

Philosophical Diary

The Philosophical Diary should be completed and submitted on a regular basis (typically weekly) over the course of the semester. The diary charts your own engagement with the course material and should come from your own insights and experiences. Aim for one or two paragraphs per entry. More than three paragraphs is too many.

There are many possible ways of approaching this assignment, and the following list is not exhaustive. Some possible approaches include:

- Writing about something in the course that you would like to share with a friend. What is it, and why do you want to share that idea, argument, concept, or point of view?
- Writing about something in the course that has led you to change your mind. Explain what it is and how it has led you to change your mind.
- Writing about something in a reading that you think the author is wrong about. Explain what the author has said and why you think they are wrong. What would you say to them to help them see the error of their ways?
- Writing about something in the course that you would like to remember 10 years from now. Explain what it is and why.
- If you run across an argument in the reading, you can try your hand at reconstructing it: setting out the conclusion of that argument and then the reasons the author offers in support of it.
- Writing about a way in which the material connects to the world or your life. What issue does the material speak to? In what way does it shed light on that issue, or lead you to see it in a different way?
- Writing about a question or problem raised in the course that you find particularly interesting or challenging. What is it about this question that you find interesting or challenging, and what are some ways you have been thinking about it?
- Writing about something in the course that you disagree with. Explain what it is and why. What alternative perspectives or arguments do you find more persuasive?
- Writing about something in the course that you feel you have a good understanding of. Explain what it is and how you came to understand it. What have you found helpful in learning about this topic?
- Writing about a personal experience that has been influenced by the material in the course. How has the material helped you to think about or understand this experience in a different way?
- Writing about a topic or issue that you would like to learn more about, and how the material in the course has inspired you to explore it further.
- Writing about a discussion or debate you have had with a classmate or someone outside the course about a topic covered in the course. What was the topic, and how did you engage with the other person's perspective?
- Writing about a topic or concept from the course that you have found difficult to understand. Explain what it is and what you have found difficult about it. What have you tried in order to improve your understanding?

- Writing about a moment in the course where you had an “aha” moment – where something suddenly clicked. Explain what it was that you suddenly understood and how it changed your understanding of the material.
- Writing about a way in which the material has challenged your beliefs or values. Explain what challenged your beliefs or values and how you have thought about this challenge.
- Writing about a topic or concept from the course that you think has the most potential to make a positive impact on the world. Explain what it is and how you think it could.

Again, this list is not exhaustive, and students should feel free to approach the assignment in whatever way suits them.

How to Approach It

The single most important thing to understand about this assignment is that you are not writing it for *me*. You are writing it to think through things for *your own benefit*.

Here is the test for whether you’ve done it well. If, when you finish an entry, you genuinely think “that was useful for me” – *whatever* that means for you – then it is a good entry, and you’ve approached the assignment correctly. If, by contrast, it felt like something you had to *get through* – a task you completed because you were *told* to – then you’re approaching it wrong. The point is not to produce something; it’s to use the writing to think.

This is also why there’s no single right way to do it, and why the list above is just a set of starting points. Different entries will call for different approaches, and what makes an entry good is not that it fits a template but that it helps *you*.

An Ongoing Dialogue

The diary also functions as an ongoing dialogue between the two of us across the semester. I will read your entries and respond, usually in detail. But it is important to clarify that I am not *grading* them, and I am not *correcting* them. I am acting as an *interlocutor*. When you work through an idea, I’ll engage with it the way I would in conversation with another philosopher: pushing back where I disagree, pointing to a consideration you might not have noticed, suggesting a connection, asking what you’d say to an objection.

One thing to understand about my responses, because it is not what most students are used to: I will almost always disagree and push back. You need to know how to read this, because the natural instinct is to read it backwards.

The more I argue with you, the more I disagree, the harder I push, the more it means I found your entry interesting. Disagreement is a sign that you’ve written something thoughtful, something with enough substance to engage, something that pushes our thinking forward. Disagreement and criticism is the highest compliment I can pay an entry.

The reverse also holds. The more I find myself simply praising what you’ve written, the more concerned you should be. Praise here often means there wasn’t enough for me to get hold of:

that the entry stayed safe, that it said the kind of thing that's true but doesn't go anywhere. So, if you get a response with no pushback, don't be reassured; ask yourself whether you actually took a risk with that entry, or whether you played it safe.

When you read my responses, then, invert the usual reflex. Lots of disagreement is good sign. Lots of praise is usually a prompt to push further next time.