



RADNOR TOWNSHIP SCHOOL DISTRICT  
Course Overview



Topics in Philosophy & Writing (“TPW”)  
Course # 05010163

**General Information:**

Credits: 0.5  
Weighted: No  
Prerequisite: None

Length: Semester  
Format: Meets Daily or Cycle Day  
Grade: 10, 11, 12

**Course Description:**

If you’ve ever won an argument—or lost one, for that matter—you may understand how important it is to be able to consider, reason, and argue effectively. This course aims to introduce students to the intellectual and moral issues that have challenged people since the dawn of society, equip them to consider those issues more carefully, and teach them how to express their opinions and arguments orally and in writing. The class will consider questions like, “Should we feed the starving?”, “Is terrorism evil?”, “What is Art?”, and “Is there justice in the world?” Students will use writing to improve their ability to clarify, summarize, communicate, persuade, and read. The goal is to help students become better thinkers, communicators, and citizens.

**Course Objectives:**

*The student will be able to...*

- A. structure thought precisely with clear language, to produce and refine writing through the use of diction, topic sentences, paragraph development, transitions, introduction, body, and conclusion
- B. comprehend difficult texts
- C. develop improved critical thinking skills, especially in terms of his or her ability to evaluate
- D. become more familiar with argumentation, honing his or her skills to make a well-supported argument and participate productively in adult oral discourse
- E. understand and apply key philosophical concepts, including but not limited to those in the philosophical sub-disciplines of ethics, epistemology (theories of what we know, what we think we know, whether we are certain, etc.), and metaphysics (concepts we use to understand the world)
- F. consider and refine his or her personal philosophy, advancing an ability to relate the world to himself or herself
- G. understand his or her own views in relation to intellectual history, with the ability to consider support by and opposition from famous philosophers and philosophies

**Common Assessments:**

**Common Assessments** (all 11<sup>th</sup> grade students in all levels)

N/A for electives

**Common Course Assessments** (all students enrolled in this course)

**Project: design an innovative interdisciplinary course**

Write up the course as it might be taught as a high-interest elective at a high school – consider educational value, discipline, teaching, and engagement

**Write a summary**

Summarize a complex text, reducing it to its essence

### **Demonstrate preparation for a complex Socratic discussion**

Variety of topics – several discussions per week

### **Write dialectical journals**

Engage in an ongoing dialectical discussion both with oneself and with the instructor (3-6 journals per quarter), examining multiple considerations and using specific evidence to pursue a refining of one's own understanding/position.

### **Write an essay expressing a personal philosophy**

...using the model of the *This I Believe* program

### **Logic games: puzzles and Venn diagrams**

Formative assessment, applying logic to syllogism, games, articles, and/or another element

### **Essay assessing an argument**

...includes consideration and explanation of one or more of: claims, evidence (grounds), explanation (warrant), qualification, concession, counterclaim, rebuttal, logical fallacies

### **Make a multimedia presentation to the group**

...based on research of a student-selected philosopher

### **Supplemental Assessments (optional)**

Consideration (and discussion) of many of philosophical history's great analogies and thought-experiments – examples have included:

- "The Allegory of the Den"
- "Spaceship Earth"/"Lifeboat Earth"
- "The Trolley Problem"

Discussion activities, including but not limited to:

- one class-selected discussion each week or cycle
- the school's/district's educational philosophies: the school motto, statements by administrators
- "Is the unexamined life really not worth living?"
- "Should we feed the starving?"
- "What determines your ethics?" – Virtue, the Categorical Imperative, Utilitarianism, and more
- difference between lying and bullsh\*\*
- are individual products *art*, *good art*, and *art that you like* (subjective appeal)

Margin-noting of articles

Type-1 writing exercises

Group project

Ethics Bowl-type team competition

Field trip to participate in a college philosophy class at Villanova University

### **Major Units of Study:**

- I. Philosophy of Education: let's start with what you know
  - A. Philosophy of this school, and the expression of that philosophy
  - B. The dialectic
  - C. Philosophers' views on education
  - D. Summarizing, abstracting, paraphrasing
- II. Ethics
  - A. Normative ethics: virtue, deontology, teleology (consequentialism)
  - B. Garrett Hardin: "Should we feed the starving?"
  - C. "Ethics Bowl"-style collaborative/competitive discussion

- D. What is your ethical code?
  - 1. Writing project: "This I Believe"
- III. Truth, Logic, and Argument
  - A. Epistemology
  - B. Plato's "Allegory of the Den" and film *The Matrix*
  - C. Argument: "Can we persuade without losing sight of the truth?"
    - 1. Premises and conclusions
    - 2. Analogies
    - 3. Logical fallacies
- IV. Aesthetics: a close look at popular culture and fine art
  - A. The objective, the subjective, and the normative
  - B. Music preferences
  - C. In-school field trip to Art Department for discussion
- V. The Philosophers, as selected by the class
  - A. What famous philosophers taught us: presentations and connections

### **Materials & Texts:**

#### **Common Texts** (all 11<sup>th</sup> graders in all levels)

N/A for electives

#### **Common Course Texts** (all students enrolled in the course)

*Thinking and Writing About Philosophy*, by Hugo Bedau (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.)

"The Allegory of the Den", by Plato

"The Trolley Problem", by Philippa Foot revised by Judith Jarvis Thompson

"I think, therefore I am" (excerpt), by Rene Descartes

ThisIBelieve.org

#### **Supplemental Texts and Resources** (optional)

"Against School", by John Taylor Gatto

*The Pig Who Wanted to Be Eaten*, by Julian Baggini

*The Philosophy Gym*, by Stephen Law

Prof. Sally Scholz (Villanova University philosophy department)

Selection from *The Matrix* (dir. A. & L. Wachowski, 1999)

Selection from and/or book review of *On Bullsh--*, by Harry Frankfurt

Radnor HS Art Department AP Art History instructor (currently Mrs. Alicia Agatone)

"State of the Art", by Barry Gewen

Instructor-produced PowerPoint of examples of "art"

[www.PhilosophySlam.org](http://www.PhilosophySlam.org)

### **Summer Assignment:**

Radnor High School publishes an annual summer reading list. Students should refer to the RHS English page for Summer Reading expectations. TPW does not always have a summer reading assignment, in part because it is not always offered as a Fall course.