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How Good Does a Starred Paper Have to Be in Order to Pass?

Graduate students planning to submit Starred Papers often wonder about the criteria of acceptability for their papers. How good does the paper have to be in order to get a grade of PASS?

According to the official regulations of the PhD Program a successful Starred Paper “is a substantial work giving solid evidence that its author is able to do the kind of original research and writing required to complete a satisfactory doctoral dissertation in philosophy.” This is suggestive, but obvious questions remain: how substantial does a paper have to be in order to be a “substantial work”? What sort of evidence would show that a student is able to do the kind of research and writing required to complete a satisfactory dissertation? And what sorts of research and writing are required to make a dissertation satisfactory?

Substantiality. A previous version of the PhD Regulations specified that Starred Papers should not exceed 30 pages. The page limit seems somewhat arbitrary. It’s easy to imagine a very substantial paper that is only half that length. And it’s equally easy to imagine a very insubstantial paper that is twice that length. Perhaps a more useful criterion would be this: the paper must make a fairly original contribution to philosophy; the main points must be backed up by persuasive arguments; there must be solid evidence that the author has surveyed the relevant professional literature.

A good term paper for a graduate seminar may be 15-20 pages long. It may be a bit unprofessional in spots. It may be narrowly focused, so that some relevant literature is never discussed. A first-rate Starred Paper would be more substantial than that. Recent prize-winning papers have been in the 25-30 page range.

Precise upper and lower page limits would be arbitrary. Different topics, arguments, writing styles, fields, etc. call for different numbers of pages. But if your paper is much under 25 pages, or much over 30 pages, you might want to give some thought to the question whether there is good reason for your paper to diverge from the norm. If you are still in doubt, show the paper to some faculty members. Ask them if they think the paper is substantial enough.

Originality. A satisfactory PhD Dissertation must be “an original contribution to knowledge”. It cannot consist entirely of mere exposition of the views of other people. It must make some novel point. Since a satisfactory Starred Paper is supposed to show that the author has the skills required to write a dissertation, the Starred Paper must also make some novel point. Perhaps the amount of originality in a Starred Paper would be equal to the amount of originality in one major chapter of a good dissertation.

A good Starred Paper might be original because it defends a novel thesis, but it also might be original because it contains new and interesting arguments against a thesis that has been defended in the literature.

Research. A typical good Starred Paper is based on serious research in the relevant literature. It’s a good idea to attach a bibliography or list of references. It’s also a good idea to demonstrate mastery of some of that literature in the paper. But keep in mind that a mere review of the literature would not, by itself, make for a successful Starred Paper.

Quality of writing. A satisfactory Starred Paper must be written in a clear, literate, and professional style. Standard conventions for use and mention must be employed; spelling should be checked; footnotes and references should conform to some known guidelines. The paper should be written in something like the style one finds in good papers in the leading professional journals.

For further guidance concerning Starred Papers, students are encouraged to take a look at the papers that have won the Heidelberger Prize. These are available in the Main Office. Every one of those papers was judged by the Department to be an outstanding example. Most faculty members are happy to read and comment on a preliminary version of a proposed Starred Paper – especially if you give them plenty of time.