



Higher Philosophy: guidance on creating assessments

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Introduction and purpose

This document provides guidance to help teachers and lecturers delivering Higher Philosophy to prepare assessments for their learners. You should read this guidance alongside SQA's [National Courses: guidance on evidence for estimates](#). You should also refer to the course specification and course support effective for the current year, which you can find on the [Higher Philosophy subject page](#) on SQA's website.

Assessments may have several purposes, but they will most likely be used for:

- ◆ diagnostic information, which helps to inform teaching and learning
- ◆ predictive information, which helps in decisions on course estimates
- ◆ practice for candidates in an external assessment context
- ◆ evidence for exceptional circumstances, should it be needed

Where evidence is used for predictive purposes or as evidence for exceptional circumstances, it is important that the assessments used are as close to the structure and format of the final exam as possible. This document provides guidance on how to meet these criteria; however, different forms of assessment may be appropriate for other purposes.

What are prelims?

A prelim or mock exam is carried out under the same conditions as the final exam. It should be clearly aligned to the course specification, content, and level of demand as exemplified in the [specimen question paper and past papers](#). Because specimen question papers and past papers are in the public domain and candidates can readily access them, they should not be used in their entirety. However, you can incorporate individual questions from past papers into prelims or mock question papers. Alternatively, you can create your own questions.

Understanding course assessment requirements and standards

Conditions of assessment

Whatever purpose assessments have, it is likely that the closer you align centre-created assessments with SQA exams, the better value they will be. This means that assessments should:

- ♦ be closed book (without notes) and timed whenever possible
- ♦ give a length of time to answer questions that corresponds to the time allowed for the Higher Philosophy question papers. In the Higher Philosophy final exam, each essay in Paper 1 is allocated approximately 1 hour and 7 minutes. Short-answer questions in Paper 2 are given approximately 2 minutes per mark

Level of demand

When creating assessments, you should consider the level of demand of the question paper. In an assessment that replicates the difficulty of the final exam, approximately 30% of the marks should be A-type, 20% B-type and 50% C-type. Assessments that are completed in one sitting and cover all three sections of the course (arguments in action, knowledge and doubt and moral philosophy) will be considered more demanding than an assessment that only covers one area or one that is completed over several sittings (all other things being equal).

Timing (when assessment is carried out)

If you carry out assessments early in the course of study, they are likely to be of less use in terms of exam preparation or generating evidence of likely success than evidence that you gather later. However, carrying out assessments early in the course helps to consolidate learning of key concepts and inform learning and teaching more generally. If you use early assessments, further evidence from assessments later in the academic year may demonstrate a candidate's progression and be more useful in building a profile and preparing for the final exam. Assessments carried out straight after learning a section of the course and only covering that section are also less likely to be a good indicator of future success.

Assessment requirements and the structure of the question paper

Detailed information on the structure of the question papers and the knowledge, understanding and skills required can be found in the [course specification](#). A summary of the two Higher Philosophy question papers is shown below.

Question paper 1: 60 marks — 2 hours 15 minutes to complete

Section	Summary
Section 1: knowledge and doubt — 30 marks	An essay question on either Descartes or Hume. Candidates do not have a choice of question.
Section 2: moral philosophy — 30 marks	<p>An essay question that asks candidates to apply a moral theory to a given situation or respond to a quotation.</p> <p>Candidates have a choice of two questions: one scenario question and one quotation question.</p>

Question paper 2: 50 marks — 1 hour 45 minutes to complete

Section	Summary
Section 1: arguments in action — 30 marks	The questions have a mark range of 1 to 6 marks and sample across this area of study.
Section 2: knowledge and doubt — 10 marks	<p>The questions have a mark range of 1 to 6 marks and focus on the fine detail of the prescribed texts.</p> <p>If the knowledge and doubt essay in question paper 1 is on Descartes, then these questions will be on Hume and vice versa.</p>
Section 3: moral philosophy — 10 marks	<p>The questions have a mark range of 1 to 6 marks and focus on the fine detail of this area of study.</p> <p>If the moral philosophy essay in question paper 1 is on utilitarianism, then these questions will be on Kantian ethics and vice versa.</p>

Creating an assessment

Centre-created assessments that closely replicate those used by SQA are most likely to prepare candidates well for the final exam. In addition, the evidence they produce will be more reliable for the purposes of producing estimates and for supporting grades under exceptional circumstances.

