

AN OPEN LETTER TO STUDENTS
WHO ARE FILLING THEIR
Gen Ed Philosophy
REQUIREMENTS

How TO Survive A
Philosophy Course
WITHOUT
Going Insane

by MICAH TILLMAN

How to Survive a Philosophy Course
without
Going Insane
*An Open Letter to Students Who Are Filling
Their Gen Ed Philosophy Requirements*

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I. WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

§1

The short answer:

Nobody knows. But they argue about it a lot.

The real answer:

I know (because I'm special), and I'll tell you.

§2

The word "philosophy" comes from the ancient Greeks. (I know. Nobody cares about the ancient Greeks. Just bear with me for a minute.)

In Greek, it was "φιλοσοφία" (*philosophia*)—which is a combination of the words *philia* and *sophia*. (See, you already know more than your stupid townie friends back home.)

But do you know what *philia* and *sophia* mean? Well, I'm going to tell you anyway:

Philia means the same thing as "friendship" or "love."
(Think of "Philadelphia," "philanthropy,"
"audiophile," etc.)

Sophia means the same thing as "wisdom."
(Think of "sophisticated," "sophism" and
"sophomore," etc.)

§3

So, the people who invented the word "φιλοσοφία" must have thought it meant something like:

"Love of wisdom,"

or

"Friendship with wisdom."

But what is *wisdom*? It's being smart, or having knowledge . . . or something. Right?

Right. But wisdom is not just knowing a lot of things; being wise means understanding life. Wisdom is not just knowing *facts*, but knowing how to *really live*.

Wisdom, in other words, is knowing how to live awesomely (or "excellently," as Aristotle liked to say).

Therefore, philosophy is:

"Being friends with awesome"

or

"Loving *excellence*"

§4

But I might get in trouble if I ever told one of my fellow philosophers that I think "philosophy" essentially means, "hanging out with awesome." And I don't like to get in trouble.

So, maybe we can ignore the whole question of *what philosophy is* for the moment, and say instead *what philosophy does*. What is philosophy's *job*? Who cares what it *is* if it doesn't work?

Whenever people ask me about philosophy, I just say this:

“Philosophy’s job is to help you think clearly about your life.”

Or, to make things a little clearer:

“Philosophy’s job is to help you think clearly about your life *so you can live it awesomely*.”

To know how to really live, you have to be able to think clearly. You can't live well if you have no clue about life.

§5

Therefore, anything that helps you think more clearly about your life is *philosophical*.

And *that* should keep us on our toes. Who knows when something in a TV show, or novel, or song (or something one of our stupid townie friends says) will turn out to be philosophical?

If something philosophical happens, we don't want to miss it; if we miss it, we might never figure out how to be friends with awesome.

§6

“But surely,” you’ll say, “you can say something more about exactly how philosophy works. How does it go about helping us to think clearly about life (so we can live it more awesomely)?”

From my years of studying philosophy, I’ve come to the following conclusion. Philosophy proceeds primarily by asking (and trying to answer) four questions:

1. What is there?
2. How do we know?
3. What should we do about it?
4. Why?

Now, philosophers often don't ask these questions explicitly. And often they're answering these questions on the assumption that we've already asked them. But the point is that these four questions guide everything philosophers do. They're always (implicitly/explicitly) asking and/or answering them.

§7

Philosophy's first question is, “What is there?” That is, what kinds of things exist? (And what kinds of things don't exist?)

How could you think clearly about life, or live life awesomely, if you don't know what things there are in the world? Imagine trying to drive excellently without having ever heard of stoplights. You'd get in a wreck before you got very far.

Or imagine trying to be an excellent surgeon if you'd never heard of germs, and therefore don't wash your hands. You'd

end up making your patients sick, not getting them better.

Or what if there's a God? Would that have an effect on what it means to live excellently? What about if countries don't actually exist? Would that have an effect on what it means to be a citizen excellently?

And is there such a thing as "right and wrong"? Surely you need to be able to answer that question in order to live excellently.

§8

Once you know what there is in the world, you immediately have to ask philosophy's second question, "How do we know?"

Imagine that one of your friends says, "Your boyfriend is cheating on you with Sally-Jane." That gives you an answer to philosophy's first question, by telling you that there are at least six things: there's *you*, your *boyfriend*, the *relationship* of being someone's boyfriend, the person *Sally-Jane*, the *activity* of cheating, and the *fact* that this activity has actually occurred between your boyfriend and Sally.

But will you just take your friend's word for it? Is that how you get knowledge? (Sometimes, maybe. Other times, maybe not.) Or will you do a scientific experiment to see if your friend is right? Is *that* how you get knowledge? (Sometimes, maybe. Other times, maybe not.)

Surely living life awesomely requires that we know things, rather than functioning on mere opinion. Right? But how is it that we know things? How do we get knowledge?

§9

Now, imagine that your friend saw your boyfriend cheating on you with Sally-Jane. Your friend got her knowledge through visual experience.

The next question you'll have to ask is philosophy's third: "What should we do about it?" After all, you want to live awesomely. What would be the most excellent thing to do?

Or imagine that you know that God exists. What should you do about that? Or what if you know that happiness exists, but can't find it. What should you do about that?

