

PHIL174 Midterm Paper Guide

Created by Jen Foster
Fall 2023

Submission Checklist ✓

- I've double-spaced my paper
- I've included my word count beneath my title
- I've included page numbers in the upper-righthand corner
- I've made sure there's no mention of my name **anywhere** in the file, including the header or the file name
- I've included a Works Cited at the end with all relevant references
- I've made sure the conclusion (thesis) that I say I'll defend in the introduction is actually the one I end up defending
- I've double-checked all of my paraphrases of course readings/slides to make sure I haven't accidentally copied word-for-word
- I've saved as a PDF

Due September 29th, 2023 by 5pm Pacific
on the discussion section Blackboard page in the
submission portal under "Midterm Paper"

The Fine Print

The midterm paper must be **2,000-2,300 words** in length.

Papers submitted **after the deadline** without a pre-approved extension from me (your TA) will accrue a **one-third letter grade penalty** for every day they are late. So a paper that would have originally earned a B+ (had it been turned in on time) will be lowered to a B if submitted one day late, a B- if submitted two days late, etc.

If you need an extension, please email me (jennifnh@usc.edu) as soon as you realize you need one. You don't need to make up a "good" excuse if you feel like you don't have one — just let me know ASAP that you could use some more time and propose what you think would be a reasonable new deadline; we'll work something out. **Just please, please please please** don't resort to cheating/plagiarizing because you're up against the deadline and panicking!!! And on the flipside, please don't give up on submitting something altogether — we can make a plan to make sure you finish the paper / get something in for a grade.

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Rubric

	Philosophical Content				Mechanics	
	Faithfulness	Clarity	Rigor	Originality	Structure	Citations
Exemplary (A)	Arguments and views relevant to the prompt are rehearsed fairly, accurately, and in sufficient detail; arguments and views are not dismissed without careful consideration.	Clear, specific, and informative thesis; prose is clear and easy to follow throughout; philosophical terms are appropriately introduced and defined or illustrated by example; each sentence says exactly what the author means it	Important claims are defended with strong, developed arguments; there are clear premises that build on each other to establish the stated thesis; strong objections are anticipated and replied to.	Does not merely rehearse views or arguments presented in lecture or readings; offers a new argument or view with strong, original examples.	Paper is very well-organized and individual paragraphs are well-structured; there is only one point per sentence, and only one argument or "big idea" per paragraph; good use of transitions between paragraphs; arguments build upon themselves in a cohesive and easy-to-follow way to arrive ultimately at the	Quotes and paraphrases are properly cited; a complete "Works Cited" appears at the end of the paper.
Competent (B)	Relevant views and arguments are rehearsed fairly, but in insufficient detail; rehearsal may contain errors or unnecessary or irrelevant details.	Thesis could be clearer or more specific; Some technical terms are used without any attempt to clarify what they mean; it is unclear what some sentences are intended to say.	Some important claims are asserted without argument; some premises are undersupported or missing; possible objections/replies are weak, obvious, or irrelevant.	May not offer a new argument or view, but clarifies or strengthens an argument from the readings or lectures with original examples.	Paper is broadly well-structured but there are some issues, e.g.– occasional problems with paragraph unity; some transitions unclear; parts of the argument "out of order", paragraphs try to do too much or feel unconnected to adjacent ones	Some direct quotes and (especially) paraphrases are not properly cited; the "Works Cited" section may be incomplete or missing altogether.
Needs Work (C)	Relevant views or are sketched in very superficial terms; are grossly misrepresented or dismissed without argument. Paper may not address the prompt.	No identifiable thesis; Much of the paper is unclear; little to no attempt is made to clarify technical terms either by definition or example.	The paper contains mostly assertions with little or no argument; given arguments do not support or even contradict thesis; no possible objections are considered.	Merely rehearses arguments from lecture or from the readings; does not offer any new argument, view, or objection.	Overall paper structure is unclear and hard to follow; significant issues with paragraph organization and unity; there is no clear logical path to the thesis/conclusion.	Very serious citation issues; most if not all direct quotes and paraphrases are not properly cited; some phrasing may be taken directly from an uncited source.

Prompts


There are **five prompts** for this assignment, each with the following form:

[X].
Explain and evaluate this claim.

