## Philosophy, BA, 2017

The study of philosophy is excellent preparation for graduate study, for professional school, for seminary, and for any career path in which clear thought and expression are valued. It cultivates skill in clear thinking and writing, in logical criticism, and increases the power and discipline of the imagination. Auburn’s BA Program approaches the study of philosophy both historically and analytically, exposing students to the great philosophers and philosophies of the past and present.

## Student Learning Outcomes

### Specificity of Outcomes

SLO 1 Analytic Reading

1. Students will be able to extract arguments from primary texts.
2. Students will be able to distinguish valid from invalid arguments, plausible from implausible premises.
3. Students will be able to offer even-handed interpretations of texts, making issues and concerns relevant to the contemporary reader.
4. Students will be able to contextualize texts relative to one another.

SLO 2 Argumentative Skills

1. Students will be able to give valid arguments with plausible premises, anticipating likely objections.
2. Students will be able to clearly explain a philosophical problem, canvasing some of its purported solutions, giving arguments for and against each.

SLO3 Philosophical Knowledge

1. Students will be able to identify central ideas associated with central figures and movements from the history of philosophy.
2. Students will be able to identify central ideas and movements within contemporary metaphysics and epistemology.
3. Students will be able to identify central ideas and movements within contemporary axiology.

SLO4 Writing

1. Students will be able to offer critical discussion that goes beyond mere reporting.
2. Students will be able to articulate fully abstract claims in explicit, minimally figurative language.
3. Students will be able to sustain a coherent intellectual narrative, including what is relevant, excluding what is not.
4. Students will demonstrate a mastery of standard written English in matters of grammar, diction, and style.

Note: We divide these SLOs into two classes. Three of them—SLOs 1, 2, and 4—are *skill-developing*. The other—SLO 3—is *knowledge-imparting*.

### Comprehensive Outcomes

The above listed student learning outcomes accurately reflect the current scope of our program. All philosophy majors must first take at least one of our courses at the 1000-level or 2000-level, which aim at developing basic analytic reading (SLO1) and argumentative skills (SLO2) required for more advanced work in philosophy. Our majors must then complete approximately seven 3000-level courses, which are designed to reinforce the basic analytic and argumentative skills achieved at the lower levels, as well as to improve writing skills (SLO4) and to broaden and deepen philosophical knowledge (SLO3). Finally, our majors are required to take at least two 4000-level courses, which are designed to allow students to master reading, reasoning, and writing skills, while further broadening and deepening their knowledge of philosophy.

Our four student learning outcomes are standard relative to the discipline of philosophy.

### Communicating Student Learning Outcomes

Per departmental policy, student learning outcomes are to be included on our course syllabi, and professors are to communicate to students how their individual courses support those outcomes. We have also posted our student learning outcomes on our website. Since most of our majors join us later on in their undergraduate careers (sophomore and even junior year), we have no orientation session at which to communicate our outcomes.

## Curriculum Map

### Curriculum Map

|  | 1. Analytical Reading | 2. Argumentative Skills | 3. Philosophical Knowledge | 4. Writing |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| PHIL 1010 | I | I, R |  |  |
| PHIL 1020/1023, 1030/1033, 1040, 1050, 1060, 1070, 1080, 1090, 1100/1103, 1110 | I | I | I | I |
| PHIL 2970 | I, R | I, R | I, R | I, R |
| PHIL 3110 | R | R, M |  |  |
| PHIL 3050, 3060, 3100, 3300, 3330, 3340, 3350, 3360, 3400, 3500, 3510, 3540, 3550, 3600, 3640, 3660, 3700, 3740, 3970 | R | R | R | R |
| PHIL 4110 | M | M |  |  |
| PHIL 4970 | M | M | M | M |

I = Introduced, R = Reinforced, M = Mastered

## Measurement

### Outcome-Measure Alignment

We have four measures: an essay exam, a paper, a multiple-choice exam, and a confidence survey. The essay exam and paper are embedded in our senior seminars, PHIL 4970. The multiple-choice exam and confidence survey are administered to students enrolled in our senior seminars, but are not course-embedded.

