

Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper

Philosophical writing is different from the writing you'll be asked to do in other courses. Most of the strategies described below will also serve you well when writing for other courses, but don't automatically assume that they all will. Nor should you assume that every writing guideline you've been given by other teachers is important when you're writing a philosophy paper. Some of those guidelines are routinely violated in good philosophical prose (e.g., see the [guidelines on grammar](#), below).

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What Does One Do in a Philosophy Paper?

1. A philosophy paper consists of the reasoned defense of some claim

Your paper must offer an argument. It can't consist in the mere report of your opinions, nor in a mere report of the opinions of the philosophers we discuss. You have to *defend* the claims you make. You have to offer reasons to believe them.

So you can't just say:

My view is that P.

You must say something like:

My view is that P. I believe this because...

or:

I find that the following considerations...provide a convincing argument for P.

Similarly, don't just say:

Descartes says that Q.

Instead, say something like:

Descartes says that Q; however, the following thought-experiment will show that Q is not true...

or:

Descartes says that Q. I find this claim plausible, for the following reasons...

There are a variety of things a philosophy paper can aim to accomplish. It usually begins by putting some thesis or argument on the table for consideration. Then it goes on to do one or two of the following:

- Criticize that argument; or show that certain arguments for the thesis are no good

- Defend the argument or thesis against someone else's criticism
- Offer reasons to believe the thesis
- Offer counter-examples to the thesis
- Contrast the strengths and weaknesses of two opposing views about the thesis
- Give examples which help explain the thesis, or which help to make the thesis more plausible
- Argue that certain philosophers are committed to the thesis by their other views, though they do not come out and explicitly endorse the thesis
- Discuss what consequences the thesis would have, if it were true
- Revise the thesis, in the light of some objection

No matter which of these aims you set for yourself, **you have to explicitly present reasons for the claims you make**. Students often feel that since it's clear to them that some claim is true, it does not need much argument. But it's very easy to overestimate the strength of your own position. After all, you already accept it. You should assume that your audience does *not* already accept your position; and you should treat your paper as an attempt to persuade such an audience. Hence, don't start with assumptions which your opponents are sure to reject. If you're to have any chance of persuading people, you have to start from common assumptions you all agree to.

2. A good philosophy paper is *modest* and makes *a small point*; but it makes that point clearly and straightforwardly, and it offers good reasons in support of it

People very often attempt to accomplish too much in a philosophy paper. The usual result of this is a paper that's hard to read, and which is full of inadequately defended and poorly explained claims. So don't be over-ambitious. Don't try to establish any earth-shattering conclusions in your 5-6 page paper. Done properly, philosophy moves at a slow pace.

3. Originality

The aim of these papers is for you to show that you understand the material and that you're able to think critically about it. To do this, your paper does have to show some independent thinking.

That doesn't mean you have to come up with your own theory, or that you have to make a completely original contribution to human thought. There will be plenty of time for that later on. An ideal paper will be **clear and straightforward** (see below), will be accurate when it **attributes views to other philosophers** (see below), and will contain thoughtful critical responses to the texts we read. It need not always break completely new ground.

But you should try to come up with your own arguments, or your own way of elaborating or criticizing or defending some argument we looked at in class. Merely summarizing what others have said won't be enough.

Three Stages of Writing

1. Early Stages

The early stages of writing a philosophy paper include everything you do *before* you sit down and write your first draft. These early stages will involve *writing*, but you won't yet be trying to write a complete paper. You should instead be taking notes on the readings, sketching out your ideas, trying to explain the main argument you want to advance, and composing an outline.

Discuss the issues with others

As I said above, your papers are supposed to demonstrate that you understand and can think critically about the material we discuss in class. One of the best ways to check how well you understand that material is to try to explain it to someone who isn't already familiar with it. I've discovered time and again while teaching philosophy that I couldn't really explain properly some article or argument I thought I understood. This was because it was really more problematic or complicated than I had realized. You will have this same experience. So it's good to discuss the issues we raise in class with each other, and with friends who aren't taking the class. This will help you understand the issues better, and it will make you recognize what things you still don't fully understand.

