

Philosophy senior project requirements and guidelines

The purpose of this document is to help students to understand the goals, process and expectations of a 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. They are not meant to impose a single mold on the admirable diversity of philosophy projects. They do not 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 revising 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 these feelings are 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: they 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 feel good about your completed project is to 1) set reasonable goals, 2) have a plan to execute them, 3) set aside sufficient working time to execute them, and 4) 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 look like at each stage of the process.

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. If you feel that a question has only one reasonable answer, or one obvious answer, it will not be a fruitful question for you to explore, and you should pursue a different question that you feel has multiple compelling answers.

You should not expect to arrive at a final formulation of your question before you start working on the project. Do not put off starting to write because you are not yet sure what your question is. As you work on the project, your understanding of the question will become clearer and more precise. 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?

-Does Hegel offer a consistent definition of freedom?

-Is Dewey's philosophy of education relevant today?

As the examples discussed above indicate, 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 purpose of an utterance? -Is independence always preferable to dependence?
- Is autism a disability?
- Can monuments accurately represent a nation’s history?

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. A conversation is not simply a group of people who talk about the same topic, but a group who respect one another’s contributions, engage in dialogue with each other, and share certain priorities, standards, and common points of reference. 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. It is often simplest to start with a topic you have some previous familiarity with, for instance from your previous course work. Since you have already spent some time learning, thinking, and writing about this topic, 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 or 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 to four chapters, plus an introduction or conclusion. 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. If you are working in the history of philosophy, 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 at least 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 be entirely new work, not work previously submitted for any course. 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.

Assignment of advisors

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 choose an advisor purely on the basis of the advisor's areas of specialization. If you are unsure whether a given faculty member would be a good fit for your intended topic, just ask them: if they don't feel that they would be a good fit, they can give you alternative suggestions for advisors who might work better. You should not feel limited to faculty in the Philosophy program; faculty outside the program have often successfully advised philosophy projects, and they can be a better choice for you depending on your topic and approach. When you request an advisor, you will be asked to provide the names of three possible advisors, two from the program and one from another program in the Social Studies Division. The assignment of advisors is done by the division, in consultation with the program. In assigning advisors, we take into account student requests, but also balance and fairness in the distribution of advisees. In most cases, the same advisor will work with you during both semesters of the project. Students may have different advisors for the two semesters, e.g., if their advisor goes on leave.

Joint projects

A joint senior project is a single project that satisfies the senior project requirement for two different programs. For example, a joint Philosophy-Classical Studies senior project might explore the literary or historical aspects of Plato's dialogues and how they affect our understanding of his philosophical arguments. Joint projects can be a wonderful way to explore interests at the intersection of two disciplines. But they are often difficult to write, since they need to cohere as a single project while also meeting the expectations of both programs. Students writing a joint project involving Philosophy and another program must fulfill all of the requirements described here, in addition to the

requirements of their other program. A joint project may have an advisor in only one of the relevant programs, or it may have two advisors, one from each program. In either case, faculty members from each program must serve on the midway and final boards. If you are contemplating a joint project, you should speak about your plans with faculty members from each program (preferably your academic advisors or others who know your work) during your junior year. Students can undertake a joint project only with the approval of the college's Executive Committee; this approval must be secured in the semester before you start the project.

Registration, credits and grades

Each student writes their senior project over two semesters. In the first semester, they register for PHIL 401 (Senior Project I), and in the second semester for PHIL 402 (Senior Project II). Each of these courses is four credits, for a total of eight credits. Students in PHIL 401 concurrently take PHIL 403, the Senior Project Colloquium (see below). All students must be in residence in Annandale during both semesters. A Philosophy project can be started in either the fall or spring semester. Students pursuing a double major should consult with both programs regarding when to start the two projects. It is recommended that double majors "stagger" the projects, beginning one in the second semester of the junior year, so that they are not doing all of the work of both projects in the senior year only. Your advisor will give you a grade of "S" ("satisfactory") or "U" ("unsatisfactory") for PHIL 401. Students must receive an "S" in PHIL 401 in order to progress to 402. After the project is completed, your final grade becomes your grade for PHIL 401 and 402.

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 <https://www.bard.edu/academics/calendar/>. For students in the first semester of their project, midway materials are due on this same date.

Role of advisors

During the first semester of the project, you will meet three times with your advisor. At the same time, you will meet weekly with the senior project colloquium (see below). During the second semester, you will meet weekly with your advisor. Before each meeting with your advisor, you should send them a detailed description of the current state of your project and a sample of your current work in progress for them to read before the meeting. You will not use your time or the advisor's time productively if you do not set aside time to work on the project between meetings. Practicing the skill of managing your time is a large part of what the senior project process is about. At the

end of each meeting, you should discuss concrete next steps with your advisor, including the work you will do before the next meeting.