Just because (a) something exists (or doesn't exist), and (b) you know it exists (or doesn't exist), doesn't mean (c) you know what to do about it. So philosophers are never content with just answering philosophy's first two questions. They also eventually try to answer the third.

§10

However, even if you've answered philosophy's first three questions (What is there? How do we know? What should we do about it?), you still don't know everything you need to know. There's one more question you have to ask.

For example, imagine that someone comes up to you and says, "There's no such thing as right and wrong." You, as a philosopher will automatically respond, "Ah, so you think you've got an answer to philosophy's first question. You're saying, '*There is no right and wrong.*' But I've got a second question for you: *How do you know?*"

Imagine that the person responds, “Because science says so. *That’s* how I know that right and wrong do not exist.”

You, as a philosopher, will respond, “Okay, so you think you have an answer to philosophy’s second question. You claim to know through science. Tell me, then, if it’s true that science says there’s no such thing as right and wrong (I don’t believe it does, but let’s pretend for the sake of argument that it does), *what should we do about it?*”

Now, imagine the person responds, “We should stop thinking that some things are right, and other things are wrong. *That’s* what we should do about it.” As a philosopher, you’ll then have to ask philosophy’s fourth question: *Why?*

Why should we stop thinking that some things are right, and other things are wrong? What would be *good* about doing that, or what would be *bad* about *not* doing that?

Just because someone has told you what you should do, in other words, doesn’t mean you know *why* you should do it (i.e., you need to know whether in fact it would be good, valuable, important, meaningful, worthwhile, etc. to do it).

Thus, after asking its first three questions, philosophy always has to ask the fourth: *Why?*

§11

If we want to live excellently—if we want to live awesomely—we have to think clearly about our lives and world. And if we want to think clearly, we have to ask philosophy’s four questions: What is there? How do we know? What should we

do about it? And *Why?*

The better we are at asking and answering those questions, the more clearly we’ll be able to think about our lives and world, and the more awesomely we’ll be able to live.

So, if you want to know what philosophy is, this would be my answer:

Philosophy is the activity of thinking clearly about your life (by asking and answering four questions: What is there? How do we know? What should we do about it? *Why?*), so that you can live your life more excellently.

II. WHAT ARE PHILOSOPHY CLASSES?

§12

Now, I assume you want to live awesomely (or “excellently”), and therefore might be interested in doing a little philosophy now and again.

However, you really have no choice in the matter. You have to take a philosophy class this semester, because the Man said so. (If you want to know *why* the Man said so, see Appendix A.)

Whether you care about being awesome, therefore, you probably would at least like to *not go insane* while you’re taking this philosophy class.

And I, fortunately for you, would like to help you out with that.

I want to help you get a handle on what your philosophy class will be like. That should help you handle your class better, and maybe even help you get a higher grade.

Whether or not you end up with the grade you want, however, I hope I can help you *enjoy* your philosophy class. You may not love it like I do (I'm a philosopher, so I practically live for philosophy classes), but you just might be able to find it *engaging*.

§13

The job of architecture classes is to teach you how to do architecture (how to design buildings).

The job of kinesiology classes is to teach you how to do kinesiology. (Whatever that is.)

Likewise, the job of philosophy classes is to teach you how to be awesome.

(I mean, “the job of philosophy classes is to teach you how to do philosophy.” Right. That’s what I meant.)

A philosophy class’s job is to teach you how to think more clearly about your life, *so you can live it more excellently*.

A philosophy class, therefore, is like a sports team’s practice. If you’re on a team, you practice to train your mind and body to play the game more successfully. Likewise, you go to philosophy class to practice thinking clearly about your life, so you can live it more successfully.

§14

That’s the *job* of a philosophy class. But what are philosophy classes actually *like*?

To start, I can tell you that philosophy classes *aren’t* like math and science classes. Philosophy classes, for example, don’t use textbooks filled with “problems” and “exercises.”

In fact, philosophy classes are more like *literature* classes. You read and discuss books, rather than “doing” problems or experiments.

There is a *difference* between philosophy and literature classes, however. Philosophy classes focus more on the world than on the books. That is, philosophy classes care more about what the books reveal about “life and the way things are,” than they care about the books themselves.

In a philosophy class, therefore, you care more about what the author says, than about how she or he says it. You care more about the beauty of the author’s ideas, than the beauty of the author’s style. You care more about whether the ideas “work (for you),” than about whether the author’s technique “works (for you).”

In a philosophy class, therefore, you read the book to discover new ways of understanding yourself and your life in the world, not just so you can say you’ve read the book.

§15

Now, one thing you need to be aware of about any philosophy class is that it will be governed by a “syllabus.” The syllabus is

like the constitution for the class. By joining the class, you agree to abide by the syllabus.

The syllabus gives you the rules for the class, as well as providing a schedule for the class's homework, papers, tests, final exam, and holidays.

If you want to know what the homework is for the next day of class, you check the syllabus. If you want to know when your next paper is due, or when your next test will be, you check the syllabus.

Always check your syllabus before each class! You don't want to be surprised by an assignment you forgot.

And remember: *If it's in the syllabus, your professor has no obligation to remind you of it.* That goes for everything (including schedules and rules). It's your responsibility to know your class's syllabus.

So, if you lose your syllabus, ask your professor for a new copy. You'll be lost without it.