It's even more valuable to talk to each other about what you want to argue in your paper. When you have your ideas worked out well enough that you can explain them to someone else, verbally, then you're ready to sit down and start making an outline.

Make an outline

Before you begin writing any drafts, you need to think about the questions: In what order should you explain the various terms and positions you'll be discussing? At what point should you present your opponent's position or argument? In what order should you offer your criticisms of your opponent? Do any of the points you're making presuppose that you've already discussed some other point, first? And so on.

The overall clarity of your paper will greatly depend on its structure. That is why it is important to think about these questions before you begin to write.

I strongly recommend that you make an outline of your paper, and of the arguments you'll be presenting, before you begin to write. This lets you organize the points you want to make in your paper and get a sense for how they are going to fit together. It also helps ensure that you're in a position to *say* what your main argument or criticism is, before you sit down to write a full draft of your paper. When students get stuck writing, it's often because they haven't yet figured out what they're trying to say.

Give your outline your full attention. It should be fairly detailed. (For a 5-page paper, a suitable outline might take up a full page or even more.)

I find that making an outline is at least 80% of the work of writing a good philosophy paper. If you have a good outline, the rest of the writing process will go much more smoothly.

Start Work Early

Philosophical problems and philosophical writing require careful and extended reflection. Don't wait until two or three nights before the paper is due to begin. That is very stupid. Writing a good philosophy paper takes a great deal of preparation.

You need to leave yourself enough time to think about the topic and write a detailed outline. Only then should you sit down to write a complete draft. Once you have a complete draft, you should set it aside for a day or two. Then you should come back to it and rewrite it. Several times. *At least* 3 or 4. If you can, show it to your friends and get their reactions to it. Do they understand your main point? Are parts of your draft unclear or confusing to them?

All of this takes time. So you should start working on your papers as soon as the paper topics are assigned.

2. Write a Draft

Once you've thought about your argument, and written an outline for your paper, then you're ready to sit down and compose a complete draft.

Use simple prose

Don't shoot for literary elegance. Use simple, straightforward prose. Keep your sentences and paragraphs short. Use familiar words. We'll make fun of you if you use big words where simple words will do. These issues are deep and difficult enough without your having to muddy them up with pretentious or verbose language. **Don't write using prose you wouldn't use in conversation: if you wouldn't say it, don't write it.**

You may think that since your TA and I already know a lot about this subject, you can leave out a lot of basic explanation and write in a super-sophisticated manner, like one expert talking to another. I guarantee you that this will make your paper incomprehensible.

If your paper sounds as if it were written for a third-grade audience, then you've probably achieved the right sort of clarity.

In your philosophy classes, you will sometimes encounter philosophers whose writing is obscure and complicated. Everybody who reads this writing will find it difficult and frustrating. The authors in question are philosophically important *despite* their poor writing, not because of it. So do not try to emulate their writing styles.

Make the structure of your paper obvious

You should make the structure of your paper obvious to the reader. Your reader shouldn't have to exert any effort to figure it out. Beat him over the head with it.

How can you do this?

First of all, use connective words, like:

- because, since, given this argument
- thus, therefore, hence, it follows that, consequently
- nevertheless, however, but
- in the first case, on the other hand

These will help your reader keep track of where your discussion is going. Be sure you use these words correctly! If you say "**P. Thus Q.**" then you are claiming that P is a good reason to accept Q. You had better be right. If you aren't, we'll complain. Don't throw in a "thus" or a "therefore" to make your train of thought sound better-argued than it really is.

Another way you can help make the structure of your paper obvious is by telling the reader what you've done so far and what you're going to do next. You can say things like:

- I will begin by...
- Before I say what is wrong with this argument, I want to...
- These passages suggest that...
- I will now defend this claim...
- Further support for this claim comes from...
- For example...

These signposts really make a big difference. Consider the following two paper fragments:

...We've just seen how X says that P. I will now present two arguments that not-P. My first argument is...

My second argument that not-P is...

X might respond to my arguments in several ways. For instance, he could say that...

However this response fails, because...

Another way that X might respond to my arguments is by claiming that...

This response also fails, because...

