

## TEACHING TESTIMONIAL #1

In my first two years of college, there is not one person that has had a larger impact on me than Professor Erik Zhang. I was fortunate enough to have Professor Zhang for PHIL 164: Morality and Business and PHIL 384: Gateway to PHIL/POLI/ECON. In both classes, we covered an array of situations that occur within business and politics and their moral implications. Before each class, we would individually read an assigned paper analyzing a given situation like price gouging or algorithms within dating apps. Then during class, Erik would recap the reading while offering additional critiques of the paper. He always offered insight that most of his students had not considered, and he pushed us to grow our critical thinking skills. He did not simply lecture. Instead, he allowed the class to guide the conversation and create their own critiques and opinions on the topics.

Through these two classes, I gained a new appreciation for the art of philosophical argumentation and developing morally coherent worldviews. I would say that Erik, more than anyone else in my life, has forced me to challenge myself on everything that I believe. This introspection is something I will continue doing for the rest of my life. I am grateful to have crossed paths with Professor Zhang

Professor Zhang's classrooms are always bursting with intellectual electricity. Students are pushed to try their hardest to present their own ideas and defend them against criticism. His knowledge and analytical ability are unmatched. He commands the room's attention effortlessly by being engaging and hilarious. Every moment spent in his classroom is well spent and provides students with moments for self-discovery and growth.

The best example I have of how amazing Professor Erik is was during the beginning of my second semester of sophomore year. For a couple of weeks, I was very disillusioned with the world and my place in it. I had spent my whole college career building myself into a strong candidate for a specific industry but was no longer sure if that was my destined path. Before I talked to friends and family, I emailed Professor Zhang to see if he was free that week and he made time (as he always does) to sit down and talk to me. During that conversation, we discussed everything from my interests and strengths to potential careers. At a time when I was truly at my lowest and most uncertain, Erik provided the support and advice that I desperately needed. I know that regardless of whether Erik is currently my professor, he will always make the time to help me. This is the standard by which he treats all his students. Leaving that conversation, I felt a newfound sense of purpose and direction.

Professor Zhang truly is a once-in-a-lifetime professor and mentor, and that sentiment is widely shared by his UNC-Chapel Hill students. I found my relationships with my peers in his class strengthened by his teaching. Outside of class, we would continue to discuss and debates the contents of the class. This is not something I have noticed in an of my other classrooms. As an educator, he creates a spark and gives his students the freedom to take it and run with it.

I am honored to have been asked to speak about Professor Erik Zhang. I am grateful to have crossed paths with him, and to have had the opportunity to take multiple classes with him. He is an energetic, passionate, and caring professor who would be an invaluable member of any faculty.

## TEACHING TESTIMONIAL #2

I write today to offer a testimonial on Professor Erik Zhang's exceptional teaching style. I first encountered Professor Zhang my sophomore year of college while taking a Philosophy of Law course, where he immediately distinguished himself as a humorous yet sincere educator. Since the first day of class Professor Zhang offered students unique perspectives while also emphasizing the importance of learning from classmates through inquisitive and civil discussion.

During the semester Professor Zhang assigned six critical comment papers, where students were expected to write a two-page response to any of the assigned readings for the semester. To my and many of my former classmates' surprise, these were not "easy A" papers. The first paper I wrote was about legislative judicial review and I did not receive a satisfactory grade. Having never written in the traditional writing style associated with philosophical essays, it was nearly impossible to write an "A" paper without significant style modification. However, Professor Zhang made himself readily available, during numerous office hours throughout the week, to offer students assistance with their writing.

The first time I went to office hours I came in discouraged but left feeling highly encouraged. Not only did Professor Zhang review every word of my first paper, but he gave me invaluable pointers on how to modify my writing to fit the traditional philosophical writing style. Consequently, despite the anonymous grading system, I significantly improved on the next paper. And still to this day, I attribute many of my foundational academic writing skills to the help I received from Professor Zhang.