The essay exam is designed to align with SLO 1. It requires that students (a) extract arguments from primary texts, (b) that they evenhandedly interpret those texts in ways that address the contemporary reader, and (c) that they situate those texts relative to one another.

The paper aligns with SLO 2. In it students are required to argue for or against a position or positions studied during the course of the semester. The paper therefore requires that students be able to both (a) generate their own valid arguments with plausible premises, and (b) be able to give arguments for and against a series of purported solutions to a philosophical problem.

The paper also aligns with SLO 4. Writing it properly requires that students be able to (a) offer critical discussion that is creative and independent, (b) assess arguments for soundness, (b) articulate abstract claims in non-figurative language, (c) sustain a coherent intellectual narrative, and (d) demonstrate a mastery of written English.

The multiple-choice exam aligns with SLO 3. It consists of multiple-choice questions assessing students’ ability to identify (a) central ideas associated with central thinkers and movements from the history of philosophy, and (b) students’ ability to identify central ideas and movements in contemporary metaphysics, epistemology, and axiology.

The confidence survey aligns with all four SLOs, providing students with the opportunity to reflect on their overall abilities in each area.

The multiple-choice exam and survey are given to students enrolled in the senior seminar though are not course-embedded.

### Direct Measures

The senior seminar (PHIL 4970) essay exam and paper are direct measures and are graded by rubrics corresponding to SLOs 1, 2, and 4. The multiple-choice exam directly measures SLO 3. The confidence survey indirectly measures all four SLOs.

### Data Collection

All assessment data collection occurs in PHIL 4970, our capstone course. Because our SLOs were designed with graduating seniors in mind, we wanted to capture data as close to graduation as possible. Data collection is the responsibility of the instructors of the two sections of PHIL 4970 offered each year. They gather course-embedded data regarding SLOs 1,2, and 4 by grading student work using the rubrics below. They gather non-course-embedded data regarding SLO 3 by administering the multiple-choice exam and non-course embedded data regarding all four SLOs by administering confidence survey. This year the instructors of the two sections of PHIL 4970 were Professor Hamawaki and Professor Long.

| Measure | Outcome(s) Assessed | Frequency | Type | Data Collection | Desired Results |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Essay Exam | 1 | Every Semester | Direct Measure | Course- Embedded | 90% of students should average better than 3.0 on each sub-outcome of SLO 1, according to the rubric below. |
| Multiple-Choice Exam | 3 | Every semester | Direct Measure | Administered to students enrolled in PHIL 4970, though not course- embedded. | Students should average 75% or better on each component of the exam. |
| Final Paper | 2,4 | Every Semester | Direct Measure | Course- Embedded | 90% of students should average better than 3.0 on each sub-outcome of SLOs 2 and 4, according to the rubrics below. |
| Confidence Survey | 1,2,3, and 4 | Every semester | Indirect Measure | Administered to students enrolled in PHIL 4970, though not course-embedded. | 75% of students should rank their skills as excellent or good—on a scale that also includes average, poor, and terrible—with respect to each SLO. |

**Rubrics**

SLO 1: Analytic Reading (used to evaluate the essay exam)

|  | 1. Inadequate | 2. Needing Improvement | 3. Good | 4. Excellent |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| A. Students will be able to extract arguments from primary texts. | Unable to distinguish arguments from descriptions, explanations, etc. | Able to distinguish arguments, but unable to identify them as deductive or inductive, or to articulate their logical structure. | Able to distinguish arguments, identify them as deductive or inductive, but unable to fully articulate their logical structure. | Able to distinguish arguments, identify them as deductive or inductive, and fully articulate their logical structure. |
| B. Students will be able to distinguish valid from invalid arguments, and plausible from implausible premises. | Unable to distinguish valid from invalid arguments, and plausible from implausible premises. | Unable to consistently distinguish valid from invalid arguments, and plausible from implausible premises. | Able to consistently distinguish valid from invalid arguments, and plausible from implausible premises. | Able to routinely distinguish valid from invalid arguments, and plausible from implausible premises. |
| C. Students will be able offer even-handed interpretations, making issues and concerns relevant to the contemporary reader. | Interpretations exhibit basic misunderstandings of texts. | Interpretations exhibit basic understanding of texts, though are often one-sided and fail to make issues and concerns relevant. | Interpretations exhibit strong understanding of texts, are even-handed, but fail to make issues and concerns relevant. | Interpretations exhibit strong understanding of texts, are even-handed, and make issues and concerns relevant. |
| D. Students will be able to contextualize texts relative to one another. | Unable to grasp basic relationships between terminologically similar texts. | Able to grasp basic relationships between terminologically similar texts. | Able to grasp complicated relationships between terminologically similar texts. | Able to grasp complicated relationships between terminologically dissimilar texts. |

