

# Philosophy Article Writing Guide\*

PHIL 715

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 (see Notes on Style below).

## 1 Arguments and Reasons

Your paper must offer an argument, not just a report of your opinions or the summary of someone else's, or a list of facts—even if they're facts about philosophy. You have to defend the claims you make. You have to offer reasons to believe them. Rather than saying, “My view is X,” go for something like, “My view is X because. . .”

You have to explicitly present reasons for the claims you make. Just because your reasons for your opinion are clear to you doesn't mean they're clear to me. You should *treat your paper as an attempt to persuade an undecided reader*.

### Audience

I've received two powerful, competing pieces of advice on how to conceive of one's audience. One of my advisors told me to think of the audience as lazy, stupid, and uninterested—so that I would get to the thesis quickly, be explicit in my arguments, and motivate my thesis with reasons to pay attention to it. Another told me to think of readers as intelligent, interested, and a little naive. I prefer for my own mental