

PHIL 3480-002: CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING IN PHILOSOPHY
SPRING 2026
BRUCE CURTIS BLDG E158, 12:30 P.M.-1:45 P.M., T-TH

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Web Site: <http://philophizer.com/index.html> (Please note: all handouts, along with lecture outlines, study guides, this Syllabus, a course calendar with all assignments listed are available both at this website and on the Canvas site)

Office Hours: 2:00-3:15 P.M. TTh in HLMS W137 (or by Zoom appointment).

Course Description

This course is different from *some* other courses in philosophy that you may have taken. If you approach it in the same way as many typical philosophy courses you will miss what is important here. You have been trained to treat philosophy as an academic subject, one that others produce and you consume. In this class I hope to help you to think like a productive philosopher. That can requires looking closely at the writings of well-known, accomplished philosophers to discern and uncover their particular ways of thinking. Their writings are useful guideposts in the development of *your own* philosophical thinking. They also stand as models for the expression of your own philosophical ideas, both orally and in written form. In the end, it is my hope you will expand upon those fundamental skills, methods, concepts, and distinctions you already possess or grasp and that are essential for the study and practice of philosophy. The basic skills covered include those involved in preparing for and writing philosophical essays, the skills needed to be a deep, active reader of philosophical articles and books, and those you will need when extracting and evaluating any arguments those texts contain. As with any genuine interaction with the best minds, your own mind will be improved in the process.

Course Objectives

1. That you learn to identify arguments, an important tool of philosophical work.
2. That you learn to read philosophical works in an active and comprehensive way, and more importantly, to develop the skills necessary to consider alternative versions of *what the author meant* by their assertions, alternatives that you then attempt to refine into the most-plausible interpretation (*very few* people, including some *working philosophers*, develop this skill to the highest level, and philosophy is always worse off for every failure to achieve the highest expression of this skill).
3. That you learn to express your thoughts clearly, to listen carefully to what others have to say, and to recognize when your own thinking has become inflexible and over-determined by your accidental and/or well-worn habits of mind.
4. That you make progress in the fine art of assessing, analyzing and criticizing arguments and the framework of thought and analysis that supports them.
5. Most importantly, that you develop skills for considering the grounds and wellsprings of philosophical *problems* and *questions*: where do they come from? Why should you, or anyone, care if they go unsolved/unanswered? Why are the particular problems addressed in any given period in the long history of philosophy, including the ones under discussion in contemporary academic philosophy, the problems/questions that matter? If you want to treat philosophy seriously, you need, at minimum, to make ongoing attempts to answer to these questions.

Required Texts

We will be reading only articles and/or papers that I make available through the Canvas site for this course, including in particular Ludwig Wittgenstein's short book *On Certainty*. Also, you should look at the Supplementary Packet for this course (available on the web site), which contains:

- (i) Helpful hints for writing philosophy papers, (ii) A list of abbreviations used in grading papers, (iii) A model history-of-philosophy paper, and (iv) A very brief but amazingly informative survey of informal logic.

Course Requirements & Percentage of Final Grade

(1) Five Diagnostic Exercises	10%
(2) Attendance	20%
(3) Three Reading Summaries (given orally by a two-[-four]-person groups)	10%
(4) Quizzes	10%
(5) Writing Exercise One	25%
(6) Second Paper	25%

Notes on Course Requirements:

(1) Our work will be more or less evenly divided between exercises and assignments designed to improve your reading skills and those designed to improve your writing skills. Many class sessions will be spent discussing the readings in detail, often after you have submitted a reading summary, or we have had a presentation from two of your classmates on it.

(2) Since a philosophical essay is *not* like other kinds of essays you may have written in college (or elsewhere), it is strongly recommended that before preparing your papers, you read very carefully the helpful hints for doing philosophy papers, the list of abbreviations used in grading papers, and the model history-of-philosophy paper (all to be found in the supplementary packet available on Canvas for the course and the website under Lectures and Handouts). I do assume that you have already learned how to write essays in English. Here you are trying to learn how to write *philosophical* essays in English.