As I continued to attend office hours, I quickly began to realize how much Professor Zhang cared about his students' academic success and overall mental wellbeing. Not only does he possess the necessary traits of being a phenomenal professor, but he approaches every class conversation and debate just as interested and passionate as the student who's speaking. Unlike previous classes where professors establish themselves as a superior, Zhang can usually be found sitting at a student desk in a circle amongst his students during class. And during office hours it's not uncommon to hear laughter and genuine conversations taking place from outside his office.

Now, as a senior in college I am eager to return to Professor Zhang's class as I complete my PPE minor. Although it is still early in the semester, I have been reminded of his enthusiastic demeanor and sincere love of teaching. Not to mention, after only 4 semesters of being at UNC, many of the students in the PPE course are his former students who - very clearly - also share my admiration and respect for Professor Zhang.

If there's one thing I hope to convey in this letter, it is that Professor Zhang has the exceptional skill to invoke excitement and a love for learning within every student he encounters. Because of his unique ability to appeal to a variety of students and more importantly a diverse group of individuals, I've witnessed a former UNC basketball player and computer science student be equally enthralled in philosophical discussion.

Professor Zhang embodies the ethos of humble leadership. The wisdom he imparts on the Carolina community is invaluable in contributing to a true liberal arts education. I could think of no better candidate than my professor, Erik Zhang, and am eager to see what he will accomplish next.

### TEACHING TESTIMONIAL #3

I have never encountered another teacher or individual who could adeptly navigate both sides of an abortion debate and create an environment where everyone in the room feels their perspective is valued and welcomed. During the 2022-2023 academic year, I enrolled in Professor Zhang's classes on Legal Ethics and Business Ethics, and these classes proved to be some of the most enlightening experiences of my college journey. In this letter, I aim to explain the qualities that, in my view, set Professor Zhang apart as an educator and to share the enduring impacts his classes have had on my personal life.

There is dynamism and excitement in Professor Zhang's class that brings students in. In my undergraduate career, it was the only class I recall where students would eagerly bring in their friends visiting from out of town to witness the magic of a master teacher at work. The coalescence of several extraordinary gifts—his nearly infallible memory, his enthusiasm and humor, and his ability to conjure fitting illustrations and metaphors from thin air—created an entertaining and engaging learning environment in which students were eager to ask questions and participate. Professor Zhang had an exceptional knack for getting students to push beyond their current level of thinking, which was epitomized in how he taught his classes. Rather than delivering a preformed speech, Professor Zhang created a living dialogue that wove through weekly philosophical topics and readings, asking students to participate by delving into their feelings and thoughts regarding specific subjects before providing challenges or provocations. After the students shared their responses, as was frequently asked of them, Professor Zhang consistently demonstrated deep consideration and compassion towards them, either reflecting on their input or respectfully countering their opinions with thought-provoking questions or ideas. In my two semesters attending Professor Zhang's classes, I observed him engaging with students several hundred times and cannot recall a single instance where he did not ensure the students felt welcome and respected, irrespective of their backgrounds, upbringings, or perspectives. Despite consistently challenging student's responses, Professor Zhang managed to do so in a way that conveyed to the students that he was not seeking to diminish their voice but rather strengthen their perspective by kindly pointing out areas where their argument might benefit from further development or investigation—all of which was taken in stride by his students.

In my personal life, I have benefited immensely from learning the value of opposing views based on my time in Professor Zhang's class. In the past, I had the strong feeling there were certain irreconcilable differences between people on either side of contentious political or ethical perspectives, like abortion or gun violence. It seemed impossible to change opinions or make peace once polarization occurred; Therefore, it was quite a shock to me to witness how individuals with completely polar perspectives on topics could find common ground in his class. People on either end of a political or philosophical spectrum, including myself, who might have responded with hostility to a different perspective at the start of the week's discussion, would often develop more patience, respect, and understanding for the other's perspective by the end of the week. It becomes much harder to hate someone who is pro-life after understanding that they genuinely believe that abortion deprives a person of their life or after understanding someone is pro-choice because they believe that women have a sovereign right to their body, which must not be infringed upon by any foreign agent. I attribute the increased respect and patience that we began to show each other predominantly to the leadership style of Professor Zhang: the deep respect he treated all students with, regardless of their perspective, and his active listening, which was picked up on by the class and emulated by the students. As a result of these experiences, I began to understand that bridging the divide between opposing groups of people is possible. However, a prerequisite to any reconciliation is developing respect and compassion for all people in the discussion, regardless of their viewpoint.

