

Guide to Philosophical Writing  
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Philosophy writing is, in many ways, different from the writing you do in most other classes. Below are some guidelines to help you do your best philosophical writing. I have written these guidelines in a way that focuses on writing philosophy papers, but the majority of these tips apply equally well to other, smaller assignments as well.

You can pretty much always find a philosopher that disagrees with any particular claim about philosophy, including what makes some philosophical writing better than others. However, if you are writing an assignment for one of my classes, rest assured that these are the guidelines that I will have in mind when evaluating the writing you turn in to me:

1. Structure: The following are the parts of a good philosophy paper:
  - a. Introduction: This should be short. Lots of students are tempted to put in what philosophers tend to think of as “filler” when they are starting their papers. You should get right down into the nitty-gritty, without a bunch of distractions. So do NOT start your paper with a phrase like “Since the dawn of time....” Rarely are such statements true, and even when they are, they do not clarify or justify the important claims in the paper. In my opinion, an introduction can be as short as one sentence, if that sentence is your thesis statement.
    - i. A thesis statement is the most important sentence in a philosophy paper. In it, you set up your main goal for the paper and outline how you will meet that goal. Here is an example of a thesis statement: “In this paper, I will argue that we should reject Goldstein’s argument for the conclusion that some a-causal properties of experiences are not neural properties because the third premise of his argument is false.”
      1. Notice that a good thesis statement uses the word “I” or “me” or “my,” because the goal of the paper is to explain what *you* think about some issue and why *you* think that.
      2. Notice that a good thesis statement also mentions the other (main) philosopher(s) whose work will be discussed in the paper. If you are writing a paper about Aristotle’s ideas, you should say that from the start, rather than implying that you came up with the whole discussion from scratch (which you did not).
      3. Notice that a good thesis statement uses an active verb such as “argue,” “defend,” “criticize,” “support,” or similar. You are not simply talking *about* some topic, you must take a stand on that topic, so avoid verbs that imply that you are only doing the former, such as “discuss,” “explain,” or “explore.”
      4. Philosophers will pay very close attention to the thesis statement when evaluating a paper. They will check to be sure it is clear what the author intends to argue, and then, after reading the paper, check to be sure that what the author said s/he would do is what s/he actually did.

- b. Main Argument: No good philosophy begins in a vacuum; all good philosophy demonstrates an awareness of those whose thinking has come before and influenced your own thinking. This first main section of the paper is where you explain some author's argument by recreating it in your own words. In my classes, this is usually the part of the paper that is worth the most points. You cannot do the other parts of the paper well if you botch this part.
    - i. For each premise in the argument, you should:
      - 1. State the premise
      - 2. Explain exactly what that means
      - 3. Explain why someone might think it is a *true* claim (that is, give a defense or justification of the premise)
    - ii. You should also explicitly state the author's conclusion before moving on to your critical analysis of the argument in question.
  - c. Objection(s): This is where you begin to critically evaluate the author's argument, whereas in the earlier sections, you were merely describing the author's argument. In the papers I assign, I almost always limit students to ONE objection. In the objection section, you talk about a reason that someone might think the author's argument is problematic. There are two main kinds of objection:
    - i. Those that say a particular premise is false or unjustified and
    - ii. Those that say that there is a problem with the structure of the argument, and that therefore the conclusion does not follow from or is not adequately supported by the premises. These point out a problem with an inference.
    - iii. Both kinds of objections have to tell the reader:
      - 1. Where the problem is
      - 2. What the problem is
      - 3. Why that is a problem
  - d. Response(s): Not every paper will include this section: check the prompt to see whether you were assigned to write one. Responses are basically objections to objections, so all the same guidelines from objections apply here.
  - e. Conclusion: Like the introduction, this section should be very short (again, one sentence might be enough).
    - i. Notice that this is the conclusion of *your* paper, and thus should reflect something about what you believe about the issue at hand. Don't get confused by the fact that the recreated argument has a conclusion and the paper as a whole has a conclusion. They won't necessarily be the same!
    - ii. You should not introduce substantive new material in the conclusion; you should only summarize what you've already said in the paper.
    - iii. Think of the conclusion as the mirror image or the bookend to match the introduction. In the introduction, you say what you are going to do; in the conclusion, you say what you have done. When you get to the end, be sure that you've done what you originally said you would do!
2. Content: Good philosophical papers include both a descriptive part and an evaluative part. The descriptive part tells the reader what some author(s) believe(s) about some topic. In it, you recreate the argument under consideration in your own words. This part has to come first, as it introduces the topic and shows that you understand the relevant literature. After you finish that part, then you can do the evaluative part, which is where

you tell the reader what is good and what is bad about the argument, and why. The objection and response sections are the evaluative part.