So we have seen that none of X's replies to my argument that not-P succeed. Hence, we should reject X's claim that P.

I will argue for the view that Q.

There are three reasons to believe Q. Firstly...

Secondly...

Thirdly...

The strongest objection to Q says...

However, this objection does not succeed, for the following reason...

Isn't it easy to see what the structure of these papers is? You want it to be just as easy in your own papers.

A final thing: make it explicit when you're reporting your own view and when you're reporting the views of some philosopher you're discussing. The reader should never be in doubt about whose claims you're presenting in a given paragraph.

You can't make the structure of your paper obvious if you don't know what the structure of your paper is, or if your paper has no structure. That's why making an outline is so important.

Be concise, but explain yourself fully

To write a good philosophy paper, you need to *be concise* but at the same time *explain yourself fully*.

These demands might seem to pull in opposite directions. (It's as if the first said "Don't talk too much," and the second said "Talk a lot.") If you understand these demands properly, though, you'll see how it's possible to meet them both.

- We tell you to be *concise* because we don't want you to ramble on about everything you know about a given topic, trying to show how learned and intelligent you are. Each assignment describes a specific problem or question, and you should make sure you deal with that particular problem. Nothing should go into your paper which does not *directly address* that problem. Prune out everything else. It is always better to concentrate on one or two points and develop them in depth than to try to cram in too much. One or two well-mapped paths are better than an impenetrable jungle.

Formulate the central problem or question you wish to address at the beginning of your paper, and keep it in mind at all times. Make it clear what the problem is, and why it is a problem. Be sure that everything you write is relevant to that central problem. In addition, be sure to say in the paper *how* it is relevant. Don't make your reader guess.

- One thing I mean by "explain yourself fully" is that, when you have a good point, you shouldn't just toss it off in one sentence. Explain it; give an example; make it clear how the point helps your argument.

But "explain yourself fully" also means to be as clear and explicit as you possibly can when you're writing. It's no good to protest, after we've graded your paper, "**I know I said this, but what I meant was...**" **Say exactly what you mean**, in the first place. Part of what you're being graded on is how well you can do that.

Pretend that your reader has not read the material you're discussing, and has not given the topic much thought in advance. This will of course not be true. But if you write as if it were true, it will force you to explain any technical terms, to illustrate strange or obscure distinctions, and to be as explicit as possible when you summarize what some other philosopher said.

☞ In fact, you can profitably take this one step further and pretend that your reader is *lazy*, *stupid*, and *mean*. He's *lazy* in that he doesn't want to figure out what your convoluted sentences are supposed to mean, and he doesn't want to figure out what your argument is, if it's not already obvious. He's *stupid*, so you have to explain everything you say to him in simple, bite-sized pieces. And he's *mean*, so he's not going to read your paper charitably. (For example, if something you say admits of more than one interpretation, he's going to assume you meant the less plausible thing.) If you understand the material you're writing about, and if you aim your paper at such a reader, you'll probably get an A.

Use plenty of examples and definitions

It is very important to use examples in a philosophy paper. Many of the claims philosophers make are very abstract and hard to understand, and examples are the best way to make those claims clearer.

Examples are also useful for explaining the notions that play a central role in your argument. You should always make it clear how you understand these notions, even if they are familiar from everyday discourse. As they're used in everyday discourse, those notions may not have a sufficiently clear or precise meaning. For instance, suppose you're writing a paper about abortion, and you want to assert the claim "[A fetus is a person.](#)" What do you mean by "a person"? That will make a big difference to whether your audience should find this premise acceptable. It will also make a big difference to how persuasive the rest of your argument is. By itself, the following argument is pretty worthless:

A fetus is a person.
It's wrong to kill a person.
Therefore, it's wrong to kill a fetus.

For we don't know what the author *means* by calling a fetus "a person." On some interpretations of "person," it might be quite obvious that a fetus is a person; but quite controversial whether it's always wrong to kill persons, in that sense of "person." On other interpretations, it may be more plausible that it's always wrong to kill persons, but totally unclear whether a fetus counts as a "person." So everything turns here on what the author means by "person." The author should be explicit about how he is using this notion.

