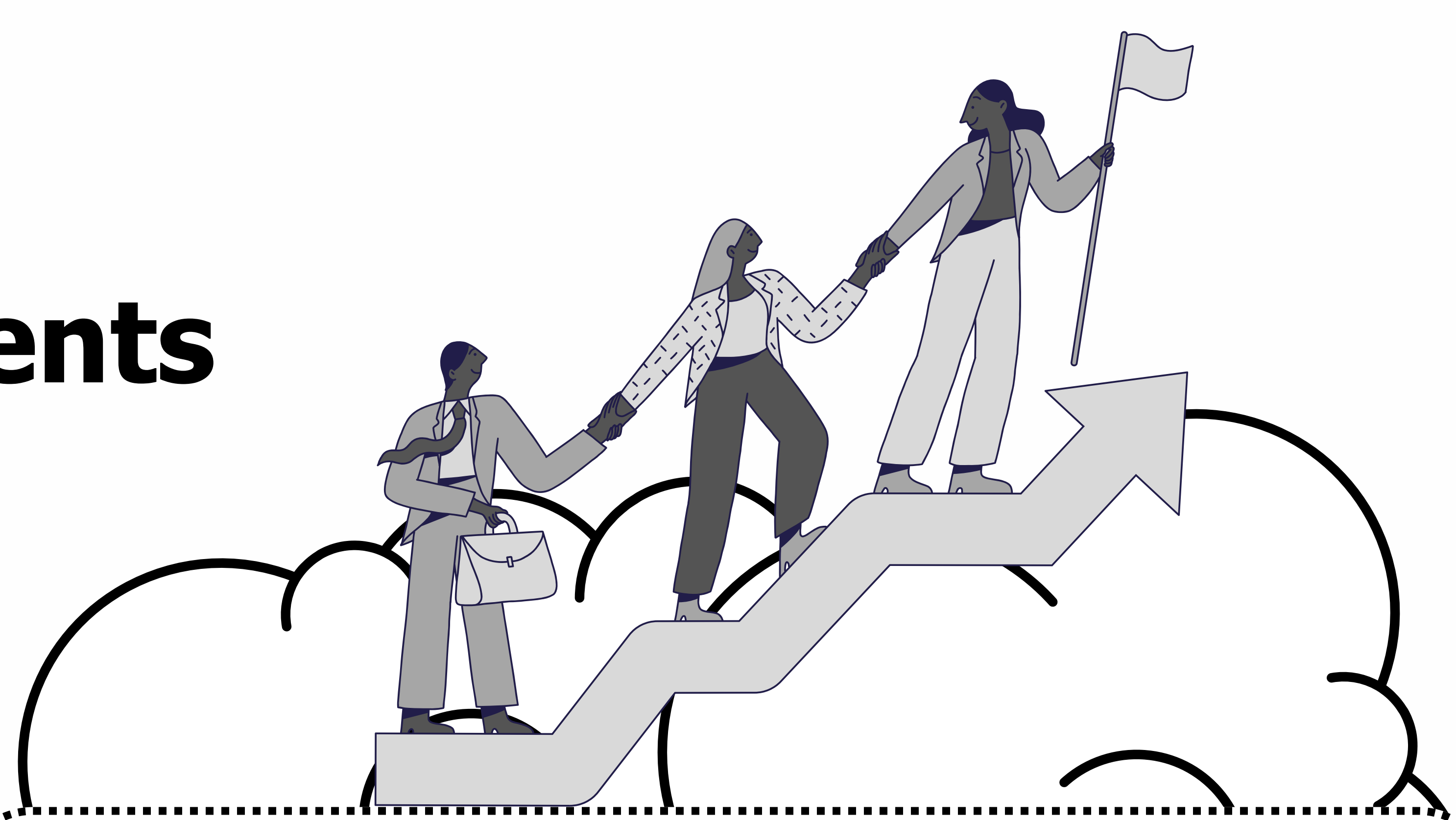


PhilSkills: A Guide for Students



What are PhilSkills?

PhilSkills are the skills you need to succeed in a standard philosophy course: understanding, 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 extremely useful outside of the philosophy classroom as well.

