

The Levels System

PHILOS 5, Science and Human Understanding

Fall 2017

This is based Dustin Locke's Level System, modified for my purposes—see Dustin's webpage at www.cmc.edu/pages/faculty/dlocke. Many thanks to Dustin for his help in constructing this part of the course.

1/ What is the levels system?

The “levels system” has four levels. Each level consists of an assignment (described below). You start at Level 1. Once you complete one level, you progress to the next.

Each time you attempt a level you will receive one of three evaluations:

- Complete
- Almost
- Not much progress

You can progress to the next level only when you receive a “Complete”. If you receive one of the other evaluations you can try again. In total, you have a maximum of *six* attempts at the levels system through the semester.

Your grade for the levels system is determined by how far you progress through the levels by the end of the semester, as follows:

Level 4. Complete = A, Almost = A-, Not much progress = B+

Level 3. Complete = B, Almost = B-, Not much progress = C+

Level 2. Complete = C, Almost = C-, Not much progress = D

Level 1. Complete = F, Almost = F, Not much progress = F

For example, if by the end of the semester you completed levels 1-3 and got an “Almost” for level 4, your grade for the levels system would be an A-.

Here are the four levels:

Level 1: Argument map. Choose an argument from the readings and represent it as an argument map.

Level 2: Argument map plus description (200 words). Just like Level 1, except that you must also produce a short, 1-paragraph description of the argument. The description should state what the conclusion of the argument is and what reasons support it. The description should be based on your map but it should not make reference to the map; the description should be a self-contained piece of prose.

Level 3: Argument map plus expository paper (300-500 words). Just like Level 2, except that your paper must also contain a paragraph that explains how the argument fits

into the broader issues we are discussing. For example, if the argument purports to be an objection to Prof Jones' thesis, explain what Jones' thesis is and why the argument, if successful, is an objection to it. Or if the argument purports to solve a philosophical problem, state what the problem is and why the argument, if successful, solves it.

Level 4: Argument map plus critical paper (500–700 words). Just like Level 3, except that your paper must also contain a paragraph that criticizes the argument. This might involve arguing that one of the premises is false. Or it might involve arguing that the premises do not support the conclusion. You should represent your criticism on your argument map.

Each attempt at the levels system must be based on a *different* argument. So, if you attempt a level and do not complete it, your next attempt at that level cannot be a re-write of the previous attempt.

2/ Why use the levels system?

There are three main advantages of the levels system.

First, it means that you can work through the course at your own pace. The system ensures that you're always working on something challenging enough to be interesting, but not so challenging as to be frustrating or daunting.

Second, the levels system prepares you to write a philosophy paper. Philosophy papers are notoriously difficult to write well, in part because what's expected of you in a philosophy paper differs from papers in other subjects. The levels system is designed to train your philosophical writing skills in a step-by-step fashion. By the time you're doing Level 4, you're writing a basic philosophy paper.

Third, the levels system is a fairer method of evaluation than more typical systems that involve a mid-term paper. Suppose student A has no experience in philosophy but student B does. Then A is likely to do worse on a mid-term paper than B. So even if A and B end up performing similarly by the end of the semester, A will get a worse overall grade than B. That doesn't strike me as a fair method of evaluation, since it partly evaluates how prepared you were before the course started! By contrast, the levels system evaluates you on the basis of your performance at the end of the course. Sure, B might breeze through the levels quicker than A. But with hard work and application, students with no experience in philosophy can complete all the levels.

3/ Schedule

You have a maximum of *six* attempts at the levels system. You can submit an assignment on any *Tuesday* of the semester, but your assignment must be based on material covered during the previous week. For example, if your assignment is based on material from the week of Sept 11th-15th, you must submit the assignment by Tuesday 19th September.

Each week I will distribute a list of prompts based on that week's material. You can use those prompts as a basis for a levels system assignment, though there is no requirement that you do so. If you use one of the prompts, you must submit your assignment *by Tuesday of the following week*. After that, I will upload answer keys for those prompts and you will not be allowed to submit assignments based on those prompts.

4/ The Small Print

- Your final grade is calculated on the basis of your *best* attempt, which may not be your last. For example, suppose you had two attempts at level 4: your first attempt got an "Almost", and your second got a "Not Much Progress". Then your final grade would be based on your "Almost", i.e. an A-.
- *Late work*: Given the flexibility of the levels system, no late work is accepted. If you can't submit an assignment one week, just submit another assignment the next week (or the one after...).