In a philosophy paper, it's okay to use words in ways that are somewhat different from the ways they're ordinarily used. You just have to make it clear that you're doing this. For instance, some philosophers use the word "person" to mean any being which is capable of rational thought and self-awareness. Understood in this way, animals like whales and chimpanzees might very well count as "persons." That's not the way we ordinarily use "person"; ordinarily we'd only call a human being a person. But it's okay to use "person" in this way if you explicitly say what you mean by it. And likewise for other words.

Don't vary your vocabulary just for the sake of variety

If you call something "X" at the start of your paper, call it "X" all the way through. So, for instance, don't start talking about "Plato's view of the *self*," and then switch to talking about "Plato's view of the *soul*," and then switch to talking about "Plato's view of the *mind*." If you mean to be talking about the same thing in all three cases, then call it by the same name. In philosophy, a slight change in vocabulary usually signals that you intend to be speaking about something new.

Using words with precise philosophical meanings

Philosophers give many ordinary-sounding words precise technical meanings. Consult the handouts on [Philosophical Terms and Methods](#) to make sure you're using these words correctly. Don't use words that you don't fully understand.

Use technical philosophical terms only where you need them. You don't need to explain general philosophical terms, like "valid argument" and "necessary truth." But you should explain any technical terms you use which bear on the specific topic you're discussing. So, for instance, if you use any

specialized terms like "dualism" or "physicalism" or "behaviorism," you should explain what these mean. Likewise if you use technical terms like "supervenience" and the like. Even professional philosophers writing for other professional philosophers need to explain the special technical vocabulary they're using. Different people sometimes use this special vocabulary in different ways, so it's important to make sure that you and your readers are all giving these words the same meaning. Pretend that your readers have never heard them before.

Presenting and assessing the views of others

If you plan to discuss the views of Philosopher X, begin by figuring out what his arguments or central assumptions are. See my tips on [How To Read a Philosophy Paper](#) for some help doing this.

Then ask yourself: Are X's arguments good ones? Are his assumptions clearly stated? Are they plausible? Are they reasonable starting-points for X's argument, or ought he have provided some independent argument for them?

Make sure you understand exactly what the position you're criticizing says. Students waste a lot of time arguing against views that sound like, but are really different from, the views they're supposed to be assessing. Remember, philosophy demands a high level of precision. It's not good enough for you merely to get *the general idea* of somebody else's position or argument. You have to get it exactly right. (In this respect, philosophy is more like a science than the other humanities.) A lot of the work in philosophy is making sure that you've got your opponent's position right.

You can assume that [your reader](#) is stupid (see above). But don't treat the philosopher or the views you're discussing as stupid. If they were stupid, we wouldn't be looking at them. If you can't see anything the view has going for it, maybe that's because you don't have much experience thinking and arguing about the view, and so you haven't yet fully understood why the view's proponents are attracted to it. Try harder to figure out what's motivating them.

Philosophers sometimes do say outrageous things, but if the view you're attributing to a philosopher seems to be *obviously crazy*, then you should think hard about whether he really does say what you think he says. Use your imagination. Try to figure out what reasonable position the philosopher could have had in mind, and direct your arguments against *that*.

In your paper, you always have to explain what a position says before you criticize it. If you don't explain what you take Philosopher X's view to be, your reader cannot judge whether the criticism you offer of X is a good criticism, or whether it is simply based on a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of X's views. So tell the reader what it is you think X is saying.

Don't try to tell the reader everything you know about X's views, though. You have to go on to offer your own philosophical contribution, too. **Only summarize those parts of X's views that are directly relevant to what you're going to go on to do.**

Sometimes you'll need to argue for your interpretation of X's view, by citing passages which support your interpretation. It *is* permissible for you to discuss a view you think a philosopher *might* have held, or should have held, though you can't find any direct evidence of that view in the text. When you do this, though, you should explicitly say so. Say something like:

Philosopher X doesn't explicitly say that P, but it seems to me that he's assuming it anyway, because...

