Philosophy Department Plan:
Spoken, Visual, and Written Communication
March, 2005

1. A brief statement of the departmental goals and objectives for an integrated, sequenced approach to spoken, visual and written communication.

A student who graduates with a philosophy major at Virginia Tech should be able to read, listen, think, and communicate thoughtfully and critically about a variety of issues that are philosophical or that are affected by philosophical ideas. The skills of reading, listening and thinking are addressed through the content of our courses and the conduct of our classes. This plan pertains to the skills of communication. Philosophy graduates should be able to participate critically and productively in class discussions, presenting ideas orally in an organized fashion; they should be able to visually represent arguments symbolically; and they should be able to write a variety of kinds of essays—from smaller, critical reaction essays to larger analytic or synthetic essays that go deeply or broadly into an idea and its foundation or application.

Philosophy began as a spoken enterprise, with Socrates as its first influential proponent and practitioner. Socrates engaged in conversations or dialogues, but eschewed the lecture format. We expect our majors to participate in class discussion. Standard technologies of visual communication, such as charts and graphs, Power Point, and Adobe Illustrator, are not generally used in philosophy. However, visual symbolic depictions of arguments are essential in logic. Given limited resources and limited class time, we plan to continue to focus our attention as a department—particularly for purposes of assessment—on writing. Specifically, our plan is essentially to remain with our current writing-intensive requirement, supplemented by a new assessment procedure involving Virginia Tech’s Electronic Portfolio program, as described below.

Our plan reflects the fact that written communication has become the focus of philosophical communication in its more formal aspects. Writing allows the extensive development of complicated ideas, the careful presentation of subtle ideas, and the ongoing possibility of examining those ideas over an extended period of time. This greater permanence of writing reflects the care and precision that philosophy demands. We see writing as a primary form of philosophical communication. Philosophy graduates should be able to write a variety of kinds of essays that are appropriate to the context, but especially essays that are clear, smooth, concise, grammatical, critical of conventional assumptions, responsive to salient issues, productive of understanding and new perspectives, and appreciative of differing perspectives.

2. A plan for developing and implementing a curriculum reflecting these goals and objectives, including an outline of phasing.

The philosophy major requires a minimum of ten courses—generally two introductory classes, a series of four courses in the history of Western Philosophy, a course in symbolic logic, and three upper-division courses, one of which must be a 4000-level
writing-intensive course. These courses gradually introduce students to the elements of communication both by example: reading exemplary philosophical texts and listening to the professor discuss philosophical issues, and by practice: writing philosophical essays, engaging in class discussion, and perhaps making class presentations.

a. Visual: All majors take Philosophy 3505: Modern Logic and Its Development. In this course they learn to represent statements and arguments symbolically, and they learn some mechanical procedures for evaluating arguments, such as truth-trees and truth-tables, which are best represented visually.

b. Spoken: In introductory courses students generally have discussion sections in which they are introduced to organized philosophical discussion by teaching assistants. In the required series of courses in the history of Western philosophy, and the 3000-level courses, students engage in discussion with professors, where the discussion is often open-ended or part of the presentation of material. In 4000-level courses, and the required writing intensive course, students are expected to engage in critical and constructive discussion, and even occasionally to make class presentations.

c. Written: Right from the start, even in large lecture classes with discussion sections, students do extensive written assignments. Through the major, writings vary from brief reactions, to essay exams, to longer responses to essay topics. Writing is a required and graded part of all of our courses. The four required courses in the history of philosophy (Philosophy 2115, 2116, 2125, 2126) are relatively small (40 students maximum), which enables the instructor to give careful attention to student writing. As the student advances through courses the assignments generally become more frequent or longer. And at the most advanced levels students are often expected to create their own paper topics, because being able to formulate a topic is as important as being able to write about it. Our writing-intensive courses (Philosophy 4204, 4214, 4224, 4334, 4604, and 4614) not only expect students to write, but to write progressively—working from drafts to finished product. *Our curriculum now already accommodates these goals and objectives.*

3. A plan for assessing outcomes.

The department can best determine progress of majors in communication skills by comparing their work at an early and a later stage of their work in the major. In practice this is sometimes hard to do. Rarely do students enter Tech planning to major in philosophy. Students tend to enroll as majors only after they have taken some courses. (Indeed, they are often advised to so wait, since misconceptions about “philosophy” are not uncommon.) Students sometimes declare only in their senior year, having already taken a large number of class for a minor, or out of interest, or planning to take the majority of their major classes during their senior year. Comparison of communication skills calls for qualitative judgment. There is no reasonable way to quantify progress, or evaluate progress by mechanical means.
a. Visual: We will not formally evaluate this, though passing Philosophy 3505 (required of all majors) indicates acquisition of the skill of symbolic representation.

b. Spoken: We will not formally evaluate this, though we will require class participation, either in discussion or presentations, as part of the final grade in our 4000-level writing-intensive classes (required of all majors).

c. Written: Essays will be saved and examined to make comparative judgments of ability over time. Once a student has declared a philosophy major, that student will be required to post all essays written for philosophy courses (along with assignments) in an electronic portfolio. Virginia Tech’s Electronic Portfolio program https://eportfolio.vt.edu/ will be employed for this purpose. During the spring semester of senior year, the student will be asked to identify three essays in the e-portfolio that best illustrate the student’s progress in writing philosophy essays. The philosophy department will designate the department’s Teaching Committee, along with the Director of Undergraduate Studies, to read the essays of graduating seniors to verify progress toward the goals of effective written communication. The committee will report on the essays qualitatively, making suggestions to the department about how assignments can be improved, and how teaching might be changed to improve student writing.

N.B., These communication requirements make use of no resources outside the philosophy department.