SLO 2: Argumentative Skills (used to evaluate the paper)

|  | 1. Inadequate | 2. Needing Improvement | 3. Good | 4. Excellent |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| A. Students will be able to give valid arguments with plausible premises, anticipating likely objections. | Invalid reasoning; implausible premises; no attempt to anticipate objections. | Instances of valid and invalid reasoning; some implausible premises; objections largely unanticipated. | Valid reasoning; mainly plausible premises; objections largely anticipated. | Valid reasoning, plausible premises, likely objections anticipated. |
| B. Students will be able to clearly explain a philosophical problem, canvasing some of its purported solutions, giving arguments for and against each. | Unable to clearly explain a philosophical problem. | Able to clearly explain a philosophical problem, but unable to canvas purported solutions. | Able to clearly explain a philosophical problem, canvasing its purported solutions, but unable to give arguments for and against each. | Able to clearly explain a philosophical problem, canvasing its purported solutions, giving arguments for and against each. |

SLO 4: Writing (also used to evaluate the paper)

|  | 1. Inadequate | 2. Needs Improvement | 3. Good | 4. Excellent |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| A. Students will be able to offer critical discussion that goes beyond mere reporting. | Discussion is wholly derivative of readings and class lecture. | Discussion is mainly derivative of readings and class lecture. | Discussion evidences independent thought and engagement with issues. | Discussion is interesting, creative, independent. |
| B. Students will be able to articulate fully abstract claims in explicit, minimally figurative language. | Unable to articulate abstract claims. | Able to partially articulate abstract claims, though rarely in explicit, minimally figurative language. | Able to fully articulate abstract claims, though not always in explicit, minimally figurative language. | Routinely able to fully articulate abstract claims, in explicit, minimally figurative language. |
| C. Students will be able to sustain a coherent intellectual narrative, including what is relevant, excluding what is not. | No discernible narrative; material largely irrelevant. | Narrative sometimes lapses into incoherence; some relevant material absent; some irrelevant material present. | Narrative largely focused; relevant material largely present; irrelevant material largely absent. | Narrative fully focused; relevant material fully present; irrelevant material fully absent. |
| D. Students will demonstrate a mastery of standard written English in matters of grammar, diction, and style. | Word choice poor; grammatical and spelling errors ubiquitous. | Word choice often ill-advised; grammatical and spelling errors frequent. | Word choice consistently well-advised;  grammatical and spelling errors rare. | Full command of language; grammatical and spelling errors absent. |

## Results

### Reporting Results

[Please provide assessment resultsaligned with the student learning outcomes. If historical assessment data is available, consider providing this data to reveal any student learning trends.**]**