Quotations

When a passage from a text is particularly useful in supporting your interpretation of some philosopher's views, it may be helpful to quote the passage directly. (Be sure to specify where the passage can be

found.) However, direct quotations should be used *sparingly*. It is seldom necessary to quote more than a few sentences. Often it will be more appropriate to paraphrase what X says, rather than to quote him directly. When you are paraphrasing what somebody else said, be sure to say so. (And here too, cite the pages you're referring to.)

Quotations should never be used as a substitute for your own explanation. And when you do quote an author, you still have to explain what the quotation says *in your own words*. If the quoted passage contains an argument, reconstruct the argument in more explicit, straightforward terms. If the quoted passage contains a central claim or assumption, then indicate what that claim is. You may want to give some examples to illustrate the author's point. If necessary, you may want to distinguish the author's claim from other claims with which it might be confused.

Paraphrases

Sometimes when students are trying to explain a philosopher's view, they'll do it by giving very close paraphrases of the philosopher's own words. They'll change some words, omit others, but generally stay very close to the original text. For instance, Hume begins his *Treatise of Human Nature* as follows:

All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call impressions and ideas. The difference betwixt these consists in the degrees of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind, and make their way into our thought or consciousness. Those perceptions, which enter with most force and violence, we may name impressions; and under this name I comprehend all our sensations, passions, and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul. By ideas I mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning.

Here's an example of how you *don't* want to paraphrase:

Hume says all perceptions of the mind are resolved into two kinds, impressions and ideas. The difference is in how much force and liveliness they have in our thoughts and consciousness. The perceptions with the most force and violence are impressions. These are sensations, passions, and emotions. Ideas are the faint images of our thinking and reasoning.

There are two main problems with paraphrases of this sort. In the first place, it's done rather mechanically, so it doesn't show that the author understands the text. In the second place, since the author hasn't figured out what the text means well enough to express it in his own words, there's a danger that his paraphrase may inadvertently change the meaning of the text. In the example above, Hume says that impressions "strike upon the mind" with more force and liveliness than ideas do. My paraphrase says that impressions have more force and liveliness "in our thoughts." It's not clear whether these are the same thing. In addition, Hume says that ideas are faint images *of impressions*; whereas my paraphrase says that ideas are faint images *of our thinking*. These are not the same. So the author of the paraphrase appears not to have understood what Hume was saying in the original passage.

A much better way of explaining what Hume says here would be the following:

Hume says that there are two kinds of 'perceptions,' or mental states. He calls these impressions and ideas. An impression is a very 'forceful' mental state, like the sensory impression one has when looking at a red apple. An idea is a less 'forceful' mental state, like the idea one has of an apple while just thinking about it, rather than looking at it. It is not so clear what Hume means here by 'forceful.' He might mean...

Anticipate objections

Try to anticipate objections to your view and respond to them. For instance, if you object to some philosopher's view, don't assume he would immediately admit defeat. Imagine what his comeback might be. How would you handle that comeback?

Don't be afraid of mentioning objections to your own thesis. It is better to bring up an objection yourself than to hope your reader won't think of it. Explain how you think these objections can be countered or overcome. Of course, there's often no way to deal with *all* the objections someone might raise; so concentrate on the ones that seem strongest or most pressing.

What happens if you're stuck?

Your paper doesn't always have to provide a definite solution to a problem, or a straight yes or no answer to a question. Many excellent philosophy papers don't offer straight yes or no answers. Sometimes they argue that the question needs to be clarified, or that certain further questions need to be raised. Sometimes they argue that certain assumptions of the question need to be challenged. Sometimes they argue that certain answers to the question are *too* easy, that is, they won't work. Hence, if these papers are right, the question will be *harder* to answer than we might previously have thought. These are all important and philosophically valuable results.

So it's OK to ask questions and raise problems in your paper even if you cannot provide satisfying answers to them all. You can leave some questions unanswered at the end of the paper. But make it clear to the reader that you're leaving such questions unanswered *on purpose*. And you should say *something* about how the question might be answered, and about what makes the question interesting and relevant to the issue at hand.

If something in a view you're examining is unclear to you, don't gloss it over. Call attention to the unclarity. Suggest several different ways of understanding the view. Explain why it's not clear which of these interpretations is correct.

