

Essay Marking Shorthand Guide

The following is a guide to shorthand symbols you might find in your essay feedback, and what they mean.

Philosophical writing is hard, and doing it well takes a lot of practice. The point of this shorthand system is to give you concrete feedback on ways to think about improving the clarity and quality of your writing for next time. If you ever have questions about specifics of how to improve your writing, please ask!

Symbol	What it means...
✓	This part is well-written, clear, concise, convincing, and/or makes a good point. Nice work!
+	This is partially correct, but missing some key point(s).
~	Not quite, but sort of. Either you're misunderstanding the material here, or you do understand it but your writing is not sufficiently clear here to communicate that understanding. I have no way of distinguishing between these two cases.
X	This is not correct, or this misrepresents an argument or view.
?	Confusing, awkward, or unclear. I've read this multiple times to try to figure out what you mean, and I still don't know. This might be due to errors in grammar, spelling, or wording, or it might be because you yourself were not quite sure what you meant here. Often, I have no way of distinguishing between these two cases. It should be difficult for your reader to misunderstand you. Tip: A good test to be sure your writing is not confusing is to have someone else read over your essay before you submit it. See also "V" below.
!	This claim is overly strong, and/or does not clearly follow from what you've said so far. Perhaps counterintuitively, this can weaken your argument, because the stronger a claim is, the harder it is to defend. Tip: make a smaller or more qualified claim here, and/or offer further reasoning to defend this claim and show how it follows from other claims you've made.
∞	It's not clear (1) how these points are related, (2) how one claim follows from (supports, entails, ...) another one here, or (3) how this claim fits in with the surrounding discussion. Clearly explain and justify the moves from one point to another in your argument.
→←	This claim appears to contradict a claim you made earlier. That means one or the other claim must be false. Solution: figure out which claim is false, remove it from your argument, and then figure out whether and how you can make your argument work without that claim.
-	Be more concise. Either you seem to be repeating a point you already made in different words here, or you are using many words to say something that could be said with fewer words.
“”	Excessive quotation. Do not rely too heavily on quoting someone else to get across a key argument or point. Your reader will gather that you know where to look up what the other author said, but might be left wondering whether or not you yourself understand the argument or point. Tip: to show that you understand another author's argument or view, summarise it in your own words (and cite them, of course). Use quotations sparingly, when you need to draw attention to another author's original wording (for example, if the point you want to make relies on specifics of how they worded their point).
∅	Don't say this, for one of the following reasons: (1) It is a poor substitute for a well-reasoned argument (common issues: "In my opinion..." "I feel that..." "Everyone agrees that..." "Obviously _____ is false ..." "Surely ..."). Tip: If you must say one of these things, be sure to immediately follow it up with an argument giving your reader reasons to agree with the claim you have just endorsed. (2) It implies that an argument is being presented or a conclusion is being drawn when it's not (common issues: "I argue that..." "Therefore..."). It's great to use these terms, but reserve them for instances where you are presenting an argument (premises and a conclusion) or drawing a conclusion that clearly follows from what you've said so far.

