

The Levels System

PHI 321: Philosophy of Science
Spring 2016

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” consists of 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 four evaluations:

- not much progress
- good effort
- almost
- complete

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 in total through the semester (see schedule below).

Your grade for the levels system is determined by how far you progress through the levels, and your evaluation on the last level you attempt, as follows:

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

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

Level 2. Complete = D, Almost = D-, Good effort = F, Not much progress = F

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

For example, if you completed levels 1, 2, and 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 description of the argument should also explain how the argument fits into the broader issues that 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 criticize 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 this part of 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 much fairer method of evaluation than more typical systems that involve a mid-term paper. Suppose student A has no experience writing philosophy papers, 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! In 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 work, students with no experience in philosophy can progress successfully through the levels and finish the course with an "A grade" for that component.

3/ Schedule

You have a maximum of *six* attempts at the levels system. The deadlines for those six attempts are as follows:

Attempt 1: Feb 13th
Attempt 2: Feb 26th
Attempt 3: March 21st
Attempt 4: April 4th
Attempt 5: April 18th
Attempt 6: May 2nd

You are not required to hand in work at each deadline. For example, if you complete all four levels in the first four attempts, you are done. Alternatively, you could in principle ignore the first two deadlines and bank on completing the four levels in the final four deadlines, though I wouldn't advise trying that!

4/ The Small Print

- You are allowed a maximum of *two* attempts at Level 4.
- 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 “Good Effort”. Then your final grade would be based on your “Almost”, i.e. an A-.
- *Late work*: If you miss a deadline, you can either (i) submit the work late and take a penalty of 1/3 of a grade per day off your final levels grade, or (ii) just forfeit that deadline and use the next one. Given the flexibility of the system, there are no extensions except in exceptional circumstances, at the recommendation of your Director of Studies.