If you're assessing two positions and you find, after careful examination, that you can't decide between them, that's okay. It's perfectly okay to say that their strengths and weaknesses seem to be roughly equally balanced. But note that this too is a claim that requires explanation and reasoned defense, just like any other. You should try to provide reasons for this claim that might be found convincing by someone who didn't already think that the two views were equally balanced.

Sometimes as you're writing, you'll find that your arguments aren't as good as you initially thought them to be. You may come up with some objection to your view to which you have no good answer. Don't panic. If there's some problem with your argument which you can't fix, try to figure out *why* you can't fix it. It's okay to change your thesis to one you can defend. For example, instead of writing a paper which provides a totally solid defense of view P, you can instead change tactics and write a paper which goes like this:

One philosophical view says that P. This is a plausible view, for the following reasons...
 However, there are some reasons to be doubtful whether P. One of these reasons is X. X poses a problem for the view that P because...
 It is not clear how the defender of P can overcome this objection.

Or you can write a paper which goes:

One argument for P is the 'Conjunction Argument,' which goes as follows...
 At first glance, this is a very appealing argument. However, this argument is faulty, for the following reasons...
 One might try to repair the argument, by...
 But these repairs will not work, because...
 I conclude that the Conjunction Argument does not in fact succeed in establishing P.

Writing a paper of these sorts doesn't mean you've "given in" to the opposition. After all, neither of these papers commits you to the view that not-P. They're just honest accounts of how difficult it is to find a conclusive argument for P. P might still be true, for all that.

3. Rewrite, and Keep Rewriting

Now you've written a complete draft of your paper. Set the draft aside for a day or two.

Then come back to the draft and re-read it. As you read each sentence, say things like this to yourself:

"Does this really make sense?" "That's totally unclear!" "That sounds pretentious."
 "What does that mean?" "What's the connection between these two sentences?" "Am I just repeating myself here?" and so on.

Make sure every sentence in your draft does useful work. Get rid of any which don't. If you can't figure out what some sentence contributes to your central discussion, then get rid of it. Even if it sounds nice. You should never introduce any points in your paper unless they're important to your main argument, and you have the room to really explain them.

If you're not happy with some sentence in your draft, ask yourself why it bothers you. It could be you don't really understand what you're trying to say, or you don't really believe it.

Make sure your sentences say exactly what you want them to say. For example, suppose you write "**Abortion is the same thing as murder.**" Is that what you really mean? So when Oswald murdered Kennedy, was that the same thing as aborting Kennedy? Or do you mean something different? Perhaps you mean that abortion is *a form of* murder. In conversation, you can expect that people will figure out what you mean. But you shouldn't write this way. Even if your TA is able to figure out what you mean, it's bad writing. In philosophical prose, you have to be sure to say exactly what you mean.

Also pay attention to **the structure** of your draft. When you're revising a draft, it's much more important to work on the draft's structure and overall clarity, than it is to clean up a word or a phrase here or there. Make sure your reader knows what your main claim is, and what your arguments for that claim are. Make sure that your reader can tell what the point of every paragraph is. It's not enough that *you* know what their point is. It has to be obvious to your reader, even to a **lazy, stupid, and mean reader**.

If you can, show your draft to your friends or to other students in the class, and get their comments and advice. I encourage you to do this. Do your friends understand your main point? Are parts of your draft unclear or confusing to them? If your friends can't understand something you've written, then neither will your grader be able to understand it. Your paragraphs and your argument may be perfectly clear to you but not make any sense at all to someone else.

Another good way to check your draft is to **read it out loud**. This will help you tell whether it all makes sense. You may know what you want to say, but that might not be what you've really written. Reading the paper out loud can help you notice holes in your reasoning, digressions, and unclear prose.

You should count on writing many drafts of your paper. At least 3 or 4!! Check out the following web site, which illustrates how to revise a short philosophy paper through several drafts. Notice how much the paper improves with each revision:

- Writing tutor for Introductory Philosophy Courses <<http://web.williams.edu/wp-etc/philosophy/jcruz/jcruz/writingtutor/>>.

Minor Points

Beginning your paper