

Philosophy MA Thesis Grading Criteria

What do we want from a thesis at MA level?

Theses which are written in philosophy will be assessed by two broad sets of criteria:

Criterion 1: the ability of the student to do philosophy

Criterion 2: the communication skills of the student.

These criteria are described below in detail. The criteria are presented in two parts: A and B. Part A describes the ideal MA thesis. Part B explains what's required to get each grade, referring back to this description of an ideal MA thesis.

The description of an ideal MA thesis is intended as a description of the kind of writing that would impress an admissions panel to a PhD programme in Philosophy: a thesis that gets the highest grade is a thesis that would impress an admission's panel to a PhD programme in philosophy. This description appears below in Part A (criteria 1 and 2).

The fact that the description of an ideal MA thesis is intended this way does not mean that the person writing the thesis needs to be aiming to apply for a PhD in Philosophy. But it does mean that we expect those who get the highest grade to have the skills and knowledge that are demonstrated by the ability to write a writing sample that would be judged highly by such an admission's panel.

Using this standard is a way of tying our assessment of MA theses to a relatively objective, external standard: examiners know what question to ask themselves when grading an MA thesis and MA thesis supervisors know what standard an MA thesis has to meet in order to get the highest grade. We have had many MA students go on to take-up PhD positions that are funded and at reputable universities across the world. Those students had writing samples that met this condition on the highest grade. We're using that as a benchmark of what to aim for in order to get the highest grade.

For the purpose of these criteria, we distinguish between three genres of MA thesis:

- **Analytic Philosophy**
- **Continental Philosophy**
- **History of Philosophy / Intellectual History**

Unless explicitly stated, points made in these criteria apply to all three genres. Most points are of this general sort. Points which apply only to one of the three genres are explicitly marked as such and colour coded.

When students submit their theses (for pre-defence/defence), they must explicitly state which genre they have written their thesis in.

Part A -- The Ideal MA thesis

This part describes the ideal MA thesis. Part B will then refer back to this description, when specifying what's required to get each grade A-F.

Criterion 1. Doing Philosophy

The first criterion falls into two sub-criteria: *understanding of existing work*, and, *the capacity to do philosophy*.

1.1. Understanding of existing work (a prerequisite to ably engaging with it)

- 1.1.1. The student has a good grasp of the relevant existing literature: literature is relevant if the student needs to be aware of this literature in order to ensure that they are making a novel contribution to the literature rather than just reinventing the wheel. This doesn't require the student to have read and clearly grasped the positions and arguments of everything on the same subject as their thesis. But the student must explain why they have restricted their attention to a sub-part of such a literature, if they have done so. It should make sense why they have made that choice.
- 1.1.2. The student should know the literature well enough to ably introduce a newcomer to this literature: its positions and arguments, history/timeline and structure.
- 1.1.3. **CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY / HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY / INTELLECTUAL HISTORY:** If a thesis is written within the traditions of continental philosophy or history of philosophy / intellectual history, it should demonstrate both the interpretation of relevant texts and knowledge of their historical context. The presentation of material and research methodology should be appropriate to the subject matter, with a careful selection of primary and secondary literature for discussion and analysis in the thesis.

1.2. Capacity to do philosophy (to make a contribution)

- 1.2.1. Not just repeating an existing exchange. But making a contribution that doesn't exist already (this could be a novel objection, a novel analysis, a novel AND USEFUL application of an existing analysis, or something else listed in the **APPENDIX** to this document).
- 1.2.2. Argue for/defend a position (as opposed to merely presenting a position).
- 1.2.3. Demonstrate an awareness of where others may have doubts about the defence given of the position defended by the student.
- 1.2.4. Avoid fallacies (given that they engage in argumentation, how well do they do it?).
- 1.2.5. **HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY / INTELLECTUAL HISTORY:** Some theses are written about the history of philosophy or intellectual history and concern the interpretation of philosophical texts. In such cases, one's philosophical contribution should consist in providing criticisms of existing interpretations of a text and in offering a new interpretation. This involves thorough knowledge of the texts being interpreted and often also knowledge of other texts by the same author, and (especially in the case of intellectual history) of the contemporary debates that the author is contributing to.

Criterion 2 Communication

- 2.1.** It's clear—both in the thesis itself and in the defence—what the aim of the student is: not just in the sense that they state it, but in the sense that upon reading the statement, the reader can understand what overall action the student is performing with the whole text, where this action corresponds to the first point under 1.2 above.
- 2.2.** It is important that the student has broken down the overarching aim of the thesis into sub-aims. It is clear how these aims add up to completion of the overarching aim of the thesis. It's clear how these sub-aims are related to each other.
- 2.3.** It is necessary for the thesis to be sufficiently signposted to facilitate timely reading and understanding. If the student were a TV chef: they wouldn't just be silently cooking in front of an audience (i.e. doing their argument in front of the audience); they would be talking the audience through what they're doing as they do it, so that the audience can easily understand the actions of the chef (the actions of the student in the thesis).
- 2.4.** Key terms that cannot be understood without clarification must be clarified to the extent required for the purposes to which the student wants to put those terms in their work. If the student is using commonly used terms from a given literature, that fact is made clear and explained.
- 2.5.** In the written thesis, the student has provided references, where required, and in the style required by the Philosophy department's style guide.
- 2.6.** The language is fluent and free from grammatical mistakes.