To produce an assessment, you should consider several elements.

Course coverage

You can ask about any part of the course content in the exam, but only a sample of the course is assessed in any question paper. Centre-created assessments and prelim question papers should aim to replicate this by sampling from across the course. The format of the final exam structure for Higher Philosophy takes care of this, as it includes content from different areas of the course across the two question papers.

Ideally, a prelim paper should avoid questions that invite candidates to use the same material when answering different questions. This is important because assessments may take place before candidates have covered all areas of the course. For example, you might prepare a prelim paper before you have finished teaching the content on one of the philosophers in the knowledge and doubt section, or one of the moral theories in the moral philosophy section. In this case, you may not be able to fully replicate the final exam, but instead you can choose to ask an essay question in question paper 1 and short-answer questions in question paper 2, both on the same thinker or moral philosophy. These questions should ask about distinct aspects of the philosopher or theory, like the examples from past papers shown below:

SECTION 1 — KNOWLEDGE AND DOUBT — 30 marks		MARKS
Attempt ONE question		
1. Read the following extract and answer the question which follows.		
<i>Some years ago, I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realised that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last.</i>		
René Descartes: Meditations on First Philosophy, Meditation I		
Explain and evaluate Descartes' arguments in Meditation I.		
In your answer you could include discussion of the following:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• the aims of Meditation 1• the method of doubt• the connections between the arguments• Descartes' position at the end of Meditation I• strengths and weaknesses of Descartes' arguments.		
		30

DESCARTES	
13. State the claim that is referred to as Descartes' Cogito.	1
14. Explain how, in Meditation 2 , Descartes reaches the conclusion that the Cogito is his certain truth.	4
15. Evaluate Descartes' Cogito.	5

The essay question focuses on content from Meditation 1, while the short-answer questions focus on Meditation 2. This means that candidates need to draw upon different knowledge and understanding to answer each question.

If you are using an early-stage assessment as a basis for estimated judgements and/or evidence for exceptional circumstances, you should supplement this with a later assessment that covers content from the thinker or moral theory that was not covered in the prelim.

Constructing a question

When constructing your own questions for assessment purposes, you should consider the following:

- ◆ Questions should only ask about content from within the course.
- ◆ The number of marks available for a question should be achievable: for example, if there are 3 marks available, then it must be possible to make either 3 distinct points in response to the question asked or to develop a point worth up to 3 marks.
- ◆ Different questions should sample different content and different skills across the course.

A helpful document for this process is the [Higher Philosophy model questions](#) which features a range of questions and marking instructions for illustrative purposes. In addition, the [types of questions](#) found in Appendix 2 of the course specification may be useful.

Essay questions

Essay questions may vary, but there are certain things that are important for all essay questions within the Higher Philosophy course. The essay questions in the final exam are marked holistically and given a mark out of 30. Because of the holistic marking, the essays involve differentiation by outcome, and so the aim is that essay questions are accessible enough for all candidates to be able to engage with them at their own level. To get the higher marks, candidates must engage in discussion and evaluation and not give a purely descriptive response. This means that essay questions must have room for discussion and allow opportunity for candidates to show their knowledge and understanding of the area of the course asked about, as well as their skills of analysis and evaluation.

You may, of course, use essay questions in different ways. You might focus on developing knowledge and understanding of the course content before asking candidates to engage in more critical discussion. For predictive purposes, this kind of evidence would be, at best,

able to offer support towards a C grade, as the higher-level skills of analysis and evaluation are expected of candidates in the A and B range of marks.

