

# PhilSkills:

## A Skill-Based Approach to Teaching Philosophy



### What are PhilSkills?

PhilSkills are the skills needed to succeed in a standard philosophy course: reconstructing, evaluating, and constructing arguments while reading, talking about, and writing about philosophical and other ideas. Because PhilSkills have to do with critical thinking and argumentation, they are highly transferable to non-philosophy contexts.

### Course content and skills

Teaching PhilSkills does not have to take time away from teaching content. By designing interactive workshops and active learning tasks using examples/themes that relate to course content, skills and content can be taught simultaneously, in mutually reinforcing ways.

### Inclusive and equitable practice

Each student comes to philosophy with a unique set of strengths, challenges, expectations, and past experiences. By explicitly teaching PhilSkills we can avoid having to make assumptions about what our students already know. Combining workshops and active learning tasks with plenty of low-stakes assignments allows students to gradually develop and hone their PhilSkills. This is an equitable practice that helps level the playing field and fosters a sense of belonging.

### Growth mindset

The philosophy classroom can be an intimidating and alienating place. Philosophical writing is often complex and jargony and undergraduates frequently express concerns over their ability to understand philosophy and to think, talk, and write like a philosopher. These worries might partly stem from a belief that success in philosophy requires raw, innate talent (see Leslie et al. 2015).

A skill-based approach to teaching philosophy helps assuage these worries by fostering a growth mindset. It communicates to the students that their abilities are expected to grow and improve over time. Growth mindset is associated with improved motivation and overall performance and reduced anxiety in academic settings (Dweck 2000, 2006).

Inviting students to periodically reflect on their development reinforces these lessons. By identifying challenges and areas of improvement, students take an active role in their own educational journey.

Dweck CS (2000). *Self-Theories: Their Role in Motivation, Personality, and Development*. Psychology Press.

Dweck CS (2006). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Random House.

Leslie SJ, Cimpian A, Freeland E (2015). "[Expectations of brilliance underlie gender distributions across academic disciplines](#)." *Science*.

## Basic PhilSkills Workshops and Associated Active Learning Tasks

### Dealing with arguments

**Workshop:** Introduce key concepts (argument, premise, conclusion, statement, validity, soundness, inductive, deductive) and some simple valid and invalid argument forms using interactive tools (e.g., [PollEv](#)) and/or [think-pair-share](#) to check understanding.

**Active learning task:** Groups of students come up with their own versions of an argument covered in class (e.g., Hume's argument from perceptual variation) and create digital posters with visual illustrations. The posters are posted on the course discussion board online.

### Reading philosophy

**Workshop:** Explain that reading philosophy involves critically but charitably engaging with ideas and arguments and explicate what students should look for: key claim(s), key argument(s), defenses of premises, key terms and their definitions, etc. (see e.g., Fassio 2017). Practice with a short sample passage.

**Active learning task:** Using a template, students create mind maps of a class reading and post those mind maps on the course discussion board online. Use of colors, symbols, and drawings is encouraged.

Fassio A (2017). "[How to read Philosophy \(a step-by-step guide for confused students!\)](#)" *My PPLS Journey: Student Blog*.

### Talking philosophy

**Workshop:** Discuss the purpose and goals of philosophy class discussions and introduce basic philosophy [discussion moves](#): agree with reasons, disagree with reasons, ask for clarification, take stock, etc.

**Active learning task:** Small groups discuss a topic previously covered in class using discussion move cards. Each group gets a deck of discussion move cards and students take turns to "play" a card (see Mortensen 2021). This is followed by a whole-class discussion of which moves were difficult and why. New moves may also be introduced.

Mortensen K (2021). "[Using Discussion Cards to Balance Philosophical Conversations](#)." *Blog of the APA*.

### Writing philosophy

**Workshop:** Explain that the goal of an argumentative philosophy paper is to offer a reasoned defense of a claim/thesis (see e.g., Pryor 2012). Introduce the basic structure of a philosophy paper: introduction with thesis statement, argument, defense of premises, objection and response. Practice.

**Active learning task:** Gallery walk to practice outlining papers. Groups construct a valid argument in support of a thesis, then come up with an objection to another group's argument and finally a response to an objection to a third argument. The whole class goes over (some of) these mini-dialogues, adding examples, definitions, and support for premises.

Pryor J (2012). "[Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper](#)."