Part B -- Grades

The grades will be awarded on the basis of how well students demonstrate their ability to Do Philosophy and to Communicate. The student must have indicated at the start of their thesis in which genre of philosophy they intend to write, and thus against which criteria their thesis will be assessed: **ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY**, **HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY/INTELLECTUAL HISTORY** or **CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY**. The following are guidelines to help examiners decide upon a grade with a level of consistency across students within a year-group and across different year-groups of students. It is recommended that examiners work through each description in order to reach a decision about where the student's thesis falls.

A: The thesis obviously meets all the requirements to a high standard: both for Doing Philosophy and Communication. The work either constitutes a competitive writing sample for a PhD application or obviously constitutes a straightforward basis on which such a writing sample may be based.

B: The thesis meets each and every one of the requirements (for both Doing Philosophy and for Communication), throughout the thesis. But not to a high standard: I.e. this would be an adequate writing sample (or basis for a writing sample) submitted in application to a PhD programme but it's not clear it would distinguish the student from competitors for the programme they were applying to.

C: Shows that the student meets most of the requirements at Doing Philosophy and Communication in most parts of their thesis. But there are deficiencies in one or the other or both areas in parts of the thesis. For instance, there is argumentation in defence of a thesis, but there are clear fallacies in the reasoning, which make the argumentation obviously unconvincing. Or there is sign-posting, but some parts of the thesis are still unclear in their point and/or content. (NB: these "for instance"s are just examples of what might characterize a work deserving of a C.) Crucially—to get a C instead of a D or E—there are other, significant parts of the thesis where such deficiencies are more or less entirely absent and in these places the student's competence in Doing Philosophy and Communication are clearly demonstrated. This is not an excellent work. But it definitely does demonstrate competence in most of the requirements at Doing Philosophy and Communication in most parts of the thesis.

D: Deficiencies in Doing Philosophy and Communication are not restricted to proper sub-parts of the thesis: these deficiencies run more or less throughout the thesis. But despite this, it's still clear that the student has some grasp of the literature they are addressing. However: either (a) the thesis is entirely, or almost entirely, descriptive (it doesn't Do Philosophy) or (b) their thesis isn't descriptive, but the attempt to Do Philosophy is highly rudimentary—perhaps there's a general impression of what the student was trying to do. But it's not properly worked out in any detail that would permit the position put forward to be properly evaluated.

E: The bare minimum for passing at MA level. In the written thesis, the student Does Philosophy badly and they Communicate badly by the criteria presented above: where this includes having failed to demonstrate, in the written text, any grasp of the literature they are addressing. What saves the student from failing is that significant

and convincing evidence is found, in the defence, of an ability to Do Philosophy and to Communicate. But in the thesis itself, this evidence is not clearly discernible.

F: Various conditions might warrant a fail:

- The student's thesis is comprehensible but the student just does not understand what they're doing. Even when under questioning in the defence, the student shows a level of understanding below the level expected at MA level.
- The written thesis is incomprehensible and the defence didn't allow the examiners to see evidence of skills in either Doing Philosophy or Communication.
- Plagiarism.

Appendix: Things that Philosophy Papers Do¹

1. Presenting a counterexample to an accepted analysis
2. proposing and defending a new analysis
3. unearthing a hidden presupposition in a discussion
4. raising an interesting new question
5. finding a new argument for/defence of an existing position
6. making useful distinctions
7. overcoming apparent distinctions
8. introducing and defining new concepts
9. creating and defending a new theory
10. raising a new objection
11. posing new puzzles or dilemmas
12. mapping the logical space / explaining options
13. defending a new interpretation of a historical figure
14. philosophizing about a new (or previously not philosophized about) phenomenon
15. clarifying and improving understanding of an existing idea or theory
16. modelling or formalizing
17. providing a new analysis or explication of something used by non-philosophers
18. extending a theory or principle to cover new cases
19. showing how a problem is merely apparent
20. showing how a conflict or incompatibility across different theories or positions is merely apparent
21. taking an existing idea in one context and applying it to a new context
22. applying a philosophical idea/principle/theory to new real-world cases
23. showing how to (and how not to) solve a problem
24. drawing out the implications of an argument or theory for related matters
25. drawing out the implications of an argument or theory for other, seemingly unrelated matters
26. noticing what is missing from an argument/idea/theorizing
27. showing how a philosophical question is actually a multidisciplinary one
28. showing the historical background of a philosophical idea
29. discovering “new” philosophy and philosophers in history
30. explaining the value of a previously neglected philosophical contribution
31. showing surprising relationships or similarities between different ideas/arguments/schools of thought
32. showing how a philosophical concept, position, or question has changed over time
33. identifying the types of empirical information needed to make progress on a philosophical question
34. analyzing an empirical experiment or case study
35. checking folk theories and assumptions with empirical or experimental methods

¹ These are drawn from the [“Types of Contributions to the Philosophical Literature”](#) entry on Daily Nous.