- a. Be sure to read the prompt carefully to be sure that you are talking about the relevant part of the text. If I ask you to write about Jackson's Knowledge Argument, and you write a paper about Jackson's reasons for thinking qualia have no causal effects, that does not fulfill the requirements for the assignment because you have changed the subject. Think of it this way: if you work in an office and the boss asks you to report on how much money is left in this year's budget as of today, but you report on how much money you think the company should budget for expenses next year, the boss is not going to count that as a success. This seems obvious, but you would be surprised how often people make this kind of mistake.
3. Style: The following are the most important virtues when it comes to the style of your philosophical writing:
- a. Accuracy: Your paper should aim for correctness in two ways. First, you need to correctly represent the views of others. Second, your writing needs to reflect a correct understanding of the meaning of philosophical terms of art.
    - i. If you use technical terms, then define them explicitly.
    - ii. If you can't explicitly define a word, then you shouldn't be using it.
    - iii. Sometimes it feels like overkill to define all the relevant terms, but it is crucial to show that you know what is going on, and it often helps you catch the places where you need to clarify your own thinking.
    - iv. Sometimes people think that using big words makes them seem smart and impressive. That is only true if you understand those big words and use them correctly, and sometimes not even then.
  - b. Clarity: Your goal is to be as clear and unambiguous as possible. If your sentence could be understood two different ways, either rewrite it to remove the ambiguity, or explicitly say "While you might think I mean this ..., what I really mean is this other thing..." Clarity often requires simplicity; use simple, straightforward sentence structures and vocabulary whenever possible. It should be completely obvious to the reader exactly what you mean (and what you don't mean). Again, sometimes people try to use flowery, complicated structure to seem smart and impressive, but it is actually more challenging and impressive to write about abstract and complicated ideas in a way that any basically intelligent person can understand.
  - c. Completeness: Make sure that your paper has all the parts that it should. If I ask you to write an objection and a response, just an objection is not going to cut it. Similarly, make sure that you discuss all the parts of the arguments that you are considering. If you leave a premise out, you have an argument that doesn't prove what it is supposed to prove, and doesn't accurately reflect the author's thinking either.
  - d. Dry, boring writing is okay. Sometimes students want to show off by using lots of big words and complicated sentences. Is this beginning to sound familiar? Making things more complicated than they need to be doesn't make you look smart if it gets in the way of your accuracy, clarity, and completeness. Philosophy is hard enough as it is; there is no need to try to show off with flowery writing. Nor should you feel that you need to entertain me; I've graded a lot of papers, and

entertainment is not what I'm looking for when I read student papers. I want you to show me that you are thinking clearly about complicated ideas.

- i. One trick is to read your paper out loud. If you can't comfortably read what you've written out loud, you may be making things more complicated than they need to be. Alternatively, you might try to verbally explain to a friend or roommate what you are going to write before sitting down to draft a paper.
  - e. Rhetorical Questions: Avoid them! The whole point of writing a philosophy paper is to give reasons for thinking something or other. Questions do not provide reasons; they are (at most) requests for reasons. Asking a rhetorical question does not advance your argument at all. In fact, it usually is a sign that you lack an argument where you need one. What makes a question a rhetorical question is the assumption that the answer is so obvious as to be uncontroversial. But pretty much everything is controversial in philosophy, and you cannot assume that your audience will answer the rhetorical question the same way you would. You need to give your audience a reason to think what you think. If you think you need to include a rhetorical question for reasons of style, you must explicitly answer it and give reasons in support of your answer immediately after you ask it.
4. Audience: I recommend that you write as though you are explaining your ideas to someone who is of average intelligence, but not familiar the material that you are discussing. Doing so will help you show me that you know what you are talking about. If you write as though you are talking to experts, you won't demonstrate to me that you understand the fundamentals of what you are saying. If you write as though you are talking to someone stupid, then you won't know me that you've thought about the material in a sophisticated way. So take the middle way. Write in a way that an average person could understand even if they have never taken a philosophy class.
  5. Citations: Including appropriate citations for your sources is absolutely crucial. You have to give credit to the people whose ideas you are discussing. I ask my students to use MLA style, but whichever style you use (follow your professor's guidelines), what really matters is that you use it consistently. I'll use footnotes in my examples below so that you don't have to flip the pages to see the full citations.
    - a. If you are using another person's exact words, you must put them in quotation marks, with a parenthetical citation, footnote, or endnote to the exact page on which those words appear. You must also have a full citation for the work in question either in the footnote, endnote, or in a bibliography at the end of the paper. For instance, Kant said, "A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes."<sup>1</sup>
    - b. If you paraphrase another person's words, you must follow up the paraphrase with a parenthetical citation, footnote, or endnote to the exact page on which the paraphrased original appears. You must also have a full citation for the work referred to either in the footnote, endnote, or in a bibliography at the end of the paper. For instance, the following sentence includes a paraphrase: Rawls said that

