

Sample Assignment - Letter to a Philosopher

Explanation of Assignment:

This is an assignment I frequently give in my History of Philosophy courses. Its goal is to promote original, active engagement with a text, as well as to develop nuanced and dialogical views of a text, i.e., not merely to subject a text to our assumptions, but to give the text a voice in responding to those assumptions. I do this by requiring students to pose original questions to the text, then to respond to their peers' question on the part of the philosopher who wrote the text.

Assignment Description: In this assignment, you will write a letter to a philosopher about some aspect of their writings - an idea, argument, etc. - that we studied that week. In each letter, you will develop a question about this idea or argument. Your letter will be submitted to a discussion board. You will then choose one peers' letter to respond to. You will respond to this letter *as the philosopher* the letter is addressed to. In your response, you will explain what you, the philosopher, think about this letter - how you would answer the question or respond to the objection, etc.

Letter due Fridays at midnight.

Response due Saturdays at midnight.

Requirements:

1. Your letter should develop an original question or argument about the text.
 1. You may not simply ask a philosopher to explain what they mean with a particular idea. Your letter must develop some original thinking, whether in terms of a novel criticism, a question the philosopher may not have thought about, a comparison with a different thinker, etc.
2. Your letter must demonstrate some knowledge and understanding of the text.
 1. You may quote specific passages from the text, though you need not. You *do* need to reference specific ideas or arguments in your letter, though.
3. Your letter should be about 300-600 words.
4. Your response should actually respond to your peer's letter: you must make sure you understand what they are asking and address *their* concerns, rather than just your own.
5. Your response should be a plausible reconstruction of how the philosopher would respond to the letter, given what you know about their thinking.
 1. It may be helpful to reference specific passages from the philosopher's work to support your answer.
6. Your response should be about 150-300 words.

Note that weeks 1-6 have special instructions.

(Rubric follows)

Rubric:

4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letter develops a highly original line of thinking in response to the text. Demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the text. • Response offers a plausible reconstruction of how the philosopher would actually answer and sheds real philosophical light on the question or objection.
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letter demonstrates some original thought and an adequate understanding of the text. • Response addresses the letter's concerns and offers a plausible reconstruction of how the philosopher would actually answer.
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letter sticks too closely to the surface level of the text or to ideas discussed in class. Makes some mistakes or doesn't demonstrate clear understanding of the text. • Response doesn't fully address the letter's concerns or isn't clearly grounded in the philosopher's thinking.
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letter does not develop an original line of thought and misunderstands or fails to demonstrate understanding of the text. • Response doesn't address the letter's concerns or mistakes the philosopher's views.

Special Instructions

Letters 1 & 2: Focus on Summary

In the first two letters, I will primarily be grading you for your capacity to provide a summary of some idea from the text, and to use this summary to develop an original question. A good summary is:

- Complete: it conveys all the essential information about some idea.
- Precise: it uses correct and unambiguous terms to convey its ideas (ask yourself: is there more than one way to understand how I am explaining this idea?)
- Accurate: the information it conveys should be correct
- Organized: it follows a logical structure, from main idea to supporting ideas, rather simply providing a list of key information.
- Concise: it conveys the ideas as concisely as possible and doesn't contain unnecessary or distracting information.
- Textually based: your summary should demonstrate that you have read and understand the text. Consider citing a key passage to support an idea. At the same time, though, try to put ideas in your own terms, and don't rely on citations to introduce ideas.

Keep in mind, you do also have to use this summary to develop your own question. So, whatever idea you are most curious about, provide a summary of that idea, then explain what question this summary gives rise to for you.

Letter 3: Interpretation

For letter 3, you should develop an interpretive question. An interpretive question is *a question about how to interpret some idea, argument, or text*. For example, an interpretive question could:

- Try to establish the structure of an argument.
- Clarify what a philosopher means by a particular term or phrase (e.g., what exactly does Descartes mean by "clear and precise"?)

- Ask whether two seemingly contradictory claims made by an author really do contradict each other.

So, for week 3, you need to ask some question about how to interpret some idea, argument, or text we read. A good interpretive question:

- Goes beyond the surface level of the text. For example, it doesn't just ask what does Descartes think he can know with certainty. It might ask: how does Descartes think he can know that he exists - is this an inference, or an intuition?
- Is clear and precise: the question clearly is asking for some one definite question.
- Does not have an immediate or obvious answer.

You will also need to develop at least two possible answers to your question and suggest what you think the best answer is. Your answer should be:

- Rooted in textual evidence.
- Give good reasons to think this is the best answer.
- Offer a plausible reconstruction of what the author would say about your question.

Letter 4: Evaluation

For letter 4, you should develop an *evaluative* question. An evaluative question is *a question about how to evaluate some claim or argument* made by an author. For example, an evaluative question might ask whether a particular argument is valid, or whether there are important unconsidered reasons that mitigate against a claim made by an author. A good evaluative question:

- Responsibly presents the view or argument made in the text, but
- Goes beyond merely repeating that claim or argument.
- Does not have an immediate or obvious answer.

Again, you should suggest at least two possible answers, and then explain which you think is best and why. Your answer should be:

- Specific: identify some specific premise or step in the reasoning that is potentially flawed or strong, or some specific consideration that makes an author's claim unlikely or likely.
- Fair: you should not distort an author's claim or argument to make your job easier.
- Nuanced: should identify potentially limitations or objections to your view.

Letter 5: Comparison

For letter 5, you should develop a *comparative* question. A comparative question is *a question about how at least two ideas, theories, or arguments compare*. For example, a comparative question might ask how Descartes' and Spinoza's accounts of the relation between mind and body compare with each other.

In your answer, you should develop a few points about how the views compare to each other. Your answer should:

- Identify specific points of similarity and difference.
- Explain *why* the two authors differ (what are their reasons).
- Identify whether the two authors are really working on the same question or topic, as well as whether they are using terms and ideas in the same way.

Letter 6: Application

For letter 6, you should develop an *application* question. An application question is *a question about how to apply some idea or theory*. You could, for example, ask what Locke's account of personal identity would say about whether someone with amnesia is the same person they were before they lost their memories. Or, you could take something you learned in a psychology class, and ask how it applies to Descartes' account of the relation between mind and body - perhaps the contemporary evidence challenges Descartes' account?

Then, provide and explain your answer to this question. Your answer should:

- Show why and how the theory applies to the situation or evidence you are applying it to.
- Be rooted in textual evidence, as well as a sophisticated understanding of the case you are applying it to.
- Be nuanced: be careful about potential problems with the application (are there ways in which the theory does not apply perfectly to the given situation or evidence, for example).

Letters 7+: Open

Feel free to develop questions of any kind in the remainder of your Letters to a Philosopher assignments.