Choose **one** to address in your paper:

1. "A principle of fair play cannot explain the obligation to obey the law without collapsing into a version of consent theory." Explain and evaluate this claim.
2. "Democratic institutions are of great instrumental value and this explains why there is a duty to obey the law in constitutional democracies". Explain and evaluate this claim.
3. "There is never a sufficient justification for violent forms of disobedience in liberal democracies because lawful protest and civil disobedience are always better alternatives." Explain and evaluate this claim.
4. "The principles that parties in the original position would select are not good candidate principles of justice because those parties are so different from real people and they have so little information." Explain and evaluate this claim.
5. "The difference principle does not permit incentive-based inequalities because those inequalities are not in fact necessary to secure further benefits for the least-advantaged". Explain and evaluate this claim.

Each of these prompts contains an **implicit argument** which can be re-written in **premise-conclusion form**. (See the next few pages).



Valid arguments are *guaranteed* to have true conclusions **if** their premises are true.

So if you want to reject the conclusion of a valid argument, you must **knock down one of the premises** — i.e., persuade us that at least one of the steps in the argument is false.

Prompt 1

“A principle of fair play cannot explain the duty to obey the law without collapsing into a version of consent theory.” Explain and evaluate this claim.

Key terms to explain:

duty to obey the law
principle of fair play
consent theory
(tacit) consent
free-riding

Rewritten as an argument:

- P1. A principle of fair play can only explain the duty to obey the law by appealing to/invoking consent.
- P2. If a principle of fair play can only explain the duty to obey the law by appealing to/invoking consent, then it is just a version of consent theory.
- C. Therefore, a principle of fair play is just a version of consent theory.

To **defend** this argument:

➔ Defend P1 and P2

- ➔ argue that a “fair play” principle’s explanation for why free-riding is wrong (and why we have a duty to obey) **requires** something like (tacit) consent.
- ➔ argue that any explanation of the duty to obey which turns on something like (tacit) consent **just is** a version of consent theory (which is pretty much true by definition — so the real task would really be arguing for P1!)

To **reject** this argument:

➔ Reject P1

- ➔ argue that a plausible “fair play” explanation of the duty to obey the law does **not** require something like (tacit) consent; something else explains why free-riding is morally wrong.

➔ or Reject P2

- ➔ argue that just because a theory explains the duty to obey in terms of consent, that **doesn’t mean** it’s a version of consent theory. (This seems hard to argue, though.....)

Prompt 2

“Democratic institutions are of great instrumental value and this explains why there is a duty to obey the law in constitutional democracies”. Explain and evaluate this claim.

Key terms to explain:

*political obligation /
duty to obey the law
political institutions
constitutional democracy
instrumental value*

Rewritten as an argument:

- P1. Democratic institutions are of great instrumental value.
- P2. If democratic institutions are of great instrumental value, then there is a moral duty to obey the law in constitutional democracies.
- C. Therefore, there is a moral duty to obey the law in constitutional democracies.

To **defend** this argument:

➔ Defend P1 and P2

- ➔ argue that political institutions in constitutional democracies really **do** have great instrumental value; they secure or promote many morally and politically valuable things.
- ➔ argue that, **because** democratic institutions secure or promote many morally and politically valuable things, citizens in constitutional democracies have a moral obligation to obey the law because it's the law.

To **reject** this argument:

➔ Reject P2

- ➔ argue that **the mere fact** that democratic institutions have great instrumental value is **not enough** to generate political obligation; constitutional democracies can secure or promote many valuable things and there still not be a duty to obey the law because it's the law.

➔ or Reject P1

- ➔ argue that democratic institutions **don't** promote many morally and politically valuable things. (This seems harder to argue, though.)

Prompt 3

“There is never a sufficient justification for violent forms of disobedience in liberal democracies because lawful protest and civil disobedience are always better alternatives.” Explain and evaluate this claim.

Key terms to explain:

disobedience
civil disobedience
violent disobedience
lawful protest
liberal democracy

Rewritten as an argument:

- P1. If lawful protest and civil disobedience are available as better alternatives, then violent forms of disobedience cannot be justified.
- P2. In liberal democracies, lawful protest and civil disobedience are always available as better alternatives to violent forms of disobedience.
- C. Therefore, in liberal democracies violent forms of disobedience can never be justified.

