

How to Get an A in a Philosophy Class

JW Gray, February 17, 2010

Even if you aren't in a philosophy class, the advice I give can be relevant to attaining a greater understanding of philosophy in general. Although some philosophy professors are easy, not all are. In other words, you probably can't get an easy A in philosophy. Nonetheless, I have a great deal of advice that can help raise your grade. Here is my current advice:

1. Take Notes

This should be obvious, but you should be taking notes. Some students don't think about taking notes when taking an online class, but you need notes no matter what sort of philosophy class you are taking. [Go here for more information about taking notes.](#)

2. Read & Re-Read

It should be obvious to read the assigned material, but you might have to read a paragraph or essay several times.

3. Do Research

You will encounter terminology and difficult reading. Look up unfamiliar terminology, and read what others have to say about the text. For example, [the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) has something to say about everything: Metaphysics, Epistemology, Plato, Aristotle, and so on.

4. Talk About It

Tell others what you are learning in your class. Your conversation could help do the following:

- (a) Force you to understand the material by verbalizing it.
- (b) Make the material relevant and interesting to your life.
- (c) Relate what you learn in the class to something else.
- (d) Help you remember the material for later.

5. Know What Arguments Are

A logic class can help, but you can learn quite a bit of logic on our own as well. In particular, know the following:

- (a) [formal logic](#)
- (b) [requirements of good arguments](#)

- (c) justification
- (d) terrible ways to argue

6. Research Essay Writing

Try to find clear and simple philosophical writing that you can emulate and read what philosophers have to say about writing essays. For example, you might want to take a look at [Thomas Leddy's Guidelines for Writing Papers in Philosophy](#) and Jim Pryor's [Guidelines for Writing a Philosophy Paper](#).

Some quick tips:

- (a) Keep things as simple as you can. Don't be too entertaining or flowery.
- (b) Make it very clear exactly what you will write in the first paragraph.
- (c) Rewrite your essay over and over until it makes sense.
- (d) Cite your sources. Have a bibliography and give page numbers, even if you aren't quoting the material. You need to give credit to other people's ideas.

7. Take Your Time

Reading and writing philosophy can take a lot of time. Don't rush things. Make time for learning philosophy. You might need to set aside an entire day to write your essay. Or even the "rough draft" of your essay. I have had to do so.

8. Go to Office Hours

Go to office hours to ask questions, discuss what you plan on writing for your essay, or even to present a rough draft of your essay before it's due.

9. Go to a Tutor

If you can go to see a tutor, you should try to do so every week. At a university going to see your Graduate Student Instructor every week is a great idea.

10. Become a Tutor and/or Teacher

If you get an A in a philosophy class, you might be able to become a tutor. This will force you to review the class material and make sure you understand it as well as possible. You will get a strong sense about your strengths and weaknesses. You will realize that you might not understand something as well as you thought, so you can do further research to try to have a better understanding.

If you are a graduate student, you can become a teacher. This is much like being a tutor, but it will force you to think a great deal about everything relevant to the class.

Conclusion

No matter what degree you want to get, what you get out of school is up to you. For most people everything learned to get a BA degree is quickly forgotten and never really put to use. Some people see the degree as little more than a "life experience." If the classes you take have anything important to teach you, then you need to put it to use and relate it to your life on your own. Remind yourself what is important and try to be excited about what you are learning. In philosophy, there are many reasons to be excited. I discussed some in my essay, "[Why Philosophy is Awesome.](#)"

If philosophy seems too hard, I have two encouraging points. First, it's only too hard because it's so new and unusual to you. The more experience you get in philosophy, the easier it gets. Second, spending a day writing philosophy essays won't seem so bad after a while. You'll get used to it.