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<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. by H.J. Paton (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1964), 62.

all people should be given the same rights to the greatest liberty that they can have without compromising the equal liberty of others.<sup>2</sup>

- c. If you are speaking in a general way about another person's view (for instance, "Cartesian dualism is the view that the mind and the body are two separate but causally interacting types of things."), you should mention the person's name in the text ("Cartesian" means "the kind advocated for by Descartes") and include a full bibliographic citation to the work you read by Descartes somewhere in the paper, but you don't need a footnote, endnote, or parenthetical citation with the specific sentence in which you refer to the author, so long as there is a full citation for the work at the end.<sup>3</sup>
  - d. If you use another's words or ideas without giving them credit, that is plagiarism whether you meant to do it or not. It is morally wrong, illegal, and something that I (a person who teaches ethics for a living) take very seriously. If you plagiarize, you will earn a zero for the assignment, and possibly for the class, depending on the severity of the offense.
6. Source Material: At the lower levels, I never assign papers that require students to read any philosophy source material that hasn't already been assigned for class. Philosophy texts are dense; it takes a lot of reading and re-reading to really understand them. I would rather my students develop a sophisticated understanding of the article they are writing about than to learn a little bit about lots of related articles.
- a. Students can be tempted to make things harder than they need to be by reading a bunch of extra material. I love it when students are willing to put in a lot of hard work, but you want to be sure that the work you are putting in is going to pay off, and that it doesn't get in the way of other things you need to do. Students who write about source material that we haven't discussed in class tend to make more mistakes in their understanding of that material than they do in the material from class, and they also tend to drift off topic without realizing it. So my advice is to not write about any texts that weren't assigned. By all means you should read as much as you want and think about the connections between assigned readings and other readings, but do yourself a favor and set that extra stuff aside when it comes to writing your assignments.
  - b. If you do turn to the Internet for background information, be careful. A good general rule is that IF a source is published by a college or university, or written by a named author who has a PhD in philosophy, then you can be pretty sure that it is on the right track. As a person who is new to the field, you should be cautious about trusting any other sources.
7. Scope: Philosophy papers should be focused and detailed. It is better to focus on one idea and discuss it in a sophisticated way than to touch on a bunch of different ideas and leave tons of unanswered questions about all of them.
- a. For instance, if I ask you to consider one objection, only consider one! If you discuss more than one, you won't have enough space to discuss either of them in the detail they deserve.

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<sup>2</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1971), 60.

<sup>3</sup> René Descartes, *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*, trans. by Desmond M. Clarke (London: Penguin Books, 1998).

- b. Lots of students are tempted to use what some philosophers call “the shotgun method,” which involves saying a little bit about a bunch of different things in one paper. One might be tempted to do this if one wants to show a broad knowledge, but papers are designed to demonstrate a deep knowledge. We develop breadth in our knowledge by doing different assignments at different times about different things.
- 8. Learn from the comments you receive on your assignments. It is much better to make a new mistake on your new assignment than to make a mistake that you’ve already made and I’ve corrected.
  - a. Sometimes students come to me with their graded papers and in the course of our discussion, they say “Well, what I meant to say is ...” It is great to reflect on paper comments and thereby learn to think more clearly about your own intentions. However, being able to articulate what you meant to say but didn’t say in your paper, while incredibly valuable as you move forward, is never a reason for me to increase your grade for the assignment in question. Your grade for an assignment is based on what you actually wrote, not on what you meant to write or on what you would have written under other circumstances.
- 9. I do not expect you to resolve any philosophical issues for all time, and you should not expect that of yourself either. There is a reason people are still talking about the philosophical questions we discuss after thousands of years of smart people carefully thinking and writing and talking about them. They are hard questions, and we may never agree about how to best answer them. You should have an opinion about the arguments you consider, but you should also know that you are not going to be able to convince every possible person that your opinion is the right one. It can be liberating to realize that you don’t have to!