§16

One thing you may notice on your class's syllabus is that your class has a "class participation" grade. Professors use this grade, shockingly enough, to encourage their students to participate in class. They figure that if you know you'll get punished for not participating (because your "class participation grade" will go down), then you'll try to avoid that punishment. And that will lead you to participate.

Unfortunately, it doesn't work. Many students would rather sit quietly through class, and get an "F" for class participation, than raise their hand, read out loud, or ask a question.

That's just the way some people are. And that's okay.

So, some professors try to include things in the class participation grade *other than* talking in class. And they come up with some pretty good ideas.

But for the moment, I want to talk about class participation in the original sense: actually being verbally involved with your classmates in the classroom. Class participation—whether you're graded for it or not—is talking (in a constructive, non-distracting, way) in class.

§17

If you talk to any philosophy professor (when she or he thinks no students are around), and ask her or him what her or his students could do to make her or him happy, she or he will always say two things:

1. Doing the readings.
2. Participating in class (that is, asking questions, and offering comments or answers).

Then, if you ask the professor what the most difficult things are about being a teacher, what the things are that make him or her feel like a failure, he or she will always say two things:

1. Trying to get students to (want to) do the readings.
2. Trying to get students to (want to) participate in class

(through asking questions and offering comments/answers).

Let that be a hint to you. If you want to make your philosophy professors happy, then (a) do the readings, and (b) show them you've done the readings by (i) asking questions about them and (ii) being ready to comment on and answer questions about them.

There is nothing a professor dreads more than “dead air” after she or he asks a question in class. . . .

§18

If it's basically impossible to get students to join in class discussions, answer questions, etc., you might wonder why philosophy professors keep trying. Is it just that they enjoy making themselves miserable?

Not more than most people, no. Actually, the reason they keep trying is that they want to know whether they're succeeding at being teachers or not. And the only way for them to know whether they're succeeding is to know whether their students are learning. And the only way for them to know whether their students are learning is for their students to tell them.

And what their students tell them through their tests and papers just isn't enough. Professors are fragile animals, easily dejected. They need constant reassurance and encouragement from their students, like this:

“There, there, li'l professor! It's okay. We understand what you're saying. No, *really*, we *do*. We get it. You're doing a great job and we're learning *so much*. Here, let us prove it to

you by having a great conversation about ‘the text’. Would you like that? We thought so.”

You know, *that* kind of thing.

§19

But there's another reason that philosophy professors keep trying to get their students to participate in class. Philosophers are convinced that you do philosophy best when you're in conversation with other people.

Talking to other people forces you to put your thoughts into words, which helps you clarify your thoughts. Sometimes you don't even quite know what you think until you've talked about it for a little while. Talking to people helps you think.

But also, talking to other people forces you to listen to other people's thoughts. It gets you to think about things you wouldn't think about otherwise. And it encourages you to work with other people to come up with ideas that make sense not just to one person, but to multiple people.

§20

Conversations and discussions are to philosophy what experiments are to science. Conversations and discussions are where you test ideas. Conversations and discussions are where you gather data, and form theories, and try out theories.

Conversations and discussions give you the chance to see whether the world looks the same way to other people as it does to you. And *that* gives you the chance to figure out

whether you're actually seeing the world the way it is, or are just imagining things.

Conversations and discussions, in other words, help to connect your ideas and feelings and thoughts to the real world, and to real life.

And philosophy professors desperately want their students to be able to take advantage of that. There is power in conversation—the power to refine and refute ideas, the power to discover truth and have a positive impact on other people (and yourself!). Philosophy professors want to make sure their students are exercising that power.

The job of philosophy, after all, is to help you think clearly about life, so you can live it awesomely. And there's nothing more philosophical or more helpful than a good discussion.

§21

So, come to class with questions to ask. Think of things you'd like to discuss with your professor and classmates, and write them down.

Then raise your hand. Or get your friends to raise their hands with you, if you're nervous. Give them all the same question to ask—that way no matter which person your professor calls on, the question will get asked.

And form opinions about the texts and topics you're studying. Find things that make you angry, or that make you happy, and write them down. Bring your notes to class, and then raise your hand.

And when one of your classmates has the guts to say something in class, back her or him up by doing the same thing. Say you agree or disagree. Maybe even say why.

Come to class expecting to talk, not just listen. It'll be easier to stay awake, if nothing else. . . .

III. WHAT ARE PHILOSOPHY BOOKS?

§22

In your philosophy class you'll be studying books that some philosophers wrote. One thing you should know about philosophers and their books is the following:

Philosophers write philosophy books because they are afraid. They're afraid of being surrounded by un-awesome people (e.g., zombies, Nazis, thieves) who want to eat their brains.

They're afraid of being stuck in a world overrun by misery and miserable people, overrun by evil and evil people, overrun by stupidity and stupid people.

A philosophy book starts when a philosopher realizes something about life or the world. The philosopher sees something that helps him or her figure out life a little better. The philosopher finally understands something she hadn't before, and that makes it clearer to her what she needs to do to live awesomely.

And then the philosopher thinks:

“But what if nobody else realizes what I just realized? What if they don’t see the truth? They’ll be stuck living a lie, and won’t even know it. And if they’re stuck in a mistaken view of the world, who knows what they’ll do to each other . . . and me!”