| Outcome | Measure | Results | Desired Result | Interpretation |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1A. Students will be able to extract arguments from primary texts. | Essay Exam in PHIL 4970 | Students averaged 3.5 according to the rubric assessing SLO 1A. | Students should average at least 3.33 according to the rubric assessing SLO 1A. | Impressive result, given the difficulty of extracting arguments from primary texts. |
| 1B. Students will be able to distinguish valid from invalid arguments, and plausible from implausible premises. | Essay Exam in PHIL 4970 | Students averaged 3.32 according to the rubric assessing SLO 1B. | Students should average at least 3.33 according to the rubric assessing SLO 1B. | Near the desired result, though low relative to how well students scored on SLO 2A, which is closely related. |
| 1C. Students will be able offer even-handed interpretations, making issues and concerns relevant to the contemporary reader. | Essay Exam in PHIL 4970 | Students averaged 3.32 according to the rubric assessing SLO 1C. | Students should average at least 3.33 according to the rubric assessing SLO 1C. | Near the desired result. |
| 1D. Students will be able to contextualize texts relative to one another. | Essay Exam in PHIL 4970 | Students averaged 3.45 according to the rubric assessing SLO 1D. | Students should average at least 3.33 according to the rubric assessing SLO 1D. | Strong result. |
| 1. Analytic Reading (overall) | Essay Exam in PHIL 4970 | Students averaged 3.40 overall according to the rubric assessing SLO 1. | Students should average at least 3.33 overall according to the rubric assessing SLO 1. | Overall, our students’ analytic reading skills seem to be strong. |
| 1. Analytic Reading (overall) | Confidence Survey | Students averaged 2.93 overall (where 3 is “good” and 2 is “needs” improvement”) according to their own assessment of their analytic reading skills. | Students should average at least 3.33 overall according to their own assessment of their analytic reading skills. | Arguably, our students are better analytic readers than they realize. |
| 2A. Students will be able to give valid arguments with plausible premises, anticipating likely objections. | Paper in PHIL 4970 | Students averaged 3.55 according to the rubric assessing SLO 2A. | Students should average at least 3.33 according to the rubric assessing SLO 2A. | High relative to students scored on SLO 1B, which is clearly related. |
| 2B. Students will be able to clearly explain a philosophical problem, canvasing some of its purported solutions, giving arguments for and against each. | Paper in PHIL 4970 | Students averaged 3.23 according to the rubric assessing SLO 2B. | Students should average at least 3.33 according to the rubric assessing SLO 2B. | Hard to say whether relatively low score here indicates student weakness or relative difficulty of mastering the relevant skill. |
| 2. Argumentative Skills (overall) | Paper in PHIL 4970 | Students averaged 3.39 overall according to the rubric assessing SLO 2. | Students should average at least 3.33 overall according to the rubric assessing SLO 2. | Overall, our students’ argumentative skills seem to be strong. |
| 2. Argumentative Skills (overall) | Confidence Survey | Students averaged 2.94 overall (where 3 is “good” and 2 is “needs” improvement”) according to their own assessment of their argumentative skills. | Students should average at least 3.33 overall according to their own assessment of their argumentative skills. | Arguably, our students are better arguers they realize. |
| 3A. Students will be able to identify central ideas associated with central figures and movements from the history of philosophy. | Multiple-Choice Exam | Students were able to identify central ideas associated with central figures and movements from the history of philosophy  56% of the time. | Students should be able to identify central ideas associated with central figures and movements from the history of philosophy  75% of the time. | Suggests (a) that our multiple-choice exam, given for the first time this year, is probably unrealistically hard, and (b) that our students know the history of philosophy better than either branch of contemporary philosophy. |
| 3A. Students will be able to identify central ideas associated with central figures and movements from the history of philosophy. | Confidence Survey | Students averaged 2.63 (where 4 is “excellent”, 3 is “good,” and 2 is “needs improvement) according to their own assessment of their capacity to identify ideas associated with central figures and movements from the history of philosophy. | Students should average at least 3.33 according to their own assessment of their capacity to identify ideas associated with central figures and movements from the history of philosophy. | Supports data from the multiple-choice exam suggesting that our students have greater familiarity with the history of philosophy than with contemporary philosophy. |