I can be a very competitive person, and before taking Professor Zhang's class, I tended to engage in debates with a preconceived perspective and the goal of exposing weaknesses and flaws in the opposing side's ideas to secure a "win". It was the only form of intellectual discussion that I was familiar with, and it was not until my time in Legal and Business Ethics that I began to understand how an intellectual environment could be a place for curiosity and mutual growth when that tendency began to change. I first noticed this change in myself when I was at home visiting my family for winter break. In my household, political discussions can be challenging. It was not unusual for individuals on opposing sides of a political spectrum to storm with frustration or anger toward each other's perspectives. However, upon returning home from break, I noticed a difference in how I approached dialogue and debates. When a discussion emerged between my mom and my sisters covering various subjects, such as abortion and gun rights, I kept asking myself how I would handle these subjects if I were in my philosophy class. How did Professor Zhang treat dissenting opinions with respect and try to understand their thought process? Without realizing it, my perspective and behavior towards conversation and debate had changed. I could ask more questions, listen more patiently, and engage in a more positive and meaningful dialogue with my family members. Further, I adjusted some of my opinions and found my family members much more receptive to considering differing opinions as well. I am exceptionally grateful to his class for showing me the value of open-mindedness and allowing me to reconsider the value of dissenting opinions with a healthy and inquisitive perspective rather than automatically trying to prove that I am right.

Professor Zhang has had a remarkable influence on my growth as a thinker, a communicator, and a compassionate individual. Reflecting on my time at UNC, Professor Zhang's class stands out due to the profound impact it has on me, both personally and intellectually. I have Professor Zhang to thank for continually helping push me beyond my current level of thinking, helping me to understand that the prerequisite to bridging divides is treating people with respect and compassion, for helping me reduce my tendency to try to win arguments rather than learn, and for allowing me to share more positive and meaningful dialogue with both my friends and family.

#### TEACHING TESTIMONIAL #4

I am writing this letter to share my appreciation for Erik Zhang's exceptional contributions as an educator and mentor. I recently graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with a Bachelor of Science degree in Public Health and a minor in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics. During my time at UNC, I had the pleasure of attending Erik's class and reading seminar, both of which are very popular among my peers for good reasons.

Erik possesses the unique ability to take complex philosophical concepts and present them with such clarity and simplicity that they become accessible and engaging for everyone. For example, when we discussed arguments for and against abortion, he did not simply present dry concepts. Instead, he began with Judith Jarvis Thomson's famous thought experiments, the violinist, and elaborated on counterarguments using the same example in an impressive storytelling manner. This teaching approach significantly accelerated my understanding of the content, almost imprinting it in my mind. Thus, when I engage in discussions about abortion with my friends now, I can effortlessly draw from the violinist case to articulate my thoughts. Furthermore, he integrated real-world scenarios, such as the Supreme Court overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, into our abortion discussion and then extended the case to another topic: the various interpretations of constitutions. Even though I was not initially very interested in this subject, I found myself quickly grasping the important concepts without feeling compelled to study or memorize the text. In short, I believe that Erik has deep knowledge of the subject matter, which makes his students unable to resist paying attention to his lectures and facilitate rapid comprehension of key take-away points.

What distinguishes Erik is not just his knowledge but also his remarkable teaching style. He fosters an inclusive and encouraging learning environment where diverse perspectives are welcomed, and intellectual curiosity is celebrated. There were numerous group discussions during class, and everyone had the opportunity to express their thoughts and receive feedback. When providing feedback, Erik listened carefully to each student's opinions and skillfully challenged us without making anyone feel uncomfortable or embarrassed, allowing us the space to re-examine our arguments. Moreover, he consistently maintained a position of neutrality while pointing out potential counterarguments, regardless of whether he personally agreed with our arguments or not. These discussions not only enriched my academic experience by prompting me to think more deeply but also broadened my horizons by exposing me to different viewpoints and modes of thinking.