So, the philosopher sits down to write. He’s got to get you to realize what he just realized. He’s got to get you to snap out of the propaganda or lies or ignorance he thinks you’re trapped in (assuming you’re anything like *he* was before *he* realized the *truth*).

And that means most philosophy books are *arguments*. The author is trying to *prove* something to you. She is arguing against some other way of seeing the world—a way that’s wrong and destructive. The philosopher is trying to get you to believe something new and different.

And that means if you want to understand a philosophy book, you have to figure out what the argument is. What view does the author think is wrong (or blind, or ignorant, or evil!), and what view does she think is right? And what evidence does the author give in her attempt to prove that you should agree with her way of seeing things?

§23

This means there’s usually a structure to the philosophy book you’re reading. There’s an outline buried underneath its sentences and paragraphs and chapters. There’s a sequence of thoughts that the author is trying to lead you along, till you come to the right conclusion (till you finally have to admit that the author is right, and somebody else is wrong).

Therefore, your two most important jobs as a philosophy reader are:

1. Figure out what the author is arguing. (What conclusion does the author want you to reach?)
2. Uncover the structure or outline of the argument.

Until you know where the author is going, and the sequence of steps the author takes to get there, you don’t actually know what the philosophy book says.

And that means you might be a zombie, and not realize it.

§24

So, here’s an example. I’m going to write you a short philosophy “book,” right here. You tell me what I’m trying to argue, and then tell me what the outline or structure of the argument/“book” is.

A Short “Book” by Micah Tillman

So much of the time, people get angry
without really knowing why.

Psychologists say that there are two basic,
physiological responses to danger: “fight or
flight.” When a person (or animal) is faced
with a threat, she or he will automatically
kick into one of two gears. Either the
person will go into battle mode (whether
defensive or offensive), or into avoidance
mode.

The two responses can be more or less

drastic. Some people are better at controlling themselves than others, and some threats aren't as scary as others.

However, one thing that is common to all of the *fight* responses is *anger*. It can be more or less intense, but if you're in fight mode, you're also going to be angry. It's your body's way of giving you the energy you need to fight.

Since anger is part of the natural, "fight or flight" response mechanism (which is built into being human), it is extremely difficult to just shut it off. You can't expect yourself or another person to just stop being angry . . . *unless you deal with the threat*.

If you find some way to make an angry person feel less threatened, his anger will start to disappear. Without feeling threatened, the "fight or flight" response will shut off. The person will find it easier to calm down.

What this tells us is that anger is a response to fear. It's not *caused* by fear (some people run away instead of getting angry); it's a way of *reacting* to fear. And that means if you want to deal with someone's anger, you need to first deal with his fear. Figure out what's making him feel threatened, and why it's making him feel threatened. Then figure out how to help him look at the threatening thing in a way that makes it seem less threatening.

His anger is his way of responding to his fear. Help him get rid of his fear, and

you'll help him get rid of his anger.

§25

Alright, so I assume you figured out what the argument was. You saw the conclusion I wanted you to draw. You realized that I wanted you to believe something, and, hopefully, you realized what it was that I wanted you to believe.

But did you discover the structure, the outline? What was the sequence of ideas that lead to the conclusion? What reasons did I offer as evidence for the conclusion? Where did I start? Where did I go next? Where did I go after that?

Looking back over what I just wrote, it looks like I first explained the "fight or flight" response, and how anger is part of the "fight response." Then I argued that if anger is part of the "fight response," and the "fight response" is a response to feeling threatened, then you have to eliminate the feeling of fear to eliminate the feeling of anger.

So, we can uncover not only the point the text is trying to make, but the structure of the text.

- I. Response to Feeling Threatened: Fight or Flight
- II. Anger as Part of Fight Response
- III. Conclusion:
 - A. Anger Is a Response to Fear
 - B. Eliminate Anger by Eliminating Fear.

§26

If you're like me, you had to read the little "book" I just wrote

a couple times. I knew there was a structure there (even though I didn't really put it there consciously), I just had to figure out what it was. And that meant I had to read it twice: once to get the point, once to find the structure.

(Okay, well, actually, I wrote it once, then reread it. But I was reading while I wrote, so it counts as reading it twice.)

With longer texts, the argument may not be so clear, and the structure may not be so easy to find. You may have to read a text a few times (not just twice) to really get a clear picture of what's going on in it.

§27

Finally, there's one more vitally-important thing I need to tell you about reading philosophy books.

Your job is not only to figure out what the argument is, and what the structure of the text is, but *to be able to explain what the book is saying to a friend* (who doesn't know anything about philosophy) *in your own words*.

It will make the philosophy books you're reading *so much more interesting* if you read them as if you were going to have to explain them to the townies of the world.

Put yourself in the position of a teacher when you read a philosophy book. I'm serious about that. Try it. When you read a philosophy book, you're not a student. You're an educator who has to save the world from being overrun by ignorance. And that means you have to be able to explain the book you are reading to your ignorant friends. If you can't, then you can't

teach them to think clearly. And if you can't get them to think clearly, who knows what kind of ignorant things they'll do to themselves and to you, how much ignorance they'll wreak, what kind of ignorant politicians they'll vote for, etc.

This is your goal when you read a philosophy book: Become able to save the world by becoming able to educate the ignorant people you know about what the book says.