Philosophy course: content + skills

You might think that philosophy courses are all about content: in an ethics class you learn about ethics, in an epistemology class you learn about epistemology, and so on. But philosophy courses are also amazing opportunities for skill building! Think of completing your assignments as training and of your instructor as a coach whose feedback is meant to help you improve.

Everybody is different

You come to a philosophy course with your unique combination of strengths, challenges, expectations, and past experiences. You might have already developed pretty good reading strategies but participating in class discussions feels challenging. Or maybe you feel that discussion participation is easy but writing philosophy papers isn't. Everybody is different and that's OK! If a classmate does something particularly well, try to learn from them. And if they struggle with something, see if you can help. Building a supportive learning community makes learning more fun!

Growth mindset

Philosophical writing is often complex and technical and many philosophy students worry about their ability to understand philosophy and to think, talk, and write like a philosopher. So if you have such worries, you are not alone. You might even think that philosophers are born, not made.

Think again! Just like you need practice to become a good athlete or a good musician, you also need practice to become a good philosopher. Your instructor knows this (they were once a philosophy student) and expects your abilities to grow and improve over time.

In fact, good instructors encourage their students to take an active role in their own educational journey by fostering a growth mindset. If you have a growth mindset, you believe that your abilities are not fixed, but can be developed through dedication and hard work. A growth mindset is associated with improved motivation and overall performance as well as reduced anxiety in academic settings.

So what can you do? First, ditch the idea that you should already possess all the relevant skills. Second, approach a philosophy course like you would approach learning a new language: accept that you need to put in the hours but believe that it's doable. Third, every now and then, take a moment to reflect on your journey: identify challenges and areas of improvement, give yourself credit for your hard work, celebrate the improvements, and make a plan on how to tackle the remaining challenges!

Basic PhilSkills and Helpful Resources

Argument basics

Philosophy deals with arguments (not opinions!), so the first thing to do is to figure out what arguments are. Here are some key terms that philosophy students should learn: statement, premise, conclusion, validity, soundness, deductive, and inductive.

Learning to present arguments in standard format will also come in handy, as does knowledge of simple valid and invalid argument forms (modus tollens, modus ponens, affirming the consequent, denying the antecedent, and so on).

This excellent website can help you get the basic down (it has exercises, too!): <https://philosophy.hku.hk/think/arg/>

Reading philosophy

Reading philosophy takes time and effort. It involves engaging with ideas and arguments carefully, critically, and charitably. When you read philosophy, you should look for key claim(s), key argument(s), defenses of premises, and key terms and their definitions. There are many great resources to help you get started, for example Alessandra Fassio's "How to read Philosophy (a step-by-step guide for confused students!)" and Melissa Jacquart's "How To Read Philosophy".

Reading philosophy should be active. Experiment with different strategies to find out what works for you. You might want to annotate while you read, write summaries or outlines, or make mind maps or other kinds of visual illustrations.

Talking philosophy

The goal of philosophy class discussions is to clarify difficult concepts, to deepen understanding of philosophical issues, to work through readings together, and to practice constructive and respectful exchange of ideas.

There are specific philosophy "discussion moves" such as agreeing with reasons, disagreeing with reasons, asking for clarification, taking stock of the conversation, and so on. You can learn more about these from Kaija Mortensen's "Using Discussion Cards to Balance Philosophical Conversations."

There are also specific discussion norms. To get a sense of these, check out the "guidelines for respectful, constructive, and inclusive philosophical discussion" by David Chalmers.

Writing philosophy

The goal of an argumentative philosophy paper is to provide a reasoned defense of a claim. Here's the basic structure of a philosophy paper: an introduction with thesis statement, argument, defense of premises, objection(s) and response(s), and a short conclusion. The language of a philosophy paper should be extremely clear and unambiguous.

Good instructors are clear about their expectations and might even share their grading rubrics with students in advance. If something is unclear, ask!

There are lots of helpful philosophy writing guides, for example Jim Pryor's "Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper" and Manuel Vargas's "How to Write (Not Terrible) Philosophy Papers".