

V83.0093, Fall 2009

PHIL APPS OF COG SCI PAPER GUIDE

Two Basic Rules Answer the question!
Give reasons for everything you assert!

Answer the Question Some of the questions are almost entirely philosophical, and you should write something close to a traditional philosophy paper: lay out someone's philosophical position, consider an objection to the position, critique the objection (explain why you think it does or does not work).

Some questions are mostly empirical: you will be assessing developments in the cognitive sciences. For example, question 6 asks you to write a paper about the prospects of a certain psychological theory of concepts. There's no philosophy here at all. Again, you will be laying out a position and one or two objections to it, and then assessing the objections. But now you are dealing with empirical evidence rather than philosophical considerations.

Some of the questions mix philosophy and cognitive science. You will have to use your judgment here to decide how much of each to include in your paper. When in doubt, stick to the basic *position, objection, assessment* model.

And then, once you have an outline for your paper, ask yourself: Does this answer the question?

Give Reasons When writing philosophy, no matter whether you are affirming a thesis, endorsing an objection, or claiming that an objection does not work, give an argument. That is, try to convince the reader that you are right, using all the resources at your disposal. Explain why they ought to agree with you. Go for a walk and argue with yourself; when you get back, write down the lines of argument you found most persuasive.

When writing about science, the same advice applies. But here, you are more likely to be appealing to the evidence: this theory cannot explain this phenomenon, while this other theory can, and so on.

Links Jim Pryor has posted some useful advice on his web site: <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/>. Look for the following sections in particular: Intro to Philosophical Terms & Methods; Reading Philosophy; and Writing a Philosophy Paper.

Length If your paper is too short, you will probably not get enough information and argument across to earn a decent grade. Widening the margins so that it takes up more pieces of paper won't increase the amount of information and argument you get across.

If your paper is too long, you are making it harder for yourself to exercise the appropriate quality control in every paragraph. If you write too much, consider cutting some parts out to get the paper down to a manageable length.

However: if you do end up writing too much, I would much rather have you exceed the page limit than have to read an incredibly tiny font or a paper with no margins. Remember, I've been doing this for ages. I can tell whether your paper is too short or too long; there's no point trying to cover it up with formatting that makes the paper harder for me to read.

Examples On Locke's theory of concepts, what would it take to acquire the concept 'just war'? Can it be done?

You'll need to give an overview of Locke's theory. Now try to figure out how to construct the complex idea of a just war from simple ideas using Locke's toolkit (conjunction, relation, abstraction). Even if you think it can't be done, give it your best shot. If you're not really trying, I won't be convinced. Then go on to explain, if you can, *why* you failed. Or if you think you have succeeded, consider an objection to your proposal, that is, a reason to think that the concept you have constructed doesn't capture everything important about our actual notion of a just war.

Make it a serious objection – I won't be very impressed by your brushing off a weak objection. Whether you are pro- or anti-Locke, do your best to put yourself in the other side's shoes, to see things the way they do.

- How can children be so good at reasoning causally, if their naive physics is seriously mistaken?

You need to unpack the presuppositions of the question and lay them out explicitly. How are children good at causal reasoning? How is their naive physics mistaken? How might the mistakes in physics cause problems for the reasoning? Why don't they, in fact, cause problems? (Or do they?) In short: explain why there is the appearance of problem, and only then explain why there is no problem. (Or argue that there is!)

- Who is right about the representation of spatial relations, Lakoff or Jackendoff and Landau?

Of course you need to explain Lakoff's and Jackendoff and Landau's

views. You could easily write six pages just doing this – resist that urge, and be concise. Now you will have space to consider no more than one argument in favor of one side or the other. Make it a good one. Then consider an objection to the argument – a serious objection, that might really move someone to disagree with you. Do your best to defuse the objection. Or go along with it, taking time to explain why you do. I am much more interested in seeing you work out the argument than in your final conclusion.

Plagiarism Once more, just to be sure: All work submitted for this class should be your own. Any words quoted from other sources should be attributed explicitly to those sources. If you are unsure whether your use of someone else's work is legitimate, please ask me. The penalties for plagiarism include failing the class and worse.

Reading For most of the questions, it is not necessary to do additional reading. In many cases it may be helpful, but thinking hard should be your first priority.