Clarifications, Rules of the Road, Regrettable Necessities & Errata

(1) What your grade means:

A: Superior work; **B:** Good work; **C:** Work with some strengths, balanced against clear weaknesses; **D:** Work with few strengths, many weaknesses; **F:** Work with no strengths not offset by clear and compelling weaknesses.

(2) Late papers are a Really Bad Thing. The usual excusing conditions must exist if I am to make exceptions in your case.

(3) Breaches of academic honesty will receive the harshest allowable university penalty. However, I do think it is worth noting that to cheat in philosophy is to cheat yourself, since you undermine the potential development of your own mind (which *is the point of any education worth having*).

(4) Handwritten notetaking improves retention and depth of understanding, and for that reason, laptops are not permitted except for those with a disability accommodation. I suggest you get a notebook in which you keep your class notes, but tablets with touchscreen-based handwriting are permitted. Cell phones are to be kept in silent mode & put away during our class meetings.

(5) Reading assignments in philosophy tend to be both challenging and time consuming. You might want to take this into account when planning your spring semester. This course is as difficult as any technical course you take (calculus, for example). Do not assume it is a cakewalk ... you will regret that assumption later.

(6) Readings should be done prior to the class for which they are assigned. If this involves a range of days, you should have everything read by the first day in the range.

(7) Total points possible for the course: 100.

(8) What to expect from me: prompt and honest feedback, clear lectures, sufficient contact outside class (e.g., office hours, e-mail, Canvas, and/or the course website).

(9) Since not all students wish to receive graded final papers with comments, please let me know in advance if you would like detailed comments on yours. Otherwise, I will only grade, not comment. All final exams and papers are returned in Canvas once graded. I do not comment on Final Exams but all are marked to indicate where points, if any, were lost.

(10) I am happy to discuss assignment grades with you after they are returned, but let's talk during office hours or on the phone.

(11) If you need to request an extension on an essay, the chance to take a quiz you missed, hope to be excused for one or more absences, or to make me aware of a situation in your personal life that you think I should be aware of, if you prefer to email me rather than speak to me in person, use the Canvas email system, **not my CU Boulder email address**. I get too many emails each day from non-university sources, whereas, Canvas emails come through and are always from students (rather than from spammers, companies I do business with, friends of mine, etc.). This makes it very unlikely that I will miss an important message from you sent through Canvas email. In cases where you need to reach me **very soon/immediately, just text me at 720-252-0643**. That will more consistently get my attention short of actually coming to talk to me in person.

(12) This syllabus is subject to revision.

Assignment Schedule

To be announced through the Canvas Calendar for this course with cues made available through a separate calendar made available on the course website.

One Last Thing

Since I find it very helpful to speak with each of you at least once, there will be required, short (10-minute) meetings during office hours the first month or so of the semester to discuss your progress. I will be distributing a digital sign-up sheet in the form of a Doodle poll so you can arrange a time and date that suits you. Don't put this off too long as it helps me to understand your work in my class if I've gotten to know your background, interests, and ambitions through a private conversation.

Basic Needs: I believe that in order to learn, students need to have their basic needs met: food to eat and a safe place to live. If you're having trouble with either, the campus has some resources for you. If you're facing food insecurity, reach out to food@colorado.edu, and they will work with you to find food resources. If you're having trouble paying rent or facing housing insecurity, you can get in touch with these advocates: [Boulder County Housing & Human Services](#) at 303-441-1000 or [Off-campus Housing](#) at och@colorado.edu & 303-492-7053. For assistance with landlord-tenant matters, contact [Mediation Services](#) at 303-441-4364 & mediation@bouldercolorado.edu. A [Student Emergency Fund](#) has been created to support students experiencing a temporary financial hardship as a result of COVID-19. Other campus resources are available here (including mental health resources and [free therapy](#)). [Case manager resources](#) are also available to help you find appropriate campus and local resources. A 24/7 [Suicide Prevention hotline](#) is available for you: just call 303-492-2277. Please don't hesitate to also approach me if you have trouble negotiating these resources.