To **defend** this argument:

➔ Defend P1 and P2

- ➔ argue that **the harms** of violent forms of disobedience cannot be justified when other, non-violent forms of disobedience are available.
- ➔ argue that non-violent forms of disobedience are **always** available in liberal democracies.

To **reject** this argument:

➔ Reject P1

- ➔ argue that, **sometimes**, the harms of violent disobedience can be justified, **even if** lawful protest and civil disobedience were available alternatives.

➔ or Reject P2

- ➔ argue that, **sometimes**, non-violent forms of disobedience are **not** better alternatives to violent forms, even in liberal democracies.

Prompt 4

"The principles that parties in the original position would select are not good candidate principles of justice because those parties are so different from real people and they have so little information." Explain and evaluate this claim.

Key terms to explain:

principles of justice
original position
parties in the original position
thought experiment
veil of ignorance

Rewritten as an argument:

- P1. If the parties in the original position are too different from actual people, the principles of justice they would select are not good candidates for actual principles of justice.
- P2. The parties in the original position are too different from actual people.
- C. Therefore, the principles of justice the parties in the original position would select are not good candidates for actual principles of justice

To **defend** this argument:

➔ Defend P1 and P2

- ➔ argue that, for their choice of principles of justice to be **relevant** to actual people, the parties in the original position can't be radically different from actual people.
- ➔ argue that the parties in the original position **are** radically different from actual people.

To **reject** this argument:

➔ Reject P1

- ➔ argue that it **doesn't matter** how different the parties in the original position are from actual people for their choice of principles to be relevant to us

➔ Reject P2

- ➔ argue that, **even though** the parties in the original position are obviously quite different from actual people, they're not **too** different for their choice to be relevant to us

Prompt 5

“The difference principle does not permit incentive-based inequalities because those inequalities are not in fact necessary to secure further benefits for the least-advantaged.”
Explain and evaluate this claim.

Key terms to explain:

principles of justice
the difference principle
egalitarianism
natural luck / natural talents
incentive-based inequality

Rewritten as an argument:

- P1. According to the difference principle, if any incentive-based inequalities are actually permissible, then they must be necessary to secure further benefits for the least-advantaged.
- P2. No incentive-based inequalities are actually necessary to secure further benefits for the least-advantaged.
- C. Therefore, according to the difference principle, no incentive-based inequalities are actually permissible.

To **defend** this argument:

➔ Defend P2

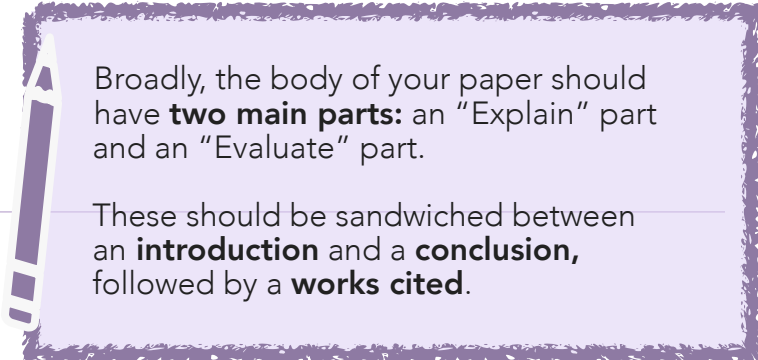
- ➔ argue that it's **never** actually true that **the only way** to secure further benefits for the least advantaged is to reward those who can “grow the economic pie” with a greater share of the resulting wealth

To **reject** this argument:

➔ Reject P2

- ➔ argue that, **in at least some cases**, allowing talented individuals who “grow the economic pie” to keep a greater share of the resulting wealth really **is** necessary to secure the relevant further benefits for the least advantaged .

Paper Structure (General)



Broadly, the body of your paper should have **two main parts**: an “Explain” part and an “Evaluate” part.

These should be sandwiched between an **introduction** and a **conclusion**, followed by a **works cited**.

