Summary of the assignment:

1. After the introductory material for this course, there are three major units consisting of two main “overarching” questions. For each of these overarching questions, you’ll be asked to give your initial response—you’ll be doing some philosophy from scratch, off the top of your head. These initial responses are a warm-up to give you some practice thinking about the topic of the unit.
2. At the end of the whole unit you’ll write a new “unit essay” that demonstrates your more articulate, more sophisticated understanding of the questions themselves as well as the possible answers to those questions. Think of the second go-round as a **take-home essay test** summarizing what you’ve learned in the unit and demonstrating a growth in philosophical sophistication.

Here’s a simple structure that you may use for your unit essay if you wish:

1. Present and explain philosophical problems based on the OAQs.

2. Explain in detail the ways thinkers have thought about this problem.

3. Give your own take on the problem, supported by reasons.

Goals of this assignment:

1. Clarify the architecture of the course and the purpose of each unit
2. Master texts
3. Practice philosophical skills: charitable reading, articulating others’ positions, evaluating and criticizing arguments, and articulating your own ideas
4. Work beyond the internal content of the texts, because few of the authors are answering the explicit question I articulated
5. Motivate a sense of wonder and ownership of the material by beginning with your own thinking
6. Metacognition: notice and reflect on what you’ve learned

**Evaluation Criteria for Overarching Question HW**

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| --- | --- |
| 90-100 (Strong) | The philosophical concepts, ideas, theories and arguments studied in class are used to develop the student’s own thinking significantly. The student shows a good understanding of what’s at stake in the philosophical problems at hand. Explanation and interpretation of ideas and arguments are clear, detailed, and nuanced, and the student displays a solid understanding of the course material. The revised answer makes good use of material to support and/or challenge the student’s answer to the overarching questions, showing how those readings are relevant to the topic.  |
| 80-89 (Acceptable) | The revised answer engages with the course material, but does not present its implications for the student’s thinking as thoroughly as it might. The student gives some explanation of the philosophical problem, but it may not be thorough. The presentation of ideas and arguments is largely clear and reasonably accurate, but the essay does not explore the topic as fully as might be the case. Explanations may be weakened by some imprecise use of language, occasional careless or ambiguous formulations, or omission of some details. |
| 70-79 (Weak) | Rather than using the ideas and arguments from the course to further his or her original thinking, the student shows only a vague understanding of the problem and makes little or no effort to develop his or her own replies, questions, objections, applications or extensions of the original essay in dialogue with those of the relevant thinkers. There may be significant lapses in understanding of the relevant readings’ substance. |
| 60-69 (Poor) | Revisions to the original essay are of little significance to the substance of the student’s thinking.  |
| 0 | The student fails to turn in the assignment. |

Details and hints:

* For your initial responses, you should think as deeply as you can about your intuitions on the overarching question. You don’t need to worry about structure and coherence. You’re not likely to have thought a lot about the question before, but do your best to get your own understanding (and questions) down on paper as articulately as you can. You will turn this in, but it will count as an ordinary homework.
* Your unit essay should represent a fresh start on answering the question. By the end of the unit, you will have engaged in dialogue with authors and classmates who have also thought carefully about the questions. This dialogue should not leave your own understanding of the questions or their answers unchanged; even if you don’t change your overall position, you should be more familiar with the philosophical territory, and able to articulate your position more clearly and defend it better against other possible points of view.
* What matters most is that the unit essay **demonstrates that you learned something—again, think of it as a take-home essay test**. This is the part that will be graded according to the rubric.
* Both your initial responses and your unit essays should spend at least one paragraph discussing your understanding of the question—what you take it to mean, how you think it arises from human experience, etc.
* The unit essay (which can be two smaller essays, depending on how you decide to organize your understanding of the material) should have more focus and direction than your initial responses, including at least one thesis that you defend. It should contain arguments that show how the readings support and challenge your thesis (or theses), and you should respond to possible challenges as best you can. The new essay might represent a stronger, more sophisticated version of your original position, or it might be a total reversal, or something in between. Either way, engagement with the questions and challenges of the course material is essential, and you must present reasons for your view—reasons that don’t just *explain* why you have the view, but serve to *justify* it. They should be reasons that other people might accept.
* What does it mean to “engage” with the material? You must demonstrate understanding of the readings and how they serve to illuminate human nature. But you need to do more than summarize; you need to show how the material bears on the overarching questions of the unit. This is not just an opinion paper. **The unit essay should NOT simply restate your original position, bolstered now by a few scanty references to the material we’ve discussed.** You do not need to refer to every single reading we discuss, but you should make use of a significant number of them.