| 3B. Students will be able to identify central ideas and movements within contemporary metaphysics and epistemology. | Multiple-Choice Exam | Students were able to identify central ideas and movements within contemporary metaphysics and epistemology 45% of the time. | Students should be able to identify central ideas and movements within contemporary metaphysics and epistemology.  75% of the time. | Suggests (a) that our multiple-choice exam, given for the first time this year, is probably unrealistically hard, and (b) that students know epistemology and metaphysics less well than they know the history of philosophy and contemporary axiology. |
| 3B. Students will be able to identify central ideas and movements within contemporary metaphysics and epistemology. | Confidence Survey | Students averaged 2.19 (where 4 is “excellent”, 3 is “good,” and 2 is “needs improvement) according to their own assessment of their capacity to identify ideas and movements within contemporary metaphysics and epistemology. | Students should average at least 3.33 according to their own assessment of their capacity to identify ideas and movements within contemporary metaphysics and epistemology. | Supports data from the multiple-choice exam suggesting that students have less familiarity with contemporary metaphysics and epistemology than with the history of philosophy and contemporary axiology. |
| 3C. Students will be able to identify central ideas and movements within contemporary axiology. | Multiple-Choice Exam | Students were able to identify central ideas and movements within contemporary axiology 54% of the time. | Students should be able to identify central ideas and movements within contemporary axiology  75% of the time. | Suggests (a) that our multiple-choice exam, given for the first time this year, is probably unrealistically hard, and (b) that students know contemporary axiology better than know contemporary epistemology and metaphysics, though less well than they know the history of philosophy. |
| 3C. Students will be able to identify central ideas and movements within contemporary axiology. | Confidence Survey | Students averaged 2.61 (where 4 is “excellent”, 3 is “good,” and 2 is “needs improvement) according to their own assessment of their capacity to identify ideas and movements within contemporary axiology. | Students should average 3.33 according to their own assessment of their capacity to identify ideas and movements within contemporary axiology. | Supports the data, generated by the multiple-choice exam, that our students know contemporary axiology better than contemporary metaphysics and epistemology, though not as well as the history of philosophy. |
| 3. Philosophical Knowledge (overall) | Multiple-Choice Exam | Students were able to identify central philosophical ideas and movements 52% of the time. | Students should be able to identify central philosophical ideas and movements 75% of the time. | Though our exam is likely too difficult, it is also possible that our students’ knowledge of philosophy lags behind their philosophical skills. |
| 3. Philosophical Knowledge | Confidence Survey | Students averaged 2.48 (where 3 is “good” and 2 is “needs” improvement”) according to their own assessment of their capacity to identify philosophical ideas and movements. | Students should average 3.33 according to their own assessment of their capacity to identify philosophical ideas and movements. | Students are clearly less confident of their philosophical knowledge then they are of their philosophical skills. |
| 4A. Students will be able to offer critical discussion that goes beyond mere reporting. | Essay in PHIL 4970 | Students averaged 3.45 according to the rubric assessing SLO 4A. | Students should average at least 3.33 according to the rubric assessing SLO 4A. | Strong result. |
| 4B. Students will be able to articulate fully abstract claims in explicit, minimally figurative language. | Essay in PHIL 4970 | Students averaged 3.18 according to the rubric assessing SLO 4B. | Students should average at least 3.33 according to the rubric assessing SLO 4B. | Disappointing result, possibly connected to disappointing result in 4D. |
| 4C. Students will be able to sustain a coherent intellectual narrative, including what is relevant, excluding what is not. | Essay in PHIL 4970 | Students averaged 3.36 according to the rubric assessing SLO 4C. | Students should average at least 3.33 according to the rubric assessing SLO 4C. | Slightly above the desired result. |
| 4D. Students will demonstrate a mastery of standard written English in matters of grammar, diction, and style. | Essay in PHIL 4970 | Students averaged 3.14 according to the rubric assessing SLO 4D. | Students should average at least 3.33 according to the rubric assessing SLO 4D. | Disappointing result, possibly connected to disappointing result in 4B. |
| 4. Writing (overall) | Essay in PHIL 4970 | Students averaged 3.28 overall according to the rubric assessing SLO 4. | Students should average at least 3.33 overall according to the rubric assessing SLO 4. | Our students’ writing skills are uneven, and not where they should be. |
| 4. Writing (overall) | Confidence Survey | Students averaged 3.02 overall (where 3 is “good” and 2 is “needs” improvement”) according to their own assessment of their writing skills. | Students should average at least 3.33 overall according to their own assessment of their writing skills. | Students’ rated their own writing skills higher than any other skills measure, yet were scored lower by their professors. |

