

# Phil 100: Introduction to Philosophy

Spring 2014

## 1. COURSE INFORMATION

Instructor	Jesse Fitts (Call me Jesse)
E-mail	<a href="mailto:jjfitts@philos.umass.edu">jjfitts@philos.umass.edu</a>
Website	Blackboard Learn ( <a href="https://mycourses.umassonline.net/">https://mycourses.umassonline.net/</a> )
Office Hours	Weekly Check-in Emails

## 2. COURSE DESCRIPTION AND GOALS

This course has three main purposes. The first purpose is specific to philosophy:

- An introduction to the big questions of philosophy.

The second goal will benefit you much beyond philosophy:

- The honing of your argumentative and analytic skills.

The third goal is also general:

- Coming to understand, in a deeper way, what you yourself believe about important issues that we all, as humans, face.

This course will be run somewhat like a face-to-face course in that material will regularly be disseminated on Tuesdays and Thursdays (except on exam days). An online class, by nature, affords the student a flexibility that a face-to-face course doesn't. However, doing well requires some structure, which is why I will keep a schedule that you ought to follow.

## 3. READINGS AND MATERIAL

There is no textbook for this class. Readings will be posted on Blackboard. Most of the material will be reading, but there will also be a few other mediums, all of which will be posted to Blackboard.

## 4. ASSESSMENT

Your grade will consist of two components:

**Discussion/participation:** There will be various discussion activities each week. In addition, our "office hours" will consist in weekly emails (see below). These are required and contribute to your discussion/participation grade. For this component, I reward effort.

**Exams:** There will be 3 exams that you will take on Blackboard. For this component of your grade, I reward mastery of the material.

4.1. **Discussion Details.** Your discussion grade consists in a weekly discussion posts. Each post will usually be about 1 to 2 paragraphs and will often involve answering a question from me and responding to other students. Details will be on the discussion board/announcements each week.

4.2. **Exam Details.** There will be three non-cumulative exams all worth the same amount. The final exam is just the third exam. You will take the exams on Blackboard on the days designated on the schedule below. To accommodate varying schedules, the exam will be available for a few days, but once you start it, you'll have two hours to take it (which should be more than enough time). The exams will consist of true-false/multiple choice and essays. The first two exams will be released on Fridays, and you'll have through the next class period to take it.

4.3. **Grade calculation details.** Grades are calculated as follows:

Exams	25% each
Discussion	25%

**How your exams are graded:** Each exam is worth 100 points. To get your grade for a particular exam, divide your score by the total possible points and multiply the result by 100.

**How your discussion grade is calculated:** Your discussion grade will be calculated thusly:

$$100\left(\frac{\# \text{ of completed posts and emails}}{\# \text{ of possible posts and emails}}\right)$$

**How the final grade is calculated:**

$$\frac{\text{Exam 1} + \text{Exam 2} + \text{Exam 3} + \text{Discussion}}{400}$$

## 5. SLIDES AND HANDOUTS

For each meeting, there will (usually) be a slide set as well as a handout.

Slides. There will usually be two versions of each slide set. One version will be a PDF that you can flip through at your own speed. You'll need a PDF viewer (such as Adobe Acrobat). Make sure to download the slide set (i.e., don't try to view them on Blackboard), view them in full screen, and use your right arrow key to move through them. The same slide set will often be available with audio commentary—posted as an (unlisted) Youtube. If there is audio commentary available, view it—I often expand on information found on the slides.

Handouts. For each slide set, there will usually be a corresponding handout. On the handout, there will be information to fill in. On the slides, the information that you need to fill in will be in red. These handouts will be your go-to for studying for the exam.

## 6. OFFICE HOURS/HELP

Instead of doing office hours, we're going to do a "check ins." The day that every exam is released, I want you to email me answering two questions:

- Are you understanding the material? If not, ask me a question.
- Do you think you're going to make it through this class?

Your email can be as simple as "Yes, yes," but use this opportunity to get one-on-one help. This weekly email counts as both participation and as a kind of required office hours. The amount of weekly emails that you send can help your grade (e.g. if you never email me, and you're on a grade cusp, I'll be less likely to bump you up).

You can also email me any questions at any time.

**Use your UMass email for our communications. Also, the announcements will automatically get sent to this email address.**

## 7. ACADEMIC HONESTY

The UMass academic honesty policy can be found here:

• [http://www.umass.edu/dean\\_students/codeofconduct/acadhonesty/index.php](http://www.umass.edu/dean_students/codeofconduct/acadhonesty/index.php)

Academic dishonesty will be punished to the greatest degree that this policy allows. For resources on avoiding plagiarism, see the following:

• <http://www.umass.edu/academichonesty/>

I assume you know what counts as academically dishonest behavior, so any excuse based on ignorance won't be accepted.

## 8. RESPECT FOR OTHER STUDENTS

When using the forums, please respect your fellow students. Don't put down other students' suggestions. This doesn't mean that you can't disagree. Quite the contrary, disagreement is encouraged. Part of what we'll learn is to hold up everything, even our most deeply held beliefs, to critical scrutiny. However, we test, agree, and disagree with ideas—not each other. So disagree in a respectful way, and if you are disagreed with, don't take it personally.

## 9. BLACKBOARD HELP

For help with Blackboard, visit <https://login.umassonline.net/amherst.cfm>. There, you'll find help *via* phone (1-888-300-6407), *via* email ([amherstsupport@umassonline.net](mailto:amherstsupport@umassonline.net)), and *via* chat.

## 10. SCHEDULE

There will be a schedule on Blackboard. I will keep you up-to-date via announcements on Blackboard.

As for topics, we will try to cover most of the following:

- The tools of philosophy: Logic and arguments
- Epistemology (skepticism): What can we know? Do we know that the (external) world exists? Do we know that the future will resemble the past?
- The existence of God: Does God exist? If an all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful God were to exist, then how could there be evil in the world? If humans had free will, would that explain how both evil and a god as described above could co-exist?
- Free will: Do we have free will? If we didn't, then how could we be morally responsible for our actions?
- Philosophy of mind: Are our minds entirely physical? Can computers (one day) think in the way that humans do?
- Ethics: Are moral truths relative to one's culture, or are some moral truths universal? In this section, we will also cover particular ethics problems, such as our moral duties to the world's poor and whether or not it is OK to eat animals.
- The meaning of life: While we, as humans, search for meaning in life, is the universe that we inhabit, in some sense, meaningless?