

Paper Assignment

Phil 309B, Spring 2011
DePauw University

Due: Friday, May 13

1 Overview

The paper assignment for this course has three main parts. First, you need to select a topic and gather outside sources relevant to that topic. Second, you will need to formulate a thesis and write a rough draft. Third, you will revise your draft in light of the comments I provide and submit your final paper at the end of the semester.

Your paper should be approximately 2,000 words. Submissions will be electronic.

2 Selecting A Topic

You should be thinking about a topic for your paper from the very beginning of class. Make a mental (or actual!) note when a topic, argument, or article catches your interest. Reading Responses are also a great way to help in selecting a topic. If there was a certain reading that you really agreed with—or really *disagreed with*—that might be a good topic for you. Before Tuesday, April 5, you need to have met with me to discuss your paper and selected a topic. During our meeting we will discuss what topics you are interested in, and also what extra reading you should be doing for the paper. Since you will need to choose a topic before we have covered all the material for this course, you should look ahead on the schedule to see if there are topics that catch your interest from later in the semester.

Note: No essay that incorporates only material from in-class readings can score better than a C.

In the last section of this handout, I list possible essay topics.

3 Writing The Paper

3.1 Your Thesis

Writing a philosophy paper may be somewhat different from other writing you have done in the past. Philosophy papers are, in general, argumentative. In your paper you should present a thesis or answer a question, and then use the paper to carefully defend this thesis or answer.

Example: Suppose you want to write about Natural Selection. You might be interested in answering the question: ‘Is Natural Selection trivially true?’ Your answer to this question would be the thesis that you are defending.

Example: Suppose you want to write about Dennett’s claim that Darwin’s evolutionary ideas can be extended to explain why it is that the laws of nature appear to be “fine-tuned” for life. Perhaps you are not persuaded by this argument. Your paper could explain Dennett’s view and then attempt to show how it is mistaken. Your thesis would be that Dennett’s view fails.

Example: Suppose you’re interested in Gould’s claims about the relationship between religion and evolution. There might be a particular argument he makes for the claim that the two are compatible. You might first present this argument, and then criticize it. Perhaps you think that Gould’s conclusion is correct, but his argument is flawed. Your thesis would be that Gould’s argument fails, but that the conclusion is nevertheless true.

In writing your paper, it is of first importance to keep in mind your thesis. Imagine that you are a prosecuting attorney, and that your job is to use your paper to convince the jury that your thesis is true.

3.2 Audience

It is also important to keep in mind your audience, just as an attorney must keep in mind those who make up the jury. In writing your paper assume that the reader is an intelligent person, but who knows nothing about what happened in our class. If you use technical terminology or some example developed in class, you must explain it so that a person not in our class could understand you. So, if your roommate is generally intelligent but cannot understand your paper, you need to do some editing.

3.3 Organization

There are many ways to organize an argumentative essay. Below I give two standard organizational structures that seem to work well. I stress that these are simply *guidelines*, however. The structure your paper should take will be strongly influenced by the topic you choose and the thesis you defend.

3.3.1 General Structure A

Any objection to a particular theory or view is a good paper topic. The paper would be structured like this:

1. Present the view.
2. Present the objection.
3. Consider possible replies to the objection.
4. Evaluate the replies and offer an assessment.

3.3.2 General Structure B

Pick a topic related to the subject of this course. Together we will find some resources on which your paper will be based. Identify a particular argument for or against some claim that is centrally related to the topic you are interested in. Your paper would be structured like this:

1. PRESENT the argument that you selected. You must have textual support for your claim that this is the argument.

2. **EXPLAIN** this argument. To do this you must first define or explain all technical terms that appear in the argument. You also need to provide the best possible reasons in favor of each of the premises (including suppressed/unstated premises). Finally, you need to explain why and how the premises support the conclusion.
3. **EVALUATE** the argument. To do this, you need to explain how someone could criticize the argument. There are two ways to criticize the argument: either by claiming that the reasoning is faulty or by claiming that one (or more) of the premises are false. A good way to show that a premise is false is by giving an example that shows this.

3.4 Rough Drafts

To help you write the best paper you can, you need to turn in a rough draft by **Thursday, April 21**. You are, of course, welcome to get me your paper earlier. The earlier you get me your paper, the earlier you will receive comments and suggestions that will help make your final paper better.

4 Paper Topics

One thing that we will notice throughout the semester is that Darwinian ideas can be applied to a wide variety of disciplines and issues. This means that there are many, many possible topics for your final paper. I'd like to leave you with a large degree of freedom in choosing your topic, so that you can research and think about something you find interesting. However, I know that selecting a topic can sometimes be daunting. In light of this, I list some general topic areas to help get you thinking. I note that this is certainly *not* an exhaustive list. Be sure to meet with me if you're having trouble coming up with something.

1. Can the Principle of Natural Selection be formulated in such a way that it isn't trivial?
2. The role of *chance* in evolutionary theories (Darwin and contemporary).
3. What are the units of selection? Does natural selection work on groups, organisms, genes?

4. How should we understand the notion of a *species*, after Darwin?
5. Evolution and Game Theory.
6. Does the theory of evolution give us a new perspective on ethics?
7. Evolutionary algorithms in computer science.
8. Analogies between evolution and artificial intelligence.
9. Anthropic principles and the idea that the universe was, in some sense, the product of natural selection.
10. Original intentionality and meaning. How does a thought get to be *about* something?
11. Design arguments.
12. Human rationality and evolution.
13. Does the notion of a meme make sense? Is there any prospect for a science of “memetics”, analogous to genetics?
14. Analogies between evolutionary history and developmental psychology. (Evo-Devo)
15. What is the structure of Darwin’s “one long argument” in the *Origin*? Can we learn anything about philosophy of science from Darwin?
16. Evolution and psychology.
17. Evolution and rationality: can we infer that our cognitive equipment makes us rational since it is the product of natural selection?
18. Intelligent Design: should it be taken seriously?
19. Arguments/Challenges to Darwinism.
20. Are there evolutionary arguments against religion?
21. Gould’s claim that science and religion do not conflict (NOMA).