And, once again, I'm serious about that. We're on a mission here people. (Cure the zombies!)

IV. WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY HOMEWORK?

§28

Philosophy homework is assigned either by your class's syllabus, or by your professor in class, or both. It consists of three things:

1. Preparing for class.
2. Preparing for tests.
3. Writing papers.

However, preparing for class and preparing for tests are the same thing in philosophy. You are always studying for the test.

If you study differently for the test than you study for class, that probably means you're not studying correctly for class. And that means you are going to have a much tougher time on the test.

§29

Remember the general “two-for-one” rule:

You should be doing at least two hours of studying outside class for every one hour you spend in class.

That’s six hours of studying per week outside of class, for each course you’re taking. (Three hours per week *in* class for each course → six hours per week *outside of class* for each course.)

And, that means, if you’re taking five classes, you need to be spending at least thirty hours a week studying *outside* class.

And that means being a student is a fulltime job. At least fifteen hours a week in class; at least thirty hours a week outside class. That’s at least forty-five hours a week of “studenting.”

And that’s painful.

§30

So, make a schedule. Block out plenty of time to do your philosophy homework. Set up times to get together with your fellow students to talk about the books and lectures. Set up times to discuss things with your professor.

And if your grades are telling you that what you’re doing isn’t working, then call for back up. “Calling for backup” usually will take one or more of eight forms:

1. Getting help from your classmates (including anyone you know who took the same class from the same professor in a

previous semester!)

(Having conversations with them about the course, the book, the lectures, the papers, the tests, how they study; copying their notes to supplement your own; getting together with them to read the texts and to go over lecture notes; getting them to come with you to visit your professor; getting them to go over your papers for you, etc.)

2. Getting help from your professor.

(Meeting with her or him to talk about the course, the book, the lectures, the papers, the tests, and how you study. Get a classmate to come along. It’ll make the conversation more interesting, not to mention making it easier for you if you’re nervous.)

3. Reading “secondary literature” (i.e., books or articles that were written about the books and philosophers you’re studying in class).

(Ask your professor if she or he can recommend any good “secondary literature” on whatever book or philosopher you happen to be studying. Also, look for books and articles on your own, using the library or Google. Sometimes it’s helpful to have not only your professor explaining the book to you, but some other scholars as well. Just pay attention to whether the secondary literature you’re reading agrees or disagrees with what your professor is telling you. After all, it’s your professor who will be grading you!)

4. Learning to make your study skills more awesome (or “excellent”).

(See the website for CUA’s Center for Academic Success [<http://success.cua.edu/>]. They have a set of tutorials online to help you improve your studying, and they offer workshops and personal help

[<http://success.cua.edu/services/>].)

5. Getting a tutor.
(See <http://success.cua.edu/tutoring/> for details)
6. Using the Writing Center to help you improve your writing skills.
(See <http://english.cua.edu/wc/> for details)
7. Meeting with your advisor.
(He or she might be able to tell you about some resource that you didn't know about. Also, he or she might just be a wise person, who can give you helpful advice!)
8. Meeting with a counselor at CUA's counseling center.
(See <http://counseling.cua.edu/> for details. Philosophers aren't the only ones who study how to live life awesomely. Psychologists do it too; they even have scientific studies and whatnot to help them figure out what works and what doesn't. They're like those "life coaches" that rich and successful people always hire to help them get even more rich and successful—except they don't charge a billion dollars an hour. When you're in college, they'll help you get more awesome for free.)

V. WHAT ARE PHILOSOPHY TESTS?

§31

Different professors assign different kinds of tests. Some ask for longer answers, some for shorter answers. Some use "fill-in-the-blank" and "multiple-choice," while others require essays.

Whatever the differences, your professor's goals in giving you a philosophy test are always the same. Every philosophy test has three—or perhaps four—goals:

1. To see if you have really gotten the ideas out of the books and into your head (by seeing if you can take those ideas out of your head and put them back on paper again).
2. To see how well you've learned to use those ideas (to answer questions, solve problems, explain situations, etc.)
3. To see how well you've learned to evaluate those ideas (by discovering or analyzing objections to them, by figuring out their consequences, and whether those consequences are good or bad, etc.)
4. [**And sometimes:**] To see how well you've learned to come up with, use, and evaluate ideas of your own.

After all, the job of philosophy is to help you think clearly about life (so you can live it awesomely), and the job of a philosophy *class* is to teach you how to help yourself think more clearly about life (so you can live it more awesomely).

Your professor wants to see whether the class is working for you. And your professor wants *you* to be able to see for yourself (so you can know whether or not you need to make some changes and/or look for help).

§32

The following are my suggestions for studying for philosophy tests. It just so happens that they're also my suggestions for studying for philosophy classes.

1. Properly read the part(s) of the book you were assigned to

read. (See Chapter III, above.) Read the day's assignment *before* coming to class.

2. Review your notes from past classes, both to refresh your memory, and to see if there's anything in them you don't understand.
3. Write down questions to ask the professor in class and at her or his office.
4. Meet with your classmates outside of class to (a) talk about the readings and lectures, (b) see if they need any help understanding the readings and lectures (when you have to explain something to someone else, it helps *you* understand it better!), and (c) see if they can help you understand the readings and lectures.
5. Meet with your professor outside of class to talk about the readings and lectures, and about any questions you have.

