

PHILOSOPHY OF FEMINISM
PHIL 206 / POLS 212 / WOMEN 206
Spring 2012

ESSAY WRITING GUIDELINES

In the two short papers you will be writing this quarter your central objective is to **clearly articulate and assess a selection of the concepts, arguments, positions** central to the philosophies of feminism we are discussing **in relation to a concrete example**. In the first essay, choose an example of media representation or public debate in which sex/gender identities are at issue; and in the second, the anchor should be either an event on campus in which feminist issues are central or your service learning experience. Although these essays are short (just two pages each), they will require some careful thinking and writing; do not try to write them at the last minute! Here are some guidelines to help develop your analysis and present it effectively.

Choosing a topic.

For these essays you will need to choose both a focal concept and an example for analysis. So from the outset, be looking for both: if you have an example in mind, read the assigned texts with an eye to how they bear on your example; a good example can help you narrow the field where the choice of philosophical focus is concerned. If your starting point is the readings, be thinking about how each of them relates to concrete practice, issues, debates; the authors' own examples may suggest places to look for a concrete anchor for your own essay.

Concept analysis.

When you've identified the philosophical concept you want to work with, develop an analysis of the way it is defined and used by a particular author: e.g., Bartky's conception of "psychological oppression"; the types of "essentialism" Beauvoir identifies and rejects; Butler's treatment of gender as performance; Crenshaw's account of "intersectionality," to take a few examples from the first weeks of the course. Tease out not just the author's formulation of this concept, but the arguments s/he gives for taking it seriously and understanding it in the terms presented. This may require some creative analysis; if you find aspects of an author's position unclear, ask to who or to what they are responding, and reconstruct underlying assumptions that the author may not make explicit but that plausibly inform their argument.

Case analysis.

Your goal in this paper is not strictly conceptual analysis and clarification; it is to evaluate the concept as formulated in relation to a concrete example drawn from the media or public debate, a campus event or aspect of your service learning placement. Identify a case that illustrates the concept you consider: e.g., as an instance of debate that presupposes an essentialist conception of sex/gender identity, or an example of harms that are oppressive, or a context in which an intersectional analysis is called for. Does the concept as developed by the author you're discussing make sense of this case? Are there aspects of the example that require some reframing or extension of the concept, or raise further questions about it? Note that Bartky does just this when she argues that, if we take psychic harms seriously, we need to reconceptualize our conventional ways of thinking about oppression. Crenshaw's critique of dichotomous race and gender categories is another example of this approach, based as it is on close analysis of the experience of women of color. Use this combination of conceptual analysis and reflection on a concrete example to develop your own critical and constructive assessment of the concept that you take as the focus of your essay.

Style vs Content.

Write clear, simple, direct sentences in the active voice. Be as specific as you can about the claims you are making and the reasons you consider them plausible (or not). Make sure that every word and clause serves a purpose and says precisely what you mean. When you lapse into run-on sentences or rely on vague phrasing and colloquialisms often the problem is not just stylistic; awkward prose can be an indication that you are conceptually unclear and may need to do some more thinking on the matter.

Writing Strategies.

Even for short papers like these, work in stages. Begin with notes on the readings that you think might be a good basis for your essay; outline the central claims the authors make about the concept that interests you, and identify points you find compelling or puzzling, that you want to explore further. Draft an initial statement that captures the key elements of this concept and then develop a draft of your argument about its strengths and weaknesses as a framework for understanding the particular public debate, media representation, event, or aspect of your service learning experience that you take as the anchor for your essay. Plan to refine this initial draft through at least one round of revision. Here are some more specific suggestions.

- Make the focus of your paper clear in the introduction; state your central thesis in a sentence or two, and ensure that every part of your paper is relevant to this thesis and the arguments that support it.
- Quote sparingly, but be sure to credit any author on whose work you rely.
- Any standard bibliographic and in-text citation style is acceptable so long as you use it consistently.
- Be sure to proofread carefully, and focus not only on grammar, spelling, and punctuation, but also on word choice and overall coherence.

Consult early and often!

It often helps to talk through your ideas as they are developing. Your section instructors and lecturer are happy to talk with you at any stage in the process, when you're first identifying a concept for analysis and when you're considering possible examples, as well as when you have a more developed draft. To this end we're scheduling an initial discussion of potential topics in mid-April; you should have identified some potential concepts and/or examples for your first paper by then. A week later the Friday sections will be devoted to an **essay workshop** to discuss how your initial draft of this paper is progressing.

Consider, in addition, setting up your own writing collective to talk through essay writing topics and strategies. You don't need to be working on the same topic or concept for discussion to be useful; it can be enormously valuable to explain what you think an author is saying, and how it relates to the example you've chosen, to someone who isn't immersed in the (same) details as you are.

- **Essay Plans Check-in:** in the Friday sections on **April 13th**
- **Essay Workshop:** in the Friday sections on **April 20th**
- **Essay due:** Friday, **April 27th at 5:00 pm.**