Senior project colloquium

The Senior Project Colloquium is a writing workshop for students in the first semester of the senior project. It meets weekly during the semester with a faculty member. At its meetings, students take turns giving and receiving feedback on their senior project work in progress. The colloquium provides a supportive intellectual community for students developing their projects. It also gives students an opportunity to practice presenting their work, giving constructive comments on their peers' work, and revising in response to comments. The colloquium is graded P/F/D, based on the development of your work and your engagement with peers' work throughout the semester. Only students who pass PHIL 403 will be allowed to register for PHIL 402. It carries no additional credits.

Midway materials

Students are required to submit the following materials at the end of PHIL 401/403: 1) A writing sample, of 15-20 pages, that represents the kind of 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) An abstract of the project, i.e., a brief statement, in clear and accessible prose, of what the project's question is, your intended argument at this point, the main sources of evidence you will use, and a brief description of an opposing argument you will consider and how you will 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 structure 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.

Boards

You will discuss the project with a group of faculty at two boards: a midway board at the end of the first semester, and a final board at the end of the second. Boards typically include two members of the faculty in addition to your advisor. Board members are assigned by the program. They are usually members of the philosophy faculty, but in some cases faculty from other parts of the college may be appropriate, especially if they have expertise that is relevant to your project, e.g., if your project is about Nietzsche, a faculty member from German Studies 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 previous board members is on leave. 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.

Midway board

The midway board is primarily an advising session. It provides an opportunity for you to reflect on the work you have done thus far, receive feedback from faculty readers, and plan for the remainder of the project. Do not be surprised if your advisor is mostly quiet 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. We recommend that you speak with your advisor after the board to help you process the feedback you received. 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 next step in the development of your project? What might you do between semesters to keep your project developing?

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 question is required for all projects across the college. The 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 take 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. If you choose to take the project for a letter grade, your board members will tell you at the board whether you have passed, and you will later be informed of the letter grade by your advisor. To ensure fairness and consistency, advisors assign letter grades in consultation with the program after all the boards for that semester have been held.

Senior project grading

Policies about the grading of senior projects are set by programs and vary across the college. In Philosophy, your grade reflects not only the completed project itself, but also your engagement, effort, and progress in PHIL 401, 402 and 403. 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 evidence, including, if relevant, both primary and secondary sources? Are quotations successfully integrated into the argument and properly cited?

Opposing arguments: Does the project engage substantively with other points of view on the question, including sympathetic consideration of their arguments? Does the project include a substantial discussion of evidence that significantly challenges the 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?

Process: Did the student take full advantage of all aspects of the process, including the colloquium and meetings with the advisor? Did the student organize the writing process and manage their time well?

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?

Salon

The Philosophy Salon is a co-curricular meeting of students and faculty, held on Fridays at noon during the semester. Attendance and participation in the Salon is expected for all Philosophy majors. At the end of each semester, seniors are invited to give a brief (approximately 7-8 minute) presentation of their project to the Salon, which is followed by an open discussion with questions from the audience. Students in both PHIL 401 and 402 are invited to participate. These presentations are optional but highly recommended. Many students describe the Salon presentation and discussion as one of their favorite parts of the entire process. They often find that the task of explaining their project in a brief and accessible way focuses their thinking about the project and

can be helpful as they revise it. The Salon is open to students and faculty from across the college, as well as to friends and family members.

Recommended schedule (based on successive fall and spring semesters; you should also consult with your advisor about their recommended timeline):

Junior year: take 300-level Philosophy seminars in which you have an opportunity to pursue topics of special interest in depth and develop longer, more independent writing projects. At the end of the semester before you start the project, you will request an advisor and have your advisor assigned. You should meet with the advisor before the end of that semester to discuss possible questions and make a plan for research between semesters.

First semester

September: weekly meetings with the colloquium; first meeting with your advisor; provisionally formulate your question and develop a reading list; identify a provisional topic for your writing sample and begin a first draft; first presentation in the colloquium.

October: weekly meetings with the colloquium; engage in sustained, focused reading and writing on your topic; continue developing your draft; second presentation in the colloquium.

November: weekly meetings with the colloquium; revise your writing sample; draft other midway materials; meet with your advisor and revise your materials in response to advisor's comments.

December: final meeting with your advisor before the midway board; finalize and submit midway materials; prepare for and complete the midway board and Salon presentation.

Second semester

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

February: meet weekly with your advisor; transition from new reading and research to full-time writing; bring new or substantially revised writing to each weekly meeting; in consultation with your advisor, make a plan for how you will complete the project in the next two months.

March: meet weekly with your advisor; finalize your conception of the project, including the main goals of each chapter and the overall argument of the project; draft the full project.

April: meet weekly with your advisor; revise the completed project in response to advisor's suggestions; be sure to give yourself time after completing substantial revisions to proofread the project carefully before handing it in; hand in the project by the college-wide due date.

May: final meeting with your advisor before the board; prepare for and complete the final board and Salon presentation.

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/. Here are some recommended examples. These projects are not only excellent, but also give a sense of the range of topics and forms that students explore in Philosophy projects:

Wailly Comprés, *De manera errante: Forging Decolonial Paths*

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*

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

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

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*