

Guide To Studying for Philosophy Exams
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Since the exams that you take in philosophy classes tend to be somewhat different from the exams you take in other classes, the best methods to use when studying for them are likely to be different from the best study methods for exams in other classes as well. The guidelines below are designed specifically to help my students study for the kinds of exams that I give, so they won't *necessarily* be as helpful in helping you study for the exams that other philosophy professors give. However, most of the recommendations that I make here should transfer over to the exams given by a significant percentage of other philosophy professors out there.

1. Memorizing key facts is only the start.
 - a. There are key facts that you'll need to know to succeed on philosophy exams. These include, for instance, technical definitions of key terms used by the authors you have been studying. For example:
 - i. If your class read anything about Immanuel Kant's ethical theory, you should be able to state each formulation of the Categorical Imperative that you covered.
 - ii. If your class included a unit about philosophy of mind, you should be able to explain what dualism is (in an amount of detail appropriate to the level of the class and the amount of time you spent on that particular kind of theory).
 - iii. If your class covered different theories of gender, you should be able to explain, say, what makes a theory a social constructionist theory of gender.
 - b. But, knowing that kind of material does not get you very far on its own. You should be able to take that kind of knowledge and **DO** something with it; you should also be able to **USE** that knowledge to demonstrate your ability to think critically. For example, you should be able to:
 - i. Compare and contrast different views
 1. By noting how they are similar and dissimilar
 2. By noting which you think is better and why
 - ii. Provide specific examples that illustrate and/or support more general claims
 1. Notice that above I've made general claims and then immediately followed them up with specific examples that illustrate and clarify the general point I'm trying to make.
 - iii. Explain author's arguments for specific claims, which is to say, authors reasons for thinking that specific claims are true
 - iv. Identify what you see as strengths and weaknesses of different views and explain why you see them as strengths and weaknesses
 - v. Object to arguments that you have studied
 - vi. Respond to objections on behalf of the person who made the argument being objected to
 - vii. Apply general principles to specific cases, including cases from your own personal experience

2. Active study methods are better than passive study methods.
 - a. There are lots of different activities that are worth doing as you study. I usually recommend that students do some combination of the following activities, giving greater emphasis to those activities at the top of this list:
 - i. Practice Writing
 1. Writing out answers to sample questions is the best way to practice for your philosophy exams because it is the exact same task that you will have to do when you sit down to your exam. Plus, as you've probably discovered by now, good philosophical writing is somewhat different from the kinds of writing you have done in other kinds of classes, so practicing this specific kind of writing is a particularly good strategy.
 - ii. Practice Talking
 1. Ideally, you should talk with other people who know something about the course material. Study groups are good!
 - a. But if you join a study group, be sure to contribute your own critical thinking skills, not just for the sake of fairness (which is certainly important), but also to make sure that you don't get led astray by a classmate who has made some sort of mistake. You shouldn't just *blindly* accept whatever a peer (or anyone, for that matter) says; you are responsible for thinking carefully about whether what others have said matches up with what you know, to ask questions if you aren't sure about something, and so on.
 2. But if you can't get together with classmates or others who know something about what you are studying, talking to people who are not familiar with your philosophy course material can be very helpful as well.
 - a. The great thing about talking to someone who isn't familiar with the material you are studying is that they can ask lots of basic questions that force you to clarify exactly what you are talking about. To successfully explain something to someone who doesn't already have a bunch of background knowledge is a really good exercise for developing your own understanding (as any teacher will tell you, teaching others is a great way to really learn)!
 3. But if you can't recruit anyone at all to talk about philosophy with you, even talking out loud to yourself can still be very beneficial.
 - a. You can get lots of benefits by talking out loud even if no one else is listening and responding. For one thing, talking out loud forces you to put the relevant ideas into your own words. For another thing, lots of people remember material better after they have vocalized their thoughts about it.
 - iii. Re-read Your Notes
 1. This is good insofar as it helps you focus on important stuff, and is thus an efficient way of jogging your memory about lots of material.
 2. It is also good to the degree that your notes are phrased in your

own words, and thus should be easier for you to understand than the original texts.