The only real difference between preparing for class and preparing for a test is that preparing for class *always* includes bringing the book you're reading to class. Whether or not you bring your book to class on a *test* day is up to you. (Your professor probably won't let you use the book during the test, but it might help you get in some last-minute studying ahead of time.)

VI. WHAT ARE PHILOSOPHY PAPERS?

§33

Most philosophy papers, but not all, are about the books you read in class. Their purpose is very similar to the purpose of tests. The professor uses them primarily to find out how good

of a reader you have become. That is, the professor uses papers to see if you are able (a) to get the ideas out of a book (or other text), and (b) to express them accurately in your own words.

However, professors also use philosophy papers to see how well you've learned to use and evaluate the ideas you get out of a book (or other text). Can you apply what other people think to new and different situations? Can you determine what is good or bad, helpful or confusing, true or questionable (etc.) about what other people think?

Finally, professors may use philosophy papers to see how well you've learned to come up with quality ideas of your own (in response to the issues raised by the books you read for class). For example, your professor may want to see you not only (a) explain an idea from a book, and (b) use the idea to analyze some new situation, or (c) say why that idea is good or bad, but (d) propose a better idea (an idea that is clearer, or that explains the world more accurately, or that is more helpful).

§34

Also, like tests, papers are a kind of conversation between you and the professor. The professor tells you things about the books in class, and tells you what kind of paper she or he wants you to write. Then you respond by writing a paper.

To qualify as a "response," however, your paper has to match the requirements your professor gives you.

If your professor asks for a cheeseburger, and you give him a *fillet mignon*, it doesn't count (even though a *fillet mignon* is probably much better, in itself, than a cheeseburger).

If your professor asks for a vinyl LP and you give her a gift

card for iTunes, it doesn't count (even though she might be able to download many more songs than can fit on an LP).

If your professor asks you to pass the *European* football, and you throw him an *American* football, it doesn't count (even though football is more awesome than soccer).

§35

So, when preparing to write your papers, make sure to pay attention *not only* to what your professor says about the books you'll be writing about, *but also* to the requirements (or "guidelines" or "prompts") your professor gives you for the papers.

It is a scientifically-proven fact that 99.2% of your classmates are *not* going to follow the directions your professor gives you, and their grades are going to suffer for it. (As will their paychecks when they continue the habit of not following directions after they graduate.)

Do not be stupid like them. You know you're smarter than them, so prove it. Follow the directions *to the T*, and if there's anything you don't understand or are unsure about, go talk to your professor.

Notice that I said, "go talk to the professor." E-mailing won't work. Your professor already gave you *written* directions for the paper. Asking her for *more* written directions will be futile, because she has already been as clear as she can be in writing. The only way to be *more* clear is for her to talk with you face to face.

§36

And whatever you do, don't plagiarize. Plagiarize once in one paper, and you get an F for the whole class. And that's really, really . . . tough. To put it mildly.

So, what exactly counts as plagiarism? In an academic paper, the rules are *way more strict* than they are in blogs or internet articles. The rules are more like Wikipedia's rules—except even *more* strict.

Online, people often don't care whether you cite your sources. I don't know why (I find it very annoying), but there it is.

However, in an academic paper (which every paper you write in college will be), you absolutely *must* cite *all* your sources. And that means if you didn't "come up with it on your own," then you must include a citation saying "where you got it from."

That includes not only quotations, but *ideas*.

For more information about what counts as plagiarism—*information you are required to know*—see CUA's official policy on "Academic Integrity" at:

1. <http://policies.cua.edu/academicundergrad/integrity.cfm>, and
2. <http://policies.cua.edu/academicundergrad/integrityfull.cfm>,
and
3. <http://policies.cua.edu/academicundergrad/integrityprocedures.cfm>.

§37

The following are my suggestions for writing philosophy

papers:

1. Don't wait till the last minute to read the instructions your professor gave you about the paper. If there's anything you don't understand or are unsure about, you'll need time to make an appointment to meet with your professor to talk about it.
2. Follow the directions. There is nothing unimportant in them. If your professor told you to do something, she didn't mean to *not* do it. If she thought it was important enough to tell you, she thought it was important enough for you to actually do.
3. If you write a paper one evening, wait till the next morning to proofread it.
4. Have a couple friends *whose writing abilities you trust* proofread your paper after you proofread it.
5. Have a couple classmates read the paper and discuss it with them.
 - a. Ask them if they think it has met the requirements, and what you can do to make sure it's obvious to your professor that the paper is meeting the requirements. (Don't assume it will be obvious to the professor that your paper has met the requirements! Make sure your paper is clear about when and where it is fulfilling the requirements.)
 - b. Ask them if they think it's persuasive, and what you can do to make it more persuasive.
 - c. Ask them if they think it's well-written, and what you can do to make it easier to read and more professional-sounding.
6. Read your classmates' papers, to see how they approached the assignment, and to get ideas for ways of improving your own writing. (And remember to cite their papers if

you use any of their ideas or words!!!)

