

Weblog discussion participation guidelines

PHIL 101

Participation in our course weblog discussion counts for 25% of your grade. Your discussion comments will be graded along a number of dimensions, not merely on the fact that you participated or the number of times you've participated. Details of my expectations are below.

How this will work

- The blog is set up using Blackboard's discussion feature. Once you're logged in and at the page for our course, just go to "Discussions" and the blog will be right there.
- I'll be the only one that can officially "post" discussion topics. You officially only get to "comment" on discussion topics. I'll post things fairly often to get you started. Such things will pose a problem or question from class or from our readings, and might give you some hints as to what kinds of things might be good to think about.
- You won't just be commenting on my opening post, but also on anything you find intriguing in the comments so far. That's what a critical discussion is, and this exercise is aimed at having you practice doing that.
- Your username will be visible, but your full name will not. So to some degree you'll know who's who in our discussion.
- Some of the postings I'll make are administrative, like telling you something about an upcoming test or a past one, alerting you to a schedule change, etc. You can use the comment feature to ask a question on that item if you like, but it won't go toward your final grade.
- If there is something that eating at you and you want it posted as a discussion topic, email me your suggestion. I very likely will then post it for everyone to think about (including you).

Minimal general expectations

- For each of our test periods (five in all), *the minimum expectation is two substantial comments per test period.* If you only post at that frequency, and the quality of the comments themselves are respectable, you'll receive a passing grade. A more exemplary grade requires more participation, with a sustained level of thoughtful comments that demonstrate a good engagement with our course material.
- What counts as "a substantial comment"? In order for your comments to count positively toward a good grade at the end, you need to have a good number of *substantial* comments that are at least 100-200 words or so each. As for content, that kind of participation does things like this:
 - posing a critical question related to my post or a previous comment, ideally followed by an attempt at a justified answer
 - drawing out some consequence of a position or someone else's comment(s)
 - giving a clear objection to a view or previous comment
 - stating a clear line of argument in favor of one's own view(s) on something relevant to the course
- There is another kind of participation that might be useful, but it won't count for much as far as the final grade goes. I'm talking about one-liner comments like these:
 - "I agree!"
 - "Neat! It's all much clearer now. Thanks!"
 - "I mean this with all due respect, but you're wrong about that."
 - "WTF??"

Grading

When the semester is over, I will evaluate all of your discussion comments together. They will be graded on the following criteria:

- ***The quality of the writing in your comments***—If your comments are clear and intelligible, well organized, and free of grammatical and mechanical mistakes, that's good. If your writing is not up to the minimal standards acceptable for college writing, that's very bad. In fact, that will result in a very low grade for this portion of the course. What's the minimal standard? One error every third sentence or so is well below the minimum for college writing. One error per 100 words is barely tolerable, but still not good. If the writing in your blog comments is substandard, I'll let you know about it, and I might even do it publicly.
- ***The accuracy of your presentation of any relevant philosophical views and/or arguments***—For comments aimed at clarifying some position or argument, this criterion isn't so important. But when you're discussing something critically, you need to have the view or argument you're discussing stated accurately. For instance, if you talk about Descartes as if he's an atheist, that's not good—he thinks there's a God.
- ***The depth of your engagement with the issue(s) being discussed***—Your comments need to demonstrate a good understanding of the issues crucial to resolving our philosophical problems. But if you spend the whole semester merely figuring out what the issues and problems themselves are, that's not good enough. You need to be making a serious effort at trying to find the right answers to the philosophical questions we'll consider. The more your comments speak to what's crucial to resolving those philosophical problems, the better. You'll be graded on that too.
- ***Frequency and number of comments***—You are expected to comment in a substantial way at least twice per test period. Don't do the minimum: More participation than that is expected for an exemplary grade, and you can participate as much as you want. More good participation tends to demonstrate more understanding and thus more learning. If that's done in a way that's clear and presented in a way that observes the rules of good writing, then you'll maximize your chances of a good grade.

I'll try to make remarks along the way about how everyone is doing with this as a group. I might send you some general remarks on your own comments too—perhaps at about the midway point by way of a mid-semester notification as to whether you're doing things right or not. You can also come see me in office hours: We can talk about your progress so far, along with any details as to the substance of any of your comments by that point.

Other notes

- I'll be talking in class about the blog from time to time. One of your own comments might be mentioned explicitly, so be ready for that.
- Don't plagiarize. Cutting and pasting philosophical remarks from elsewhere without proper citation is unacceptable, and even closely paraphrased but uncited material counts as plagiarism. The rules of academic behavior are in effect here, so observe them.
- You may cite things from elsewhere on the web or otherwise, but we need to know where to go to see it for ourselves. Give us web links, page numbers, etc. as necessary.
- Rude, obscene, and or profane comments will be deleted, and in exceptional cases may constitute academic misconduct.