

THE PHILOSOPHY SENIOR CAPSTONE EXPERIENCE

A Student Guide

Description. The capstone experience for Philosophy majors combines mastery of one philosopher's work on a significant problem with an understanding of how that philosopher's work may be brought into dialogue with broader traditions in or modes of philosophy.

Seniors in Philosophy begin the capstone experience in **PH 475: Senior Essay**, a course in which students explore the work of a particular philosopher that they find interesting or intriguing. In the course, students investigate thoroughly that one philosopher's views on a significant philosophical issue or problem, leading to a **10-15 page essay** describing and placing into critical context the philosopher's approach to that issue or problem. The course is taken during a block of the student's choosing prior to block 7 of the senior year, with all essay writing completed by the last day of the chosen block.

The capstone experience closes with the block 7 course, **PH 476: Senior Seminar**, which draws together all graduating seniors. Senior Seminar sets the following goals for students: 1) developing a critical perspective on one's own work and on the varieties of philosophical inquiry manifest in the essays the other seniors produce; 2) learning to contextualize each student's work in relation to the history of Western philosophy and comparative or critical perspectives in philosophy; 3) learning to contextualize students' essays in relation to major problem areas and schools of thought in philosophy; 4) developing an ability to present one's own work orally and to engage in effective critical discussion of others' philosophical writings; and 5) revising and further developing the senior essay.

The capstone experience **requires students to take responsibility for their own educations** to a greater degree than do most College or Department courses. It also gives students opportunities to work closely with an individual faculty mentor, to develop ideas and polish essays over a period of months, and to collaborate with fellow students as they pursue their respective philosophical interests. Because the capstone courses require students to take initiative, coordinate research and writing with individual faculty mentors, and collaborate with other seniors, it is vital that all students understand and adhere to the program's schedule and requirements, as outlined below.

Senior Essay Expectations

Content. The senior essay is not a senior thesis, and as such, is not intended primarily as a piece of original philosophical scholarship. Nevertheless, the essay should demonstrate an understanding, not only of a single philosopher's views, but also of the relationship between those views and other related positions. In addition, the essay should critically engage with the issue or problem being studied. For example, the essay may: 1) identify aspects of the philosopher's views that call for further questioning or development; 2) assess the plausibility of those views; 3) ask how well those views fit with ideas from other theoretical or cultural perspectives; or 4) some combination of 1-3.

The senior essay is also not an independent study, but a regular departmental course. Although the content of the research will be determined by agreement between you and your faculty mentor, the basic expectations for all the senior essays are as outlined above. Although you will be able to choose which of blocks 1 through 6 in which to take Senior Essay, the schedule of the chosen block will follow the outline below (as amended to meet your and your faculty mentor's scheduling needs). **In all cases, Senior Essay students will be on campus for the duration of the essay block.**

Research. Research for the senior essay typically will involve close reading of the philosopher's work, as well as engagement with the views of that philosopher's main interlocutors and appropriate secondary literature. The degree to which the project involves secondary literature or alternate perspectives will vary from project to project. You and your faculty mentors will need to agree on the scope of the research to be done no later than the end of the first week of the essay block.

Deadlines and Grading. A complete essay is due at the end of the senior essay block, and will be graded by your faculty mentor. Grades for the course will consider both your performance in the course as a whole (20%), including your ability to meet deadlines and your effectiveness in conferences with your faculty advisor, and the quality of your final essay (80%). It is extremely important, then, that you pay attention to the schedule and requirements below, as your success in meeting them will influence your grade in the course.

Schedule and Requirements

Spring of the Junior Year.

The senior capstone experience begins at the end of the junior year with the development of a program of study and the assignment of faculty mentors.

- Block 8, Week Three: Submit the Project Proposal Form to Senior Essay Directors.
- Block 8, Week Four: Department assigns a faculty mentor to each student.

Process: Submit via email a completed Project Proposal Form (see p. 4 of this document) to **both** Senior Essay Directors -- Jonathan Lee and Dennis McEnerney for 2010-11. The form asks what project you would like to undertake and explains faculty mentor assignments. Note that students will not necessarily receive their first choice of a faculty mentor. The Department will assign the faculty mentors, taking into consideration student preferences, areas of competence, and schedule conflicts. Once assignments are made, a list of the students' projects and their faculty mentors will be posted in the Department and on the Department's website.

Summer.

- By late summer: We recommend that you read the text or texts chosen for investigation.
- For students writing essays in Block 1: Contact your faculty mentor no later than August 20th to make an appointment for the first Monday of the block. Note that all seniors will be required to meet with the Senior Essay Directors at 1:15 PM on that first Monday. So pick another time.

Block 1.

- First Monday, 1:15 PM: All seniors meet with the Senior Essay Directors to review the senior capstone experience schedule and requirements. ***Attendance at this meeting is mandatory.***

Before Your Essay Block.

- By Week 4: Confirm the meeting time with your faculty mentor on the first Monday of your essay block. ***Students must take the initiative to schedule this meeting, in person, via email, or via telephone.*** (The Senior Essay Directors will send you a reminder in Week 3.) Any students having difficulty contacting their mentors should consult with the Senior Essay Directors.

During Your Essay Block.**Week 1.**

- Monday: Meet with your faculty mentor, typically at 1:15 PM. Confirm the block's schedule.
- By Thursday: Complete re-reading your primary text or texts. Submit to your faculty mentor a three-to-five page essay summarizing the text or text and situating it within the context of the problem or issue that you are exploring in your essay.
- By Thursday: Meet to discuss the reading and your summary and reflections with your faculty mentor. Agree with your mentor on whether or how much additional reading will be required (secondary reading, alternate approaches, or additional texts by the author being investigated).

Week 2.

- By Tuesday: Five pages of draft due.
- By Wednesday: Meet with your faculty mentor to discuss the draft. Plan remainder of the paper or the steps needed for rewriting or expanding the essay.
- Friday: Optional follow-up meeting with your faculty mentor.

Week 3.

- By Sunday: First draft of the senior essay due by email. Submit a print copy on Monday, if your faculty mentor requests one.
- By Tuesday: Meet with your faculty mentor to discuss the draft. Plan revisions.
- By Friday: Second draft of the senior essay due.

Week 4.

- By Monday: Meet with your faculty mentor to discuss the draft. Plan completion of the essay.
- Wednesday noon: Final, polished version of the senior essay due. Submit copies to **both** your faculty mentor **and** the Senior Seminar Faculty (in 2010-11: Jonathan Lee and Alberto Hernandez-Lemus).

Block 7: Senior Seminar

- Present your essay to the seminar, and listen to others present theirs.
- Contextualize your essay and the other essays you read in relation to the history of Western philosophy, comparative or critical philosophies, and content areas of philosophy.
- Revise your essay.

Key Terms Defined:

Senior Essay Directors: Two faculty members who coordinate the work of students and faculty in the Senior Essay course. Jonathan Lee and Dennis McEnnerney will direct Senior Essay in 2010-11.

Faculty Mentor: The individual faculty member assigned to work with you as you research and write your senior essay. Faculty mentors are assigned by the Department for each student; they grade the senior essays.

1. Senior Seminar Faculty: Two faculty members who will teach the Senior Seminar course in block 7. In 2010-11, the faculty members will be Jonathan Lee and Alberto Hernandez-Lemus.