7. Ask your professor if he or she is able and willing to read papers before they're due.
 - a. If your professor says "yes," then make an appointment with him or her to go over your paper.
 - b. Ask your professor if she or he would prefer to read the paper (while you twiddle your thumbs), or if she or he would prefer that you read the paper to her or him.
 - i. If I had to guess, I'd say most professors will prefer that you read the paper to them, so make sure to read the paper out loud on your own ahead of time. This will not only help you catch mistakes in it, but will help you make sure it sounds good when read aloud.
 - c. Write down the comments your professor makes about the paper while she or he is reading it (or while you are reading it to her or him), and after she or he finishes reading it (or after you are finished reading it to her or him).
 - d. Follow your professor's suggestions *and* make any specific changes your professor wants you to make.
 - i. Don't expect too much out of your professor, if you ask her or him how you can improve the paper so it will get a better grade. (That's like asking your professor to write your paper for you.)
 - ii. Instead, give your professor concrete ideas that you've come up with about what to add to the paper, or what to change about the paper, and see how your professor feels about those ideas. Don't expect your professor to come up with ideas for you. That's not your

professor's job.

VII. WHAT ARE PHILOSOPHY GRADES?

§38

Grades at CUA have specific meanings.

A = "Excellent."

B = "Good."

C = "Satisfactory."

D = "Passing."

F = "Failing."

Your professors at CUA first decide whether your performance on an assignment was excellent, good, satisfactory, passing, or failing. *Then* they assign a grade to your performance.

Your professors probably expect to be *satisfied* by everyone's performances, and thus they probably expect to give everyone a "C." If you satisfy the requirements, you satisfy the professor. And that means your performance gets a "C."

Not a "B." "B" means "*good*," and "good" is *better* than "satisfactory."

And not an "A" either. "A" means "*excellent*," and "excellent" is *way* better than "satisfactory."

So, in *any* class at CUA, on any given assignment, you have to do more than just meet the requirements to get higher than a "C." To get a "B," your performance will need to be not only

satisfactory, but mildly impressive. And to get an "A," your performance will need to be seriously impressive.

§39

You're scared now, right? To help you feel less scared, let me give you a few tips for your philosophy courses, at least.

Philosophy professors like two things: (1) Clarity, and (2) Comprehension.

Work very hard to be clear on all your assignments. And I don't just mean, "use good handwriting."

I mean that whenever you're writing a paper or taking a test, you should (a) think of yourself as a philosophy book writer, and (b) think of your professor as the philosophy book reader.

Then, you should (c) make your professor's reading job as easy as possible. Make your arguments clear. Make the structure of what you write obvious.

And make sure your professor won't be able to miss the places where you are fulfilling the requirements for the assignment. (If, for example, the assignment is to answer three different questions, then give three clearly distinct answers—and point out which answer belongs to which question.)

Don't make it difficult for your professor, or it will be harder for her or him to find your performance better than satisfactory.

§40

Then, in addition to being clear, show that you comprehend the material covered in class and in the readings. Show that you not only know the words and phrases that get used in class (and in the books), but that you know what they *mean*.

The important thing is the ideas—the meanings—not the words. Sometimes students think that if they just memorize the right terms, they'll be fine. However, you're much more likely to perform impressively if you understand the *ideas* behind the terms.

So, how do you make sure you understand the idea behind a term?

First, ask: What *other* terms *mean the same thing*, or *convey the same idea*?

Second, ask: What other terms might *seem* to mean the same thing, or convey the same idea, but *don't*?

Third, ask: What *consequences follow* from the idea behind the term? (In other words, if you believed in the idea, what *else* would you have to believe *as well*? How would you have to think, act, feel, etc.?)

Fourth, ask: Why would someone believe or disbelieve in the idea behind the term?

§41

And how do you do answer those four questions?

First, do some thinking about each question on your own.

Then, do some thinking on each question with your classmates, friends, and professor.

Ask questions. Offer suggestions. Take suggestions. Think for yourself, but also allow others to help you out. And give yourself the chance to help other people too. You might help them see something they hadn't before.

§42

If your grade on an assignment is below a "D," that lets you and your professor know that the class isn't working as well as it should for you. And that means you might need to get together with your professor to figure out why.

It may just be that you need to not only go to the lectures and read the books, but also regularly visit the professor in her or his office to talk about the books and lectures.

Or, it may just be that you need to study with different people before the tests.

Or, it may just be that you need to study with people more often, (i.e., not just before the tests, but every week), to talk about the books and lectures.

Or, it may be that you're just not putting in enough study work outside class, period. . . .

VIII. WHAT IS A PHILOSOPHY STUDENT?

§43

The obvious answer to that is: “Someone who wants to live awesomely (or ‘excellently’) and, therefore, is looking for ways to think more clearly about his or her life.”

But we can also expand that definition:

A philosophy student is someone who has learned that how you look at things determines how you live. Thus, a philosophy student is someone who has discovered there’s more than one type of power.

§44

Some people think that *physical* power is the only kind of power. But not philosophy students. A philosophy student has learned that there are mental and emotional kinds of power too.

Some people think that “power” is always something that one person does to another person. But not philosophy students. A philosophy student has learned that one of the most important kinds of power is your own power over yourself.

Some people think it’s possible to become powerless, to be helpless. But not philosophy students. A philosophy student is someone who has realized that if you’re losing a “fight” using one kind of power, there are usually other kinds of power available to you.

