

I strive to make the classroom a welcoming, friendly, and inclusive environment for all students. This is particularly important when teaching social and political philosophy to students with increasingly polarized views on hot-button subjects. I believe that, for such classes to be effective, the students must feel comfortable enough to express their sincerely-held views and ask questions without being worrying that they will be judged or shouted down. From the very start, I keep the atmosphere casual and conversational, emphasizing that the primary purpose of lectures or seminars is to foster meaningful discourse: class is not a competition zone, but rather, a cooperative venture where students work together to achieve deeper philosophical insights and get closer to the truth. I stress that differences in opinion are not a cause for conflict or tension; instead, they are necessary for joint reasoning and deliberation. That said, I have also cultivated great sensitivity to how power dynamics play out in the classroom and am keenly aware of how *some* differences in opinion can land very differently for students from historically marginalized groups. Careful moderation of class debates, for me, is perfectly compatible with encouraging students to speak freely. For example, in PHIL 108H, I taught students about the individual right to bodily integrity by using the topic of sexual consent as a jump-off point. I anticipated that the assigned reading, which argues against the popular notion of enthusiastic consent, was likely to generate strong opinions that might be split along gender lines. Consequently, I employed two strategies that were highly successful in sparking vigorous but friendly debate. I mediated the discussion by providing further historical and political context to the contentiousness of enthusiastic consent within feminist theory, and reminded the students that their seemingly opposing views sprung from the grounding principle of concern for bodily autonomy and how that right is best-respected. At the same time, knowing that the issue would likely “hit home” more intensely for women, I conscientiously backed up and substantively strengthened the points they made, while also giving them further opportunity to elaborate.

Next, I take an exploratory and dialectical approach to teaching. My role is not to tell students what to think, but to show them *how* to think well, especially by accustoming them to scrutinize their own views and extend the scope of the material I cover. I begin each class with a brief recap of the previous week’s content, highlighting not only the material I covered in my lecture, but also reminding students of the focal points of their prior discussions and showing how those relate to the new lesson. After setting up this context, I go through the basic concepts at hand, establishing the existing philosophical positions and explaining the exact points of disagreement between theorists. From there, I draw out the implications of these disagreements on present-day society. This ensures that everyone has a good grasp of the philosophical debate, and the relevant stakes at hand, before I pose them more complex questions. After that, I prefer to let the students set the tone of the discussion, and I encourage them to respond to *each other*, rather than to me. It is for this reason that I keep my lectures relatively short (20 minutes in a 1 hour 15 minute seminar) and conclude with a set of four key questions that I first ask students to discuss in small groups, after which the groups will present their views to the rest of the class. For example, when teaching Locke’s view of property rights in PHIL 108H, I rounded off the lecture by explaining the ill-effects of gentrification and whether it called for more stringent restrictions on property acquisition than the ones that Locke stipulates. Linking a classic but potentially dry account of property rights to a pressing political issue instantly sparked an animated discussion where students found themselves teasing out the nuances of Locke’s view in the modern-day context; for example, would his proviso that “enough and as good” be left for other members of society prohibit landlords’ practice of charging high rent, or place limitations on the number of properties people may own? The conversation took on new and welcome directions when students began to talk about the extent of landlords’ right to *control* the use of their properties, rather than acquisition alone. While they were generally in favor of property rights, some had difficulty squaring this with strict rules that they were subjected to by their landlords. Here, I explained that control rights are often regarded as an extension of ownership rights, and noted how the students had begun to touch on another important dimension of property rights that might give them reason to re-think their original views.

Thirdly, I am dedicated to teaching students how to write well. I do this by providing students with a detailed template for writing a good philosophy paper, down to the components of the introduction, body, and conclusion, which I call “Anatomy of an Essay”. (It is to my understanding that this very document has been used by other faculty members and teaching assistants). The template has been vital to students producing high-quality philosophy essays, as many of them are unsure of how to write philosophy papers, and their work has clearly benefited from my insistence that they consciously define the terms of the essay questions, and follow a clear and systematic structure. At the same time, I typically devote two weeks to writing workshops that focus on finessing students’ essay introductions. I run these workshops in this order: (1) Students submit draft versions of their introductions, (2) They are split into small groups of 4-5 where their only reading assignment for the week is to read their classmates’ introductions and come to class with detailed feedback, and (3) workshops are then conducted by my bringing up each draft introduction on the screen, allowing the students to provide comments on their classmates’ work and ask how they can improve their own drafts. While these sessions are student-led, I play the role of moderator while also offering my own detailed comments. In my experience, this practice has also made students much more at ease with sharing their work and understanding the value of constructive criticism. Lastly, when grading their essays, I read their work carefully and in-depth, combining fine-grained comments with more general suggestions about the essay’s style, structure, and strategies.