I. Introduction (thesis paragraph)

- Establish (in a topic sentence) the subject matter of the paper; identify for your reader the particular philosophical debate you’ll be wading into
- State your thesis; tell the reader which position you’ll ultimately defend in the paper – be specific!! Don’t just say “I will argue for/against position {x}”, but “I will defend position {x} against the objection that...” or “I will argue against position {x} by showing that {x} is subject to counterexamples,” etc.
- Sketch a preview of the general structure of the paper, including any specific objections you’ll be considering. (“First I will rehearse the argument that... I will then consider an objection that... As I will argue, this objection fails because...”)
 - You will probably need to update/rewrite this part after you’ve finished your first draft to reflect what actually happens!

II. “Explain” (~33%)

- Identify the argument you’ll be defending/arguing against, including all of the relevant premises. (Feel free to use the premises and conclusions provided in this guide!)
- “Unpack” each of the relevant premises in its own paragraph (at least!)
 - Define all important terms for the reader so they know exactly how you’ll be using them for the purpose of the paper. Often the relevant definitions may be taken from Dr. Quong’s slides (which you should cite, if you use them).
 - Concrete examples are a great way to illustrate a concept / clarify what you mean!

III. "Evaluate" (~50%-60%)

If you want to defend the argument you explained in Part II

- Identify (in a topic sentence) what you think is the strongest objection/counter-argument to the argument you just explained; clearly identify which premise it's an objection/counterargument to
- Explain that objection/counterargument (~one paragraph)
- Develop your new reply to that objection/expand on a reply considered in class in a new way; walk your reader, *clearly* and *slowly*, through your reasoning
- Anticipate a possible rejoinder to your argument on behalf of your opponent; motivate it as well as you can (~one paragraph)
- Offer a reply to that rejoinder; explain (perhaps only in a sketchy way) why the objection you've just considered fails to undermine your argument

If you want to reject the argument you explained in Part II

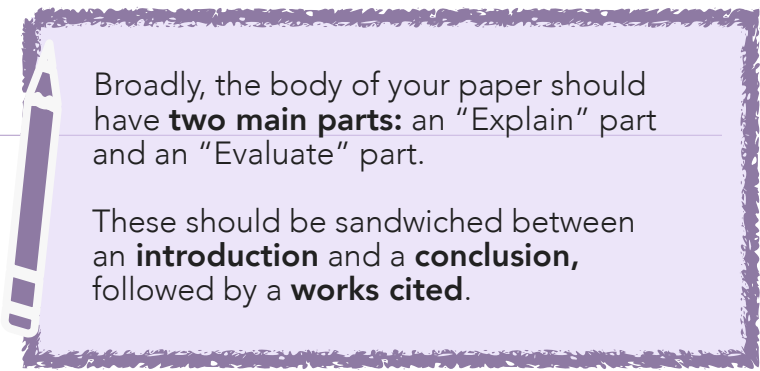
- Identify (in a topic sentence) which premise(s) of the argument you've just explained you'll now be objecting to; identify the key premises or "moves" of the counterargument you'll be making.
- Develop that counterargument; for each key "move" of your argument, "unpack" and defend it in its own paragraph; walk your reader, *clearly* and *slowly*, through the steps of your reasoning
- Identify and develop at least one possible reply to your counterargument on behalf of your opponent (i.e., someone who likes the argument you explained in Part II); motivate that reply as well as you can (~one paragraph)
- Offer a rejoinder to that reply; explain why this possible objection from your opponent fails to undermine your argument (repeat this/the previous step as necessary)

IV. Conclusion (~one paragraph)

- Remind us what you've argued for in the paper and how you argued for it (e.g., by defending the thesis that... against the objection that..., etc.)

Paper Structure (Details)

Introduction (Thesis Paragraph)



Broadly, the body of your paper should have **two main parts**: an “Explain” part and an “Evaluate” part.

These should be sandwiched between an **introduction** and a **conclusion**, followed by a **works cited**.

It's tempting to begin introductions from a very zoomed-out perspective, and “funnel” your way down to your thesis. **But avoid zooming out too far** and starting your paper with sentences like “Since the beginning of time...” Your introduction should be short and to the point—**ideally no more than a paragraph**.