Erik is also very thoughtful when designing assignments for his class, aiming to support his students in building valuable academic skills and critical thinking abilities. For instance, his twopage comment paper assignments encouraged me to delve deeper into the class readings rather than accepting their arguments without rigorous analysis. This practice also helped me refine my ability to articulate my thoughts effectively, as I could not simply write down whatever crossed my mind without careful consideration. These skills have proven invaluable not only in my academic pursuits but also in my professional life. Though regrettably, I did not pursue a career in law or philosophy, my capacity to write concisely has still found broad application and gained positive feedback as a healthcare consultant.

Erik's dedication to his students extends well beyond the classroom. His availability during office hours is invaluable to me and many of my peers. He is always willing to patiently clarify doubts, discuss philosophical nuances, and offer guidance on assignments. Furthermore, his instruction for our reading group, in my opinion, exemplifies an outstanding commitment to the practice of philosophy beyond the classroom. This approach opens doors for students who are eager to explore philosophy but may be hesitant or too busy to enroll in formal classes.

What stands out most to me is his genuine concern for his students' personal growth, even when it is not strictly related to the course material. For instance, we discussed my concentration in public health often, and he always listened attentively, asking thought-provoking questions. His fresh perspectives consistently encouraged me to dig deeper into my research and projects, sparking valuable insights.

I must admit that I may not recall every concept and theory from Erik's class at this moment. Nevertheless, I think I will never forget his perception of philosophy—having no clear answers to most, if not all, philosophical questions is acceptable, because the true value lies in our ability to ask these questions. It can be disheartening to acknowledge that, as mortal human beings, we may never uncover the absolute truths in philosophy; however, the real joy resides in the journey itself. I believe this is exactly how I will aim to live with philosophy in my limited life.

Erik's dedication to teaching, his ability to make complex concepts accessible, and his genuine care for his students have left an indelible mark on my academic and personal development. I wholeheartedly endorse him as an outstanding educator and mentor, and I wish him all the best in his future endeavors.

## TEACHING TESTIMONIAL #5

I was privileged to be a student of Professor Zhang's during my freshman year when I took PHIL-280, Legal Philosophy.

Admittedly, I was apprehensive about Professor Zhang's teaching style at the beginning, which I'd characterize as conversational as opposed to lecture-style: structured upon student questions, comments, and criticisms of the readings, to which other students or Zhang would respond. Thus, student participation is a must, and as a shy person, I was worried about my grade suffering from anxiety around speaking up in class. I convinced myself this teaching style was not conducive to my needs, but the class content sounded so interesting that I made myself sit through the first two weeks of lessons. I can't begin to express how glad I am that I stuck it out—Zhang's instructional methods turned out to be exactly what I needed in order for me to fully absorb the content and get me to think philosophically rather than just to understand the philosophical idea presented. I found myself speaking up in class regularly, despite my racing heart and sweaty palms. Zhang was very supportive of my participation and made me feel comfortable to speak in class, engaging enthusiastically with my comments and questions, as well as posing new questions or hypotheticals to build off my provisions to the class discussion. My classmates were also receptive to this teaching style, and it really seemed to enrich the learning that was done. I specifically remember one student suggesting a potential solution to a philosophical problem presented in one of our readings, and Zhang slammed the chalk down on the ledge and exclaimed, "Now we are doing philosophy!" The whole class lit up, tangibly energized by Zhang's enthusiasm both for his beloved subject and for student ingenuity.

Professor Zhang also fostered a communicational and needs-responsive classroom environment. I came to his office hours every chance I got and every time he was friendly, respectful, and ready to listen to my questions and concerns. Zhang would listen to me for as long as I needed, and I was able to build a rapport and personal relationship with him. Despite my insecurities about my writing abilities as a new philosophy student, Zhang's confidence in me never wavered. Without dealing out false reassurance, Zhang approached my questions with reason and presence of mind, talking to me like an intellectual equal, which meant everything to me in those moments of stress. He was receptive to my mental health concerns, providing reasonable extensions for assignments when it was clear it was needed and offering appropriate support. His care and genuine interest in my academic career are notable both in and outside the classroom, best displayed by his gracious agreement to meet me for coffee over the summer to discuss how our lives had progressed beyond our time in PHIL-280.