It has become normal for essay questions in both knowledge and doubt and moral philosophy to include bullet points of what might be included in the discussion. This scaffolding is intended to help all candidates, but particularly those who are likely to gain a C pass or below. It is important that these bullet points provide a useful guide of what to include and encourage inclusion of description of the theory as well as discussion in relation to the question asked. Without this scaffolding, weaker candidates may not engage with the question asked because they are not sure what the essay question requires, even though they have a certain amount of appropriate knowledge and understanding. Thus, the question may not differentiate C candidates from weaker candidates particularly well. It is also worth noting that including too much detail in the bullet points is likely to make the essay question less demanding. That said, the scaffolding is intended as a help and not an essay plan. An essay that takes a different approach to answering the question than the scaffolding suggests can still achieve top marks if the candidate has demonstrated the knowledge and understanding of the course content as well as skills of analysis and evaluation appropriately.

Knowledge and doubt essays

The essay question from this area in the final exam will be on either Descartes or Hume. It may have a quotation from the text to provide a stimulus for the question. If included, the quotation should be one that is relevant to the question asked and it is likely that it will provide some context to help make the question clearer. The essay question below works in this way:

SECTION 1 — KNOWLEDGE AND DOUBT — 30 marks	MARKS
Attempt ONE question	
<p>1. Read the following extract and answer the question which follows.</p> <p><i>Some years ago, I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realised that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last.</i></p> <p>René Descartes: Meditations on First Philosophy, Meditation I</p> <p>Explain and evaluate Descartes' arguments in Meditation I.</p> <p>In your answer you could include discussion of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• the aims of Meditation 1• the method of doubt• the connections between the arguments• Descartes' position at the end of Meditation I• strengths and weaknesses of Descartes' arguments.	
	30

The quotation is useful because it provides candidates with reference to the need for the method of doubt, a simple description of the method, as well as the aims of the process. A quotation that is irrelevant may increase the level of demand of an assessment, as it has the potential to confuse candidates. It is not necessary to include a quotation in every essay question in this section.

Essay questions may ask about any aspect of the course content in the section. In recent course exams, they have been focused on one aspect of the course content for Descartes or Hume, for example the Cogito for Descartes, or the theory of causation for Hume. However, it is worth noting that a more general or thematic question would also be acceptable. For example, 'How successful is Descartes' rationalism?' or 'How successful is Hume's empiricism?'. Such a question could allow candidates an opportunity to select the aspects of the course texts that they focus their discussion on. Essay questions that are overly-narrow may increase the level of demand beyond what is normal in the external assessment.

Moral philosophy essays

There is a choice in the moral philosophy section of the final exam: candidates choose from two types of essay — they either produce an essay in which they apply a moral theory to a given situation or respond to a quotation in the context of a moral theory. Sometimes the essays are on Kant. Sometimes the essays are on utilitarianism.

Scenarios are devised to highlight issues or problems with a theory, though there may be many different and appropriate areas for discussion. The information on the use of scenario questions in the 'Preparing for course assessment' section of the [course specification](#) might be helpful. For example, the scenario below raises issues regarding short-term versus long-term consequences and local versus global consequences, but there are many other ways to discuss this in relation to utilitarianism.

SECTION 2 — MORAL PHILOSOPHY — 30 marks

Attempt ONE question

3. Read the following situation and answer the question that follows.

A proposal has been submitted for a power station to be built in your area. It will provide cheap electricity and support industry in your area. You and your family could directly benefit from this because it will create hundreds of different jobs and electricity bills will be cut in half. However, as it will be powered by fossil fuels, it will cause air pollution and contribute to global warming over time.

As a Councillor you have to vote on whether or not to support this proposal.

Would Utilitarianism help you to make this decision?

In your answer you could include the following

- a description of classical Utilitarianism
- an explanation of how Utilitarians say we should make moral decisions
- application of Utilitarian ethics to this scenario
- evaluation of Utilitarian ethics in relation to this scenario.

30

If the scenario does not include something that requires ‘resolving’ in terms of the application of the moral theory, then it might not provide candidates with much opportunity to engage in critical discussion of the theory. This may make the essay question less demanding and will not provide the opportunity for differentiation between candidates able to achieve higher grades from those who may only achieve a C pass or below.