3. However, looking at your notes doesn't necessarily exercise your critical thinking skills or help you dig into the sophisticated details of an author's view, so there are drawbacks to this strategy.
- iv. Review the Comments on Your Graded Assignments
 1. This is good insofar as it helps you identify your own strengths and weaknesses, your good and bad habits. If, for instance, you've received multiple comments about problems with your thesis statements, that gives you a strong clue that you should devote some study time to what an appropriate thesis statement looks like.
 2. The drawback of this strategy (at least for Rachel's classes) is that it is highly unlikely that you will ever be asked a question on an exam that covers exactly the same content as what you have already been asked on homework or in a paper prompt. I tend to ask questions about specific bits of course material that you have not already written about to help you achieve a larger breadth of knowledge.
- v. Re-read the Assigned Texts
 1. What is great about going back to the source and re-reading the assigned texts for the class is that, with greater experience under your belt, you are almost certain to get more out of the reading than the first time around. It helps you dig into the details of the view and the justifications for it, rather than just skimming the surface of the material.
 2. But re-reading the assigned texts takes lots of time and doesn't necessarily keep your brain as active in terms of critical thinking as other study methods, so it usually isn't the most efficient use of your limited time.
 3. It is, however, a good idea to re-read the original text if there is a particular article or chapter or something that you've been continually struggling with and that you expect to see questions about on the exam.
3. Practice answering different *kinds* of questions. As you do the activities (writing, talking, reading, etc.) listed under #2, be sure to practice completing all the different kinds of tasks listed under 1.b. For instance, if you only practice answering questions about definitions, you won't be prepared to answer, for instance, the questions about comparison and evaluation that you can expect to see on your exam.
4. If, while studying, you have a question or concern that you've tried to answer or resolve yourself (by reading the information I have posted online, referring to your notes, and so on) but have not been able to do so, there are a few things you can do:
 - a. First, note that you should practice your critical thinking skills by trying to figure out the answer to your question or solution to your problem on your own before trying to contact me.
 - i. For instance, if your question is simply about what your grade is, you can

- calculate that yourself by looking in Moodle, doing some simple math, and checking where you are against the grading rubric in the syllabus.
- ii. If your question is about the exam logistics, Rachel always posts a detailed exam info sheet ahead of time on Moodle that tells you what you need to know (and more)!
- b. If you have tried to figure things out on your own and are still having trouble, meeting me in person (either in office hours or by appointment) is the best option, because if we have a face-to-face conversation, you have the best chance of getting the help you need. Meeting allows me to ask you follow up questions to determine exactly what is tripping you up, and tailor my advice to your needs based on your facial and verbal responses.
- i. However, being able to do this requires some planning ahead, and you may not have the luxury of time on your side when studying.
- c. If you cannot schedule a meeting with me prior to the exam to clear things up, you can get in touch with me over email. However, if you are going to email me with last minute questions before the exam, there are a few things to keep in mind:
- i. Be as specific as possible in asking your question, which increases the chance that my response will actually do what you need it to.
 1. Tell me what relevant information you already know, so I can have a better idea of exactly where you are getting stuck and tailor my response accordingly.
 2. Sometimes it helps to phrase your question as a sort of multiple choice, like this: “When so-and-so says X, I’m not sure if they mean Y or Z.” That way, I get an idea of what you are thinking about and can respond appropriately.
 - ii. If all you do in your email is ask me to explain something to you, chances are that what I’ll do is send you some questions and suggestions that will help you figure out how to explain it yourself. If we are at the point in the term where you are studying for the exam, it doesn’t help you much if I act like a waitress of knowledge, just delivering answers to you. You’ll learn more and perform better on your exam if you figure things out for yourself, so I’ll try to help break things down into parts or manageable steps so that you can figure out what you need to know (at least partially) under your own steam.
 - iii. Don’t wait until the last minute for this either! Even though there is a better chance that I’ll be able to respond via email at the last minute than there is that I’ll be able to schedule an appointment at the last minute, there is no guarantee that I’ll be able to respond to your email in time or that the response I send will be as tailored to your specific needs as it would be if the time pressure weren’t a factor.
 1. What counts as the last minute? If it is less than 24 hours before the exam, it is definitely the last minute. Even a few days before the exam can be last minute, depending on where you are in terms of your skills, understanding, and the amount of time & effort you’ve put in so far. For instance, if you haven’t been keeping up with your reading throughout the term, even more than a week before the exam can suddenly become “the last minute.”

5. Study under conditions that are as similar as possible to the conditions under which you will take your exam. This is a good tip for *all* kinds of exams, not just philosophy exams.
 - a. Sit at a desk or table, which is better for keeping your focus than hanging out on a couch or in bed or on the floor.
 - b. Keep distracting noises to a minimum. Studying while watching television or surfing the Internet is very ineffective. (For instance, studies show that students who surf the Internet during class do not perform any better on their assignments than the students who didn't show up for class at all.)
6. Get plenty of sleep, eat plenty of healthy foods, drink plenty of water, and don't forget to exercise!