Symbol	What it means...
C	<u>C</u> harity. You've uncharitably presented someone else's view here, oversimplified or trivialised their view, criticised their view without fully explaining it first, and/or appear to be criticising <i>them</i> more than you are criticising their view itself (also known as an "ad hominem" attack). Perhaps counterintuitively, this weakens your own argument. Tip: Your own view will be more convincing if you first charitably present the opposing view— which involves explaining why someone might hold that view —and <i>then</i> go on to object to it or point out problems with it.
D	<u>D</u> evelop. This sounds like a good, interesting, and/or central point. However, not enough is said about it, or you've started making a point but haven't finished. Provide more detail, develop and support this point further. Tip: In a short essay where you are already at the word limit, it might not be obvious how to do this. Nearly always, the solution is to make fewer points overall, and develop the ones you do make more carefully. If you want suggestions for how to do this in the context of a specific essay or draft, please ask!
def	<u>D</u> efine or explain. Given the centrality of the term, concept, or idea in question to your argument, and/or the use of a term that could be understood in different ways, you should be clear about how <i>you</i> are using it. Define it based on how the term is relevant to this course (not from a dictionary).
F	<u>F</u> iller or <u>F</u> luff. It might be tempting to say things like "Ever since the dawn of time, humans have puzzled over the nature of mind" or "The evolution of cooperation is the biggest problem in biology," or to give an interesting but tangential overview of some history or background relevant to the topic at stake. Don't, unless it is absolutely clear how what you are writing helps support your overall argument. This sort of "filler" discussion almost always takes up valuable space in which you could be developing and supporting your argument.
HW	<u>H</u> and <u>w</u> riting. (This applies to mini essays—I strongly prefer that you type them on a computer and print them, but some of you might sometimes turn in handwritten ones.) If submitting a handwritten mini essay, please ensure that your handwriting is clear and readable. I can't read this, and if I can't read it, I unfortunately can't give you credit for it.
P	<u>P</u> aragraph. There should be a new one here. Including multiple lines of reasoning or multiple conclusions in a paragraph can make it harder for your reader to follow you. Paragraph breaks (and clear transitions between them) help your reader follow your reasoning more clearly.
R	<u>R</u> eference. This needs one. Use in-text parenthetical citations or footnoted citations, accompanied by a bibliography or reference list at the end of your essay. This symbol typically means that you have made an empirical claim that needs to be backed up with a reference to be convincing (for example, "Studies have shown that _____", "There is evidence that _____", or "It is argued that _____"), or you have referred closely enough to an idea or argument from the course readings that you really should be citing the relevant author's work.
Rel	<u>R</u> elevance? The points you are discussing here might be interesting, but it's not clear how they are relevant to the surrounding discussion, to your overall argument, or both. They might well be relevant, but if you don't make it explicit how, your reader will not see how. Tip: A good test is to go through your essay and ask, of each sentence: How is this relevant to supporting my overall view, and is its connection to the surrounding sentences obvious? If you're not sure how to answer that question, that might suggest you should remove the sentence and use the space to further develop another, more central point or example.

Symbol	What it means...
RQ	<u>R</u>hetorical <u>Q</u>uestion. This symbol means that you have asked a rhetorical question and moved on, leaving your reader guessing, but not entirely sure, what your answer is (and/or how it fits in with your overall argument). An implied but unstated answer to a rhetorical question is a poor substitute for a well-reasoned argument. Tip: avoid rhetorical questions in academic writing; it's almost always better to just get to the point and say what you mean. If you do choose to use a rhetorical question, either (1) answer it immediately, or (2) give your reader an immediate indication of how you will answer it (for example: "We wouldn't eat our pet dogs, would we? I will argue that we wouldn't and that in light of this, there is no justification for eating pigs.")
S	<u>S</u>upport. This claim needs more support. Common issues here include merely reporting your opinion or what you believe instead of giving an argument, reporting what someone else said without showing why it is a plausible thing to say, or stating a key controversial premise without backing it up. Tip: For your overall argument to be convincing, each of the claims you use to establish it must be convincing as well. Give your reader good reasons to agree with you, for example, by showing (1) some evidence that supports your claim, (2) how the opposite of your claim is implausible or impossible, (3) how your claim follows from an earlier claim or some other, uncontroversial claim, or (4) how an obvious objection to your claim is a bad objection.
TM	<u>T</u>oo <u>M</u>uch. You are making many points quickly one after another. This can undermine the force and clarity of your argument. Tip: especially when there is a low word limit, make fewer points, slow down, and develop and explain the ones you do make more carefully. If you want suggestions for how to do this in the context of a specific essay, please ask! See also "P" above.
V	<u>V</u>ague. You are saying something vague or ambiguous, in the sense that it could be interpreted in multiple ways. Since I can read only your essay and not your mind, I don't know how you intended it to be interpreted, and therefore might not be giving you credit for your intended meaning here. Tip: A good test to be sure your writing is clear is to have someone else read over your essay before you submit it. See also "?" above.
W	<u>W</u>ording. You appear to have used the wrong word here, there appear to be missing words, or you could probably find a better/clearer word or phrase to express what you're trying to say.