panels with two or three of their fellow seniors. Each student gives a short presentation (approximately 7-8 minutes) about their project, which is followed by an open discussion with questions from the audience. Attendance at the conference is open to students and faculty from across the college, as well as to friends and family members.

### **Deadlines**

Each semester there is a single college-wide deadline for all senior projects, which is posted on the college academic calendar. In the spring it typically comes at the end of April or beginning of May. For current dates, see <http://www.bard.edu/undergraduate/calendar>. For students in the first semester of their project, midway materials are due on this same date.

**Recommended schedule** (based on successive fall and spring semesters):

Previous spring: pursue an independent research project on a topic of your interest in PRS (you may have the chance to do so in other classes as well); request an advisor; meet with your advisor before the end of the spring semester to discuss possible questions and make a plan for research during the summer.

September: bring in a substantial piece of writing relevant to the project that you have done for a course or that you have done over the summer; set new goals for reading, writing and revising.

October: engage in sustained, focused reading and writing on your topic; move toward a conception of the overall goals and structure of the writing sample.

November: draft and revise your writing sample and other midway materials.

December: finalize midway materials; prepare for midway board.

January: follow up on suggestions from the midway board for revision or expansion of the writing sample.

February: transition from new reading/research to full-time writing; often the best plan is to build out from the writing sample.

March: clarify the overall goals and structure of the project, highlighting areas that are especially in need of drafting or revision.

April: draft and revise the completed project; be sure to give yourself time after completing substantial revisions to proofread the project carefully before handing it in.

May: prepare for final board and senior project conference.

### **Examples**

A great way to demystify the senior project and to see some of its possibilities is to look at projects from the recent past. The library makes these easily available online in PDF format. The full digital archive of projects going back to 2011 is available at [https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/sr\\_proj\\_phil/](https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/sr_proj_phil/). Here are some recommended examples:

Anna Daniszewski, *The Philosopher's Diagnosis: Sickness in Plato, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger*

Sorrel Dunn, *Extraordinary Language: Apprehending Wonder in Woolf and Wittgenstein*

Michael Golub, *Taking the Long Way Home: On Becoming Oneself through Others in Montaigne's Essays*

Austen Hinkley, *Beginning in Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Mallarmé*

Ying Huang, *Dismantling the Novelty and Mystery in Implicit Bias: A New Perspective*

Dana Miranda, *The Nation-State as Historian: A Philosophical Reading of Monumentalization*

Daniel Perlman, *Terms of Eternity: World and Reason in the Ghazali-Averroes Polemic*

Thatcher Snyder, *The World Through Your Eyes: An Analysis of Spike Jonze's Her*

Leonardo Santoso, *What's the Problem with Noumenal Affection?*

Jeremiah Tillman, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Communication and the Fullness of Time in Repetition and Fear and Trembling*

Bethany Zulick, *An Outsider's Perspective: Walter Benjamin's Vision of Philosophy*