This testimonial was written with full transparency and no embellishments. Professor Zhang is one of the most intelligent and talented professors I've ever had the privilege of meeting. I am more comfortable speaking in class now, I have gained practice in an unfamiliar way of thinking and writing, and my knowledge has grown exponentially in the field of legal philosophy. I took the course because it aligned perfectly with my interests, and Zhang only served to reaffirm my love of this subject. He fostered a classroom environment conducive to learning and thoughtful engagement, providing appropriate guidance through the delicate balancing act of knowing when to step in with more instruction and when to step back, allowing the students to become the philosophers. He has truly impacted my UNC career in a way no other professor has, and I am grateful for the opportunity to share my appreciation.

## TEACHING TESTIMONIAL #6

Professor Erik Zhang was my instructor for PHIL 280 - Morality, Law, and Justice: Issues in Legal Philosophy. The course design took the class through ongoing discussions on constitutional law, criminal law, and the institution of law, from the early United States into the contemporary period. The class looked at legal documents, writings from legal scholars, court cases, and various philosophical arguments on topics such as affirmative action, punishment, and law's fundamental nature.

The topics we covered were often extensive, relevant, but also incredibly challenging as well; however, Professor Zhang was persistent and superbly successful at facilitating both the discussions and providing clarity. He was especially quick in extracting the essential mechanics and points of an argument, which was especially helpful for papers written before the 20th century. This often drew more students into joining the discussion.

Zhang's lectures stood out for me due to their accessibility without many materials or aids. While he used the chalk board effectively, he never once fiddled with PowerPoint-style lecturing. He taught classically with minimal material. This challenged me to focus more on the lecture subject arguments and responses from my classmates than on attempting to ferociously copy content from a slide deck. It greatly influenced my approach to learning philosophy and has served me well.

The teaching approach Professor Zhang practiced was effective because it felt seamless. When he arrived, he would greet us, subtly remove any anxiousness from the room, and then smoothly transition into the topic of the day. He would extract and correct the subject argument from class participants within the first third or so of a class, highlight particular points, and provide noteworthy implications as we moved to a period for conversation and debate. Prodding at both sides of any argument noticeably gripped students who may have otherwise kept to themselves. I distinctly remember many peers, who wanted nothing to do with philosophy, being fully invested in debating issues like justifying punishment differentials between criminal attempts and completed crimes. Professor Zhang has a seemingly effortless skill for stoking discussions and making them both engaging and approachable.

And, while I saw collegiate athletes, prospective law students, philosophy enthusiasts, and indifferent peers alike enthralled due to Professor Zhang's instruction, he also retains the ability to help students develop their own philosophical skills. Having sought his guidance on philosophical writing, I can attest to Professor Zhang's skilled coaching. He meticulously asked questions such that I saw and developed my own arguments. He also consistently alerted me to where I may receive significant objection. A single meeting with him amply helped me align my thesis and build my arguments.

My experience in Erik's class animated philosophy into something like a captivating sport. Catching nuance became like the fun of seeing clever and innovative use of skill by prodigious athletes. A lot of what Erik did in his teaching was display how small changes in an argument greatly affects the outcomes, or how the angle at which one approaches an argument can change one's perspective. I recognize that Erik's teaching confirmed philosophy's underlying place in so much of what we experience day to day. I saw before my very eyes that philosophy is a practice that can agitate, change, and broaden people's perspectives because of Erik. His passion for philosophy gave the course life and that positively extends to his students. Erik gave me glasses to see even more color and potential in philosophy and it has left an enduring impact on me as a whole.

Professor Erik Zhang is quick, clear, charismatic, poised, and unpretentious. His control of a classroom is exemplary, and if you didn't know any better, you might think he has three times as much teaching experience than he does on paper. He shows incredible care for his students and brings a great



energy to the spaces he's in. He's a phenomenal educator who brightens philosophy for all on his roster. Students any- and everywhere are lucky to have him.