Like the scenario questions, you can create quotation questions to highlight issues or problems with the theory, like the example below for Kantian ethics.

3. Read the following quotation and answer the question that follows.

With his total emphasis on duty, Kant leaves out other important considerations when making moral decisions. There must be more to doing the morally right thing than duty.

To what extent is this a fair criticism of Kantianism?

Consider how Kant might respond to this criticism.

In your answer you could include the following

- a description of Kant’s moral theory
- an explanation of how Kant says we should make moral decisions
- discussion of how the criticism applies to Kantian ethics
- evaluation of Kantian ethics in relation to this criticism

30

The nature of the issue highlighted affects the essay question's level of demand. A quotation that relates to an obscure or unusual criticism or problem of the theory would make the essay more demanding and might make it particularly difficult for weaker candidates to attempt. This would mean it might not differentiate well between candidates who are likely to gain a C pass compared with those who might achieve a lower mark. In addition, a quotation that deals with a criticism that is very easily resolvable might make the essay too straightforward and less demanding. This would not provide the opportunity to engage in deeper critical discussion that would allow for differentiation between candidates able to achieve higher grades from those who may only achieve a C pass or below.

Short-answer questions

As noted previously, it is acceptable to select questions from different past papers and specimen question papers to create a valid prelim assessment. In addition, one way that you can create your own assessment questions is by using the question stem from past paper and specimen paper questions as a basis for new questions. For example, you could easily adapt the following questions in the specimen paper:

2. Read the following passage and answer the question that follows.

'If someone knows in advance that their actions risk death, then when they voluntarily take those actions, they accept a risk of death. These conditions surely apply to rock climbers. Therefore, people who engage in rock climbing have accepted a risk of death.'

Explain with reference to the above passage why it contains an argument.

2

3. (a) Read the following argument and answer the question that follows:

*'Every kind of animal has some kind of reproductive system.
Dogs are animals.
Therefore, dogs have some kind of reproductive system.'*

Arguments are often evaluated in terms of acceptability, relevance and sufficiency.

Is the first premise in the above argument acceptable?

Support your answer with a reason.

1

It is possible to create a novel question using question 2 as a basis. Take the question stem: 'Read the following passage and answer the question that follows' and 'Explain with reference to the above passage why it contains an argument' and a new question can be created by inserting a novel argument to the question.

The same would be true for question 3. (a) where you could introduce a novel argument. When doing this, it is important to keep the challenge of the argument included at a similar level, or to change the marks accordingly. The arguments in the above questions are both straightforward, which is appropriate because the arguments are used to focus on the definition of an argument in question 2 and the acceptability of the premise in 3. (a). Using more challenging arguments would make the question less accessible without increasing the overall difficulty of the question, and so this would not be appropriate.

This is different when looking at question 4 below. In this case, the complexity of the argument matters.

	MARKS
<p>4. Read the following argument and answer the question that follows.</p> <p><i>'For goodness' sake, Sophie is the right candidate for the job. She has got the necessary academic qualifications and she has extensive relevant experience. She has lots of useful contacts. She has the best temperament for dealing with stress. Come on, she's obviously the right candidate.'</i></p> <p>Present the above argument in an argument diagram.</p> <p>You must include a key for your diagram.</p>	3

There are 3 marks for this question and the marking instructions are as follows:

Question	Detailed marking instructions for this question	Max mark
4.	<p>Award 1 mark for a convergent argument diagram.</p> <p>Award 1 mark for identifying the conclusion, 'Sophie is the right candidate for the job'.</p> <p>Award 1 mark for providing an appropriate key, with statements labelled and omitting both 'for goodness' sake' and 'come on, she's obviously the right candidate'.</p> <p>Candidates who do not use a convergent diagram can receive a maximum of 2 marks for this question.</p> <p>A correct diagram for this argument would be:</p> <p>Key</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sophie is the right candidate for the job. 2. Sophie has got the necessary academic qualifications 3. Sophie has extensive relevant experience. 4. Sophie has lots of useful contacts. 5. Sophie has the best temperament for dealing with stress. <div style="text-align: center;"> <pre> graph TD 2 --> 1 3 --> 1 4 --> 1 5 --> 1 </pre> </div>	3

If you included a more straightforward argument, then there may be no need to 'tidy up' the wording of the argument, as described for the third mark identified in the marking instructions. This would make the question easier, and it may not be appropriate to award it 3 marks.

