

mastery

Philosophy papers are graded on how great an understanding of the selected topic is demonstrated in them. If your paper demonstrates that you understand your topic well, you get a good grade. If it doesn't, you don't. Mastery is the condition of knowing some particular topic backwards, forwards, inside out and sideways. If you haven't mastered a topic, you can't write well about it. You can't master a whole field in a few weeks, but you can master some small part of it. Even that takes a lot of work, which is why lower division philosophy papers tend to be short.

- Pick the topic you're most interested in.
- Take time to narrow down the area you will write on.
- Read everything to do with that narrow area.
- Identify the main positions and ideas in that area and restate them in your own words.
- Illustrate each important idea with an example you make up yourself.
- For each position, describe life in a world in which that position is true .
- Identify the main arguments in your area.
- Restate each argument in your own words, writing as though you believed it to be true.
- Try to come up with other possible positions in the area.
- Make up your own ways of engaging the topic.
- Repeat as necessary.

Mastery is the opposite of memorization. When you have mastery of a topic you can go beyond the texts, make up your own descriptions and arguments and explain things in your own words and own examples. Amazing as this may seem in light of what you read in the opinion columns of our major news media, it is necessary to actually know something about a topic before you can write well about it. No matter how long you spend polishing a paper, even the most elegant expression of ignorance is only worth an F. This is the reason that most philosophy papers are written about very narrowly defined topics. Only when what is being written about is a very small part of something does it become possible (I won't say easy) to learn that thing inside out and through and through in a very short time. Since philosophy is the art of understanding, philosophy papers are graded on how great an understanding of the selected topic is demonstrated in them. If your paper demonstrates that you understand your topic well, you get a good grade. If it doesn't, you don't.

Two ways to guarantee a bad grade are A: to write it the evening before it's due, and B: to spend the whole two weeks writing a paper without ever researching the topic. Understanding takes time and effort, which is why the one or two weeks you have to write a philosophy paper is barely time enough to do it. The most extreme problem a student can have (apart from never attending class) is illustrated by the following incident which, although I've boiled down the dialog a bit, actually happened to a professor I knew.

Late in the quarter, a small delegation of students visited the professor in his office and the following conversation took place:

Students: "We've come to see you because we don't think we're getting the help and guidance we need to do well in this class."

Professor: "Good heavens! This is terrible! Let me see what I can do to be more helpful. You're all doing the reading, of course?"

Students: "No."

Professor: "Well, you're asking questions in class, aren't you?"

Students: "No."

Professor: "Are you visiting your professor and asking her questions?"

Students: "No."

Professor: "Well, here's some help and guidance. Do the reading, consult your professor regularly and ask questions in class. If you still have problems after this, see me again."

It's true that a bad professor and text can prevent you from understanding by failing to communicate the material clearly, but even the clearest presentation cannot make you understand. No matter what the professor or texts do for you, understanding depends fundamentally on what you do. Many students have the experience of struggling through the reading, not understanding it at all, and then having everything seem clear at the lecture. From this they conclude that it's not worth it to do the reading since they can get what they need from the lecture. This is a wildly bad mistake. Philosophy texts are difficult because the subject matter is complicated and depends on subtle shades of meaning. Your professor (usually) isn't making up for the writer's inability to be clear. The writer is (usually) being as clear as he can. Your professor is simplifying by bringing out the main points and showing roughly how they are connected. Thus the lecture is not the whole story. Rather it is intended to illuminate the issues dealt with in the text, and thus help you in your struggle to understand those issues. Struggling through complex and subtle text may not be fun, but it's the only way to understand philosophical issues well enough to (eventually) write about them.

While it's necessary to read the parts of your texts that deal with the topic you're going to write about, there are reasons to do all the other reading as well. For one thing, it's very rare for a philosopher's arguments on one topic to be disconnected from his arguments on other topics. Thus really understanding the arguments contained in those pieces of text that explicitly mention your topic often depends on other arguments in other pieces of text that you were also supposed to read. (Why aren't these connections brought out in lecture? Well, sometimes they are, but there's a lot to cover and the professor only has so much time.) Another problem is that philosophers tend to look at things very differently from the way ordinary people (and other philosophers) do. These differences are very subtle and it's very easy to miss them and come out thinking you understand when you really don't. In order to really understand a particular philosopher you must at least take the time to read what she wrote.

Finally, there's the difference between merely understanding a topic and mastering it. If you understand, you can explain what particular philosophers say about a topic, what their arguments are, and what the relevant facts are. When you've mastered the topic you can talk about other possible arguments, what might be wrong with these arguments, why those particular facts are relevant and what would happen if the facts were different. Mastery means understanding a topic well enough to go beyond what's already been said to work out for yourself which arguments work and which don't and even to work out effective and relevant arguments of your own. (Again, this is why philosophy papers tend to have such narrowly defined topics.) Mastery never comes by memorization. You can commit to memory absolutely everything ever said about your topic and still not understand any of it. Just a learning to ride takes getting on a horse and trying to make it do things. Understanding, and eventually mastery of a topic, comes from trying to explain relevant facts, other people's arguments, and what might be wrong with them.

In practical terms, someone seeking to master a topic must start out by trying to put everything in her own words. This means taking things like claims, arguments and (hopefully) relevant passages, "translating" them into her own words and then seeing if the "translation" really does mean the same thing as the original. Thus it means accepting a fundamental uncertainty about her understanding of the material. This uncertainty is especially acute when it comes to arguments, both those she is attempting to reproduce, and those she comes up with herself. Mastery of a topic is not gained by playing it safe, but by taking a series of "stabs in the dark" each of which is then thoroughly criticized in hopes of improving the next stab. This is why philosophy papers are usually short and cover a very limited topic. Mastering even the smallest topic well enough to write even a three to five page paper takes quite a lot of time and effort.