

Phil 100C: First Writing Assignment

Spring, 2026

Instructions

Due, as an attachment, via the “Assignments” tool on Canvas, by 11:55pm Wednesday, April 29.

Identify a short passage — either one of those listed below or, if you prefer, another one of similar length — which can be interpreted in (at least) two different ways. Give two different interpretations, indicating briefly what can be said in favor of each (on the basis of the text itself and/or based on other things you know about Locke’s views). No need to find a conclusive argument for one interpretation or the other — if nothing else, you don’t have space for that; just give each of them some reasonable support. (In some of these examples, what I’ve said in lecture may favor one interpretation over another. That’s okay, you should still be able to think about other possible interpretations.)

The total length of your response should be 2–3 pages.

If you are using one of the suggested passages, you need not quote it.

Needless to say this should be your own original work. If you have any questions about what plagiarism is or how to avoid it, you can ask me, or consult the resources listed on the Library website.¹ For possible consequences of plagiarism, see the Academic Misconduct Policy.²

Along with the suggested passages below you will find some hints as to why they might be difficult to understand. You need not follow those hints, however; please ignore them if you don’t find them useful.

Note that this is not a full scale paper — please do not write an introduction and conclusion, summarize other, irrelevant parts of the text, etc. Just focus on doing the above.

¹<https://guides.library.ucsc.edu/c.php?g=1349850&p=9960819>.

²<https://ue.ucsc.edu/academic-misconduct.html>.

You can find answers to some commonly asked questions about my assignments and grading in my FAQ (<https://people.ucsc.edu/~abestone/courses/faq.html>).

Text passages

1. “The senses at first let in particular ideas, and furnish the yet empty cabinet: and the mind by degrees growing familiar with some of them, they are lodged in the memory, and names got to them. Afterwards the mind proceeding further abstracts them, and by degrees learns the use of general names. In this manner the mind comes to be furnished with ideas and language” (I.ii.15, p. 65). (Hint: what kind of ideas do the senses let in? Would a good example be “mama” or would it rather be something like “warm”? Or, in a slightly different direction: which comes first, general names or abstract ideas?)
2. “For if those innate ideas, are not clear and distinct, so as to be universally known, and naturally agreed on, they cannot be subjects of universal, and undoubted truths, but will be the unavoidable occasion of perpetual uncertainty. For, I suppose, everyone’s idea of *identity*, will not be the same, that Pythagoras, and thousands others of his followers, have, and which then shall be the true? Which innate? Or are there two different ideas of *identity*, both innate?” (I.iv.4, p. 92). (Hint: is an unclear innate idea *impossible*? Why? Or is there something else wrong with it?)
3. “By this idea of solidity, is the extension of body distinguished from the extension of space. The extension of body being nothing but the cohesion or continuity of solid, separable, moveable parts, and the extension of space, the continuity of unsolid, inseparable, and immovable parts. *Upon the solidity of bodies also depends their mutual impulse, reistance, and protrusion.* . . . If there be others, that have not these two ideas distinct but confound them . . . I know not, how men, who have the same idea, under different names, or different ideas, under the same name, can, in that case, talk with one another, any more than a man, who not being blind, or deaf, has distinct ideas of the colour of scarlet, and the sound of a trumpet, could discourse concerning scarlet-colour with the blind man . . . who fancied that the idea of scarlet was like the sound of a trumpet” (II.iv.5, p. 127). (Hint: what could we say to the blind man, in explaining scarlet, that would be analogous to “upon the solidity of bodies also depends, etc.,” as an explanation of solidity?)

If the answer is: nothing, then how are the two cases still supposed to be analogous? In other words: how can something like solidity, which has such specific relations to other ideas, be simple and indefinable?)

4. “For division (which is all that a mill or pestle, or any other body, does upon another, in reducing it to insensible parts) can never take away either solidity, extension, figure, or mobility from any body, but only makes two, or more distinct separate masses of matter, of that which was but one before; all which distinct masses, reckoned as so many distinct bodies, after division make a certain number” (II.viii.9, p. 135). (Hint: how do we know so much, in advance, about what one body can or cannot do to another?)

5. “To prevent [the need for endless particular names], the mind makes the particular ideas, received from particular objects, to become general, which is done by considering them as they are in the mind such appearances, separate from all other existences, and the circumstances of real existence, as time, place, or any other concomitant ideas ... Thus the same colour being observed today in chalk or snow, which the mind yesterday received from milk, it considers that appearance alone, makes it a representative of all of that kind, and having given it the name *whiteness*, it by that sound signifies the same quality wheresoever to be imagined or met with” (II.xi.9, pp. 155–6). (Hint: what idea(s) does the name “whiteness” signify? Is the abstract idea of whiteness the same as idea the simple idea, *white*, or is it a different idea, and if so how is it different? What two ideas are combined in the proposition, that snow is white?)

6. “And I believe we shall find, if we warily observe the originals of our notions, that even *the most abstruse ideas*, how remote soever they may seem from sense, or from any operation of our own minds, are yet only such, as the understanding frames to itself, by repeating and joining together ideas, that it had either from objects of sense, or from its own operations about them” (II.xii.8, p. 161). (Hint: what operation(s) of the mind is/are involved in “warily observing the originals of our notions”?)

7. “For the several modes of numbers, being in our minds, but so many combinations of units, which have no variety, nor are capable of any other difference, but more or less, names or marks for each distinct combination, seem more necessary, than in any other sort of ideas” (II.xvi.5, p. 196). (Hint: so do we really have clear and distinct ideas of very large numbers?)

8. “By *pleasure* and *pain*, delight and uneasiness, I must all along be understood . . . to mean, not only bodily pain and pleasure, but whatsoever *delight* or *uneasiness* is felt by us, whether arising from any grateful, or unacceptable sensation or reflection” (II.xx.15, p. 218). (Hint: is this a definition of pleasure and pain? But I thought simple ideas could not be defined.)