CAMPUS POLICIES AND RESOURCES

Classroom Behavior

Students and faculty are responsible for maintaining an appropriate learning environment in all instructional settings, whether in person, remote, or online. Failure to adhere to such behavioral standards may be subject to discipline. Professional courtesy and sensitivity are especially important with respect to individuals and topics dealing with race, color, national origin, sex, pregnancy, age, disability, creed, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, veteran status, marital status, political affiliation, or political philosophy.

For more information, see the [classroom behavior policy](#), the [Student Code of Conduct](#), and the [Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance](#).

Accommodation for Disabilities, Temporary Medical Conditions, and Medical Isolation

If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please submit your accommodation letter from Disability Services to your faculty member in a timely manner so that your needs can be addressed. Disability Services determines accommodations based on documented disabilities in the academic environment. Information on requesting accommodations is located on the [Disability Services website](#). Contact Disability Services at 303-492-8671 or DSinfo@colorado.edu for further assistance. If you have a temporary medical condition, see [Temporary Medical Conditions](#) on the Disability Services website.

If you have a temporary illness, injury or required medical isolation for which you require adjustment, just let me know what kind of adjustment (approval for absences from class, extensions on assignments for which the due dates are not workable given the illness, injury, or medical isolation involved). Privacy rules prohibit teachers to require knowledge of the *exact nature* of such illness, injury, or medical situation as a condition of providing accommodation. You are therefore *not required* to share that information with me.

Preferred Student Names and Pronouns

CU Boulder recognizes that students' legal information doesn't always align with how they identify. Students may update their preferred names and pronouns via the student portal; those preferred names and pronouns are listed on instructors' class rosters. In the absence of such updates, the name that appears on the class roster is the student's legal name.

Honor Code

All students enrolled in a University of Colorado Boulder course are responsible for knowing and adhering to the [Honor Code](#). Violations of the Honor Code may include but are not limited to: plagiarism (including use of paper writing services or technology [such as essay bots]), cheating, fabrication, lying, bribery, threat, unauthorized access to academic materials, clicker fraud, submitting the same or similar work in more than one course without permission from all course instructors involved, and aiding academic dishonesty. Understanding the course's syllabus is a vital part in adhering to the Honor Code.

All incidents of academic misconduct will be reported to Student Conduct & Conflict Resolution: StudentConduct@colorado.edu. Students found responsible for violating the [Honor Code](#) will be assigned resolution outcomes from the Student Conduct & Conflict Resolution as well as be subject to academic sanctions from the faculty member. Visit [Honor Code](#) for more information on the academic integrity policy.

Sexual Misconduct, Discrimination, Harassment and/or Related Retaliation

CU Boulder is committed to fostering an inclusive and welcoming learning, working, and living environment. University policy prohibits [protected-class](#) discrimination and harassment, sexual misconduct (harassment, exploitation, and assault), intimate partner abuse (dating or domestic violence), stalking, and related retaliation by or against members of our community on- and off-campus. The Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance (OIEC) addresses these concerns, and individuals who have been subjected to misconduct can contact OIEC at 303-492-2127 or email CUreport@colorado.edu. Information about university policies, [reporting options](#), and [support resources](#) including confidential services can be found on the [OIEC website](#).

Please know that faculty and graduate instructors must inform OIEC when they are made aware of incidents related to these policies regardless of when or where something occurred. This is to ensure that individuals impacted receive outreach from OIEC about resolution options and support resources. To learn more about reporting and support for a variety of concerns, visit the [Don't Ignore It page](#).

Religious Accommodations

Campus policy requires faculty to provide reasonable accommodations for students who, because of religious obligations, have

conflicts with scheduled exams, assignments or required attendance. Please communicate the need for a religious accommodation in a timely manner (at least one week prior to the holiday/observance involved).

See the [campus policy regarding religious observances](#) for full details.

Mental Health and Wellness.

The University of Colorado Boulder is committed to the well-being of all students. If you are struggling with personal stressors, mental health or substance use concerns that are impacting academic or daily life, please contact [Counseling and Psychiatric Services \(CAPS\)](#) located in C4C or call (303) 492-2277, 24/7.

Free and unlimited telehealth is also available through [Academic Live Care](#). The Academic Live Care site also provides information about additional wellness services on campus that are available to students.