### Interpreting Results

Our students seem to have relatively strong analytic reading skills (SLO 1) and argumentative skills (SLO 2). Their writing skills (SLO 4) are apparently weaker. Though our students seem able to offer original critical discussion (SLO 4A) and to sustain coherent intellectual narratives (SLO 4C), they apparently struggle when it comes to *expressing themselves*, whether by articulating abstract claims in minimally figurative language (SLO 4B) or by constructing sentences, paragraphs, and papers in standard English (SLO 4D).

As for our students’ knowledge of philosophy (SLO 3), it’s clear that both of our measuring instruments need improving. Our multiple-choice exam is too hard. Our confidence survey measures our students’ confidence with respect to each SLO overall, but not with respect to each individual sub-measure. Despite these weaknesses, we believe we gathered actionable data from the multiple-choice exam and confidence survey. Our students are clearly less confident in their knowledge of philosophy (SLO 3) than they are in their philosophical skills (SLOs 1,2, and 4), and their low scores on the multiple-choice exam, however difficult the exam may be, bears out their lower confidence. This raises the question whether we have focused on skills in our classrooms at the expense of knowledge. Moreover our students’ relative confidence in the knowledge of the areas covered on the exam—history of philosophy, metaphysics and epistemology, and axiology—matched up perfectly with their relative scores on the multiple-choice exam. We can conclude with some confidence that our students knowledge of contemporary metaphysics and epistemology is weaker than their knowledge of the history of philosophy and of contemporary axiology.

### Communicating Results

The Philosophy Department meets annually to discuss the results of the previous year’s assessment report. Last year that meeting, during which we discussed the 2015-2016 report, took place on August 31, 2016. This year’s meeting, during which we will discuss the 2016-2017 report, is scheduled take place on August 30, 2017.

## Use of Results

### Purposeful Reflection and Action Plan

At last year’s assessment meeting, members of the Philosophy Department discussed the result suggesting that our students’ writing skills were lagging behind their reading skills and argumentative skills. We decided that the data weren’t yet conclusive enough to warrant changes, because (a) we had only one year of data, (b) the data we had from that one year was based on a small sample, and (c) those data did not indicate that our students’ writing skills lagged far behind their reading and argumentative skills. We also discussed ways of improving future assessments. We decided that future assessments would include: (a) a multiple-choice exam assessing SLO 3, that is, our students’ ability to identify philosophical ideas, figures, and movements, and (b) a confidence exam assessing our students’ confidence regarding all four SLOs. We decided that each member of the department would contribute questions to the multiple-choice exam and that a small committee would write the confidence survey. Both the multiple-choice exam and confidence survey were incorporated into our 2016-2017 assessment.

The agenda of this year’s assessment meeting, scheduled for August 30, 2017, will include:

* How shall we address our students’ relative *overall* weakness with respect to SLO 3, that is, philosophical knowledge? To what degree are our students’ low scores on the multiple-choice exam a reflection of the difficulty of the exam? Do their slow scores, in combination with their low confidence in the level of their philosophical knowledge, indicate that we have focused on developing skills at the expense of imparting knowledge? If so, what actions can we take to correct this imbalance?

* How shall we address our students’ relative *specific* weakness with respect to SLO 3.B, that is, knowledge of contemporary metaphysics and epistemology? Since the multiple-choice exam and confidence survey both suggest that student knowledge is lagging in this area, the question is not whether we have actionable data, but what actions to take in light of that data. An obvious answer is to offer more courses in contemporary metaphysics and epistemology. The difficult question will be how to make room for more courses in contemporary metaphysics and epistemology without cutting courses that will simply leave our students less knowledgeable in some other area?

How to address our students’ relative *specific* weaknesses with respect to SLOs 4B and 4D? Last year’s assessment provided weak data that writing was our students’ weakest skill. We now have stronger and more specific data that confirms last year’s finding. What explains their relative weakness with respect to SLOs 4B and 4D? What can be done to address these weaknesses? How can we better integrate teaching the mechanics of writing into our courses?