§45

A philosophy student has learned that there are more options—more kinds of power—available to you than most people realize.

For example, if you get a bad grade on a test, this does *not* show that you are powerless to get a good grade. Rather, it shows that you need to reexamine the kind of power you were using against the test.

If your own internal powers—the abilities you have, all by yourself (of reading the book, of taking notes, of figuring out problems)—weren’t enough to “overpower” the test, then you need to use the power to call for backup.

A lot of people forget that the power to call for backup is a kind of power. They think that a power has to belong to them themselves, or else they can’t use it.

But a philosophy student knows better. A philosophy student knows that if you can exercise the power to get other people to help you, then their power becomes your power. (“With our powers combined . . . !”)

§46

Furthermore, a lot of people think power is always a negative thing, and can only be used for negative things. Physical power gives you the ability to fight and destroy, mental power gives you the ability to cheat and manipulate, emotional power gives you the ability to harm and control.

But they’re wrong.

Physical power *also* gives you the ability to help and build, mental power *also* gives you the ability to organize and solve, and emotional power *also* gives you the ability to encourage and support.

Therefore, a philosophy student is someone who has learned that your professors aren't the only ones with power. They have the final power to give you a grade—a power that students don't have. But *students* have the power to make class time either miserable or fun, and to make study time either helpful or pointless.

As a philosophy student, you have the power to choose your attitude and your techniques. You have the power to decide how you use the many kinds of power available to you.

It is always easier either *not* to use those powers at all, or to use them in *negative* ways. I don't know why, but it is. It's simply *easier* to give up or go negative.

However, it's always a greater (*more powerful*) display of power to actually *use* the powers available to you in *positive* ways.

So when faced with the question of how to use your powers, choose to use them in the most powerful way you can: positively, helpfully, constructively (that is: awesomely).

§47

A philosophy student, therefore, is someone who is learning how to use the power she or he has in order to think more clearly and live more awesomely. And that means everyone

should be a philosophy student, at least a little bit.

Fortunately for you, you're in a philosophy class—so you've got a much higher chance of being a real philosophy student than some people. (Some people have no idea what philosophy even is, and wouldn't know a philosopher from Adam.)

And you may not have any choice about whether you take the class, but you *do* have a choice about whether to make the most of it. (The Man doesn't have the power to make you miserable, unless you let him.)

Good luck!

MICAH TILLMAN

APPENDIX A
WHY THE MAN MAKES YOU TAKE PHILOSOPHY

My Best Guess #1

I think that maybe The Man makes you take philosophy courses because perhaps The Man thinks the following. (I'm not sure, though. I'm just guessing.)

1. Perhaps the Man wants to make lots of money.
2. The Man will make lots of money if lots of students want to come to his school.
3. Lots of students will want to come to The Man's school if graduates from his school tend to get good jobs.
4. Graduates from The Man's school will tend to get good jobs if they tend to be good employees.
5. People who can think clearly about life and the world (and who, therefore, can live awesomely) tend to be good employees.
6. People who've taken philosophy classes tend to be able to think clearly about life and the world (and, therefore, tend to be able to live awesomely).
7. Therefore, people who've taken philosophy classes tend to be able to be good employees.
8. Therefore, people who've taken philosophy classes tend to be able to get good jobs.
9. Therefore, lots of people tend to want to go to schools where people take philosophy classes (whether they've ever heard of philosophy classes before or not).

10. Therefore, The Man will want everyone at his school to take philosophy classes.

My Best Guess #2

I *also* think that maybe The Man makes you take philosophy courses because perhaps The Man thinks the following. (Again, I'm not sure. I'm just guessing.)

1. Perhaps the Man wants to make lots of money.
2. The Man will make lots of money if lots of students want to come to his school.
3. Lots of students will want to come to The Man's school if graduates from his school tend to get good jobs.
4. Graduates from The Man's school will tend to get good jobs if they tend to be good employees.
5. People who understand themselves and other people tend to be good employees.
6. People who understand "where they are coming from" and "where other people are coming from" tend to understand themselves and other people.
7. People who study the great thinkers of the past who have shaped our world and culture tend to understand "where they are coming from" and "where other people are coming from."
8. People who take philosophy classes study the great thinkers of the past who have shaped our world and culture.
9. Therefore, people who have taken philosophy classes tend to understand "where they are coming

from” and “where other people are coming from.”

10. Therefore, people who have taken philosophy classes tend to understand themselves and other people.
11. Therefore, people who have taken philosophy classes tend to be good employees.
12. Therefore, people who have taken philosophy classes tend to get good jobs.
11. Therefore, lots of people tend to want to go to schools where people take philosophy classes (whether they’ve ever heard of philosophy classes before or not).
13. Therefore, The Man will want everyone at his school to take philosophy classes.

Conclusion

So, maybe that’s what The Man is thinking, and maybe that’s why The Man makes you take philosophy courses. Perhaps The Man wants to make everyone stretch, tone, and beef up their minds. Perhaps The Man wants everyone to think about where they come from and where the people they’re going to have to spend their lives dealing with come from. That way his graduates will be more likely to succeed in doing whatever it is they try to do. And, therefore, his graduates will be more likely to make him look good and get him more money.

Maybe, in other words, The Man is being selfish. But we all end up the better for it.