As mentioned previously, it is important that the questions in an assessment have varying levels of challenge. You can sometimes change the level of demand of a question by increasing or decreasing the marks available, but in doing so it is important to make sure that there is enough to be said to collect the marks available. Here are some examples:

14. Explain two problems with the claim ‘whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true’.

4

You could make this question more challenging by changing it to ‘Explain three problems with the claim ‘whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true’ for 6 marks. This is more difficult because candidates will need to draw upon some of the more complex criticisms to gain full marks. Similarly, changing to ‘Explain one problem with the claim ‘whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true’ for 2 marks would make this question less challenging.

On the other hand, it would not be appropriate to change the mark range of the following question:

21. Explain the distinction between act and rule utilitarianism.

2

Marking instructions:

21.		<p>Act: an individual action is right if it maximises happiness. (1 mark)</p> <p>Rule: an action is right if it conforms to a rule that would maximise overall happiness if everyone followed it. (1 mark)</p> <p>No marks for just saying that Rule Utilitarians follow rules and Act Utilitarians don’t follow rules.</p>	2
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There is no way to answer this question without including both definitions of act and rule utilitarianism and so we could not reduce the marks. Similarly, it would not be reasonable to increase the mark range for this question, because there are no further points to make to answer this question.

Writing inclusive questions

The best way to make sure you do this is to use the wording of the [course content](#) section of the course specification. The wording of the course specification should be familiar to candidates and using it will help them to decode the question more quickly and focus on their response.

Furthermore, you should follow the guidelines below:

- ◆ Write questions that are clear, precise, and easy to understand. Apart from appropriate philosophical terminology, avoid using jargon or difficult language.
- ◆ Use terminology that is familiar to all candidates.
- ◆ Consider the impact of cultural and linguistic issues when writing questions.
- ◆ When constructing scenarios or arguments, avoid stereotyping. For example, think about using a female name when creating a scenario that includes a stereotypical male role or occupation, and vice versa. Or use gender-neutral names.
- ◆ Use names that reflect the cultural diversity of the community of your centre, and of Scotland.
- ◆ As much as possible, try to make questions concise and easy to read.

Marking reliability

You should be familiar with the general marking principles for Higher Philosophy and the published marking instructions that accompany SQA past papers, as these demonstrate the required marking standard.

It is good practice to prepare the marking instructions at the same time as you construct the assessment. You can then refine marking instructions considering candidate responses. They should be agreed between all markers and applied consistently.

Cross-marking of a sample of each marker's work ensures the marking instructions have been applied accurately and consistently. Some common marking issues include:

- ◆ inconsistent application of the marking instructions
- ◆ markers being over-lenient or too harsh
- ◆ marks being awarded to candidates for doing the same thing more than once (for example an explanation of different complex ideas)
- ◆ candidates being awarded marks despite the fact they have not given sufficient detail to answer the question

When making holistic judgements on philosophy essays, you should try to show close correspondence with national standards. Using the holistic marking criteria found on specimen question papers and past paper questions as a basis for essay judgements is important when the essay is being used as evidence for exceptional circumstances or for predictive purposes.

In addition, you should only allocate marks based on the written response and not on what the response infers.

Checklist for prelim writing

Yes or No	Checklist
	Contains questions drawn from at least three past papers or specimen question papers (if using).
	Approximately 30% of marks are A-type, 20% are B-type, 50% are C-type.
	Each question assesses only what is listed in the course specification.
	Paper structure, format, and language mirrors that of an SQA question paper.
	Questions, scenarios and arguments are inclusive.

Administrative information

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History of changes

Version	Description of change	Date

Note: please check SQA's website to ensure you are using the most up-to-date version of this document.