It should accomplish all of the following tasks:

- Establish the *topic* of the paper (e.g., political obligation, uncivil disobedience, Rawls's difference principle)
- Establish the *question* that the paper will try to answer (e.g., whether Rawls is right that his difference principle is compatible with inegalitarian incentives for “talented” persons)
- Identify the *answer* that the paper will try to give to this question (i.e., your thesis)
- Sketch a *roadmap* for the paper. What view(s) are you going to discuss, and which objection(s) to your own thesis are you going to consider?

The third bullet point is absolutely crucial. Every paper must *argue* for a position, and have a clear statement in the beginning of what that position is going to be. Your introduction, then, should clearly state whether you will be *defending* the claim at issue in the prompt, and so arguing that it is *true*; or *arguing against* the claim at issue in the prompt, and so arguing that it is *false*.

Your thesis statement should be **specific** and **informative**; it should tell the reader exactly **what** conclusion you will be seeking to persuade them of, and give them a preview of **why**. It should come at the end of your introduction, and be more than one sentence if necessary!

Paper Structure (Details)

"Explain" (~33%)



The job of the "Explain" part is to **clarify the debate** for your reader.

It should provide **enough setup** for us to understand the "Evaluate" part, but **not too much** that it ends up dominating the paper.

This part should begin in your first body paragraph, after you've introduced your thesis. In it, you should **state, unpack, and contextualize the argument in the prompt**.

This will involve **defining terms or ideas** used in the claim (like "political obligation", "legitimate authority", "original position", "the principle of fair equality of opportunity" etc. **Do not just list definitions**; rather, define relevant philosophical terms as they come along, when you first introduce them.

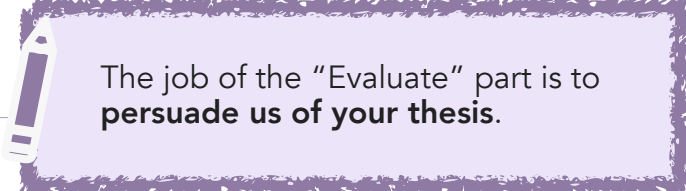
The "Explain" part of your paper will also involve **motivating** the relevant argument, or **getting it on the table in a way that makes it seem worth talking about**. What is the philosophical context for the argument in the prompt, and why does it matter whether it's true? And most importantly, what parts of the argument are you going to be focusing on?

Pay special attention to the arguments you're rehearsing from course material, making sure that you articulate them **as clearly, accurately, and charitably as possible**. If you are defending the argument in the prompt, you should give someone who disagrees with you **the strongest case you can**, and then try to show why they're wrong. Similarly, if you are arguing against the argument in the prompt, you should give the *proponent* of that argument the strongest case you can, before going on to argue why you think they are wrong.

Also, remember that you **must cite** any ideas or arguments that aren't originally yours, including material from the course readings *and* the lecture notes (see citing instructions, below).

The explain part should make up **about one-third** of your paper (excluding your introduction and conclusion). In a paper this short, it is best to **get to your argument** no later than **the end of page 3**. Don't let the paper become dominated by summary!

Paper Structure (Details)



The job of the “Evaluate” part is to **persuade us of your thesis**.

“Evaluate” (~50-60%)

In this part of the paper, you should **present and defend your own argument** for or against the position taken in the prompt. Your job is not merely to “weigh the pros and cons” of arguments for and against that position; it is to **persuade your reader to take a particular stance**. This is your chance to make an original contribution!

There are lots of strategies to take in this section. Here are just a few:

- **Defend** one or more of the premises in the prompt against one or more relevant objections we’ve considered in class
- **Give original examples** which help explain one of the premises in the prompt / elicit intuitions which help to make that premise more plausible
- **Discuss what [plausible, implausible] consequences** one of the premises in the prompt would have, *if* that premise were true
- **Offer an original counterexample** to one or more premises in the prompt
- **Revise** one of the premises in the prompt to bolster it against an objection

Once you make your case for or against the argument in the prompt, you should then **evaluate your own argument**. If you’re disagreeing with the prompt, how might someone who agrees with it respond? And if you’re defending the prompt, how might an opponent try to resist your claims? **Put yourself in the shoes of a critical reader**. Can they poke obvious holes in your argument? Can they redescribe one of your examples so that it supports *their* view, rather than yours, or resist your analogies?

For each objection you consider, **offer a reply**. You want your reader to walk away believing that your conclusion is true—and this will require convincing them that the objections you’ve considered aren’t actually problems. Keep in mind that you might only have room to consider one objection—if that’s the case, make sure it’s a *good* objection, and not a silly, obvious, or irrelevant one.

Spend enough time thinking about possible objections **before** you start writing that you can revise your original argument in light of any obvious ones. Then, make sure to devote enough *space* to possible objections that you can **develop them in detail**.

Paper Structure (Details)



The job of the conclusion is to **remind us what you've argued**

Conclusion

Like your introduction, your conclusion **does not need to be long**. On the contrary, it should be short and to the point—ideally only a paragraph.

A good conclusion does **two jobs**:

- remind the reader of **what your thesis was**
- remind the reader **how you argued for that thesis**

A great conclusion also:

- gives the reader some sense of **where things stand now**
 - ➔ Given that we've been convinced that your thesis is true, what relevant questions are still unanswered?
 - ➔ Are there limits to the arguments you've made in this paper, which someone else might expand upon later?

Again this doesn't need to be long or detailed! It just needs to give us a sense of where the "conversation" might go from here.

The most important thing is that you reiterate your position on the prompt, so the reader remembers what they've supposed to be convinced of! Just make sure that the position you've now ended up defending is **the same one** you say that you'll defend in the beginning. (You will probably need to tweak your introduction once you've finished your conclusion).

Citing Sources

This isn't a research paper! **Avoid consulting outside sources.** But you *should be* drawing from relevant material from the class, including readings and slides. And anything you reference — **including ideas that you paraphrase in your own words** — must be properly cited.

In-text citations

Include in-text citations whenever you are referencing a claim or idea from the readings, lecture slides, or (if you're using them) outside sources

- For readings, in-text citations should include the author's last name and the page number in parentheses [**ex: (Rawls 19)**]. If you've already mentioned the author's name in the sentence, you can just include the page number [**ex: (19)**].
- For lecture slides, in-text citations can just be (**Quong**).

Direct quotation

Use **quotation marks** whenever you **copy text verbatim** from a reading or slide.

Use **introductory clauses** like "According to [author's name]" to **integrate** direct quotations into the body of your paper. For example:

Nagel puts the objection this way: "So long as a person exists, he has not yet died, and once he has died, he no longer exists; so there seems to be no time when death, if it is a misfortune, can be ascribed to its unfortunate subject" (771).

"Works Cited"

Any source you use — **including outside sources, if you do use them** — should be included in a "Works Cited" section at the end of the paper. (Entries for class readings and slides are provided below).

Default "Works Cited" Entries

Feel free to **copy and paste** the relevant ones for your paper!

Here are "Works Cited" entries for all of the course readings/lecture slides related to the five prompts.

(Again, if you *do* happen to use an outside source, **you'll need to provide a corresponding entry** in your Works Cited. MLA format is fine.)

Lectures

Quong, Jonathan. "Political Obligation (First Week)" PHIL174, University of Southern California. Microsoft PowerPoint presentation, Fall 2023.

Quong, Jonathan. "Political Obligation (Second Week)." PHIL174, University of Southern California. Microsoft PowerPoint presentation, Fall 2023.

Quong, Jonathan. "Dissent and Disobedience." PHIL174, University of Southern California. Microsoft PowerPoint presentation, Fall 2023.

Quong, Jonathan. "A Theory of Justice (First Week)." PHIL174, University of Southern California. Microsoft PowerPoint presentation, Fall 2023.

Quong, Jonathan. "A Theory of Justice (Second Week)." PHIL174, University of Southern California. Microsoft PowerPoint presentation, Fall 2023.

Readings

King Jr., Martin Luther. (1986). "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." *The Journal of Negro History*, 71(1), pp. 38-44.

Rawls, John. (1999). *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*. Harvard University Press.

Simmons, A. John. (2008). Political Obligation and Authority. In *The Blackwell Guide to Social and Political Philosophy*, R.L. Simon (Ed.). Newark: Wiley.