

“Those who know that they are profound strive for clarity. Those who would like to seem profound to the crowd strive for obscurity.” (Nietzsche, *Gay Science* §173)

## Statement on Writing

The study of philosophy, among other things, trains students in the skills of critical thinking. Such skills lie at the heart of liberal education. Contrary to popular conception, quiet absorption in one’s thoughts is neither the most distinctive mode of practicing philosophy nor the privileged route to acquiring wisdom. Rather, it is through speaking with others and especially writing that one does philosophy.

For this reason, all philosophy courses at Wheaton require thoughtful class participation in which students read responsibly and listen actively to the arguments of others. Save for Phil 125, all courses include writing assignments designed to improve one’s ability to read and reflect on philosophical texts and to produce philosophical arguments. These assignments are not tests of philosophical wisdom; they are inducements to the practice of philosophy. When carried out with sincerity and academic integrity, writing philosophy holds out the promise of making students into active inquirers of a difficult subject matter. To write philosophy is to become philosophical.

The centrality of writing to the practice of philosophy enhances, not dispels, the need for responsible listening, reading, and speaking. All are components of the training in critical thinking. Students must first of all listen and read actively. This means engaging intellect, imagination, and feeling in the tasks of reflecting patiently, interpreting fairly, considering alternatives, and rearticulating thoughtfully. Students must also develop competence in oral defense of their arguments and examination of the arguments of others. Here quick-mindedness and concision are the chief virtues. Finally, students must bend their prose before the demand of clearness. Vague writing conceals muddled thinking, but only briefly. Lucid prose, stripped free of jargon and cant, cliché and emptiness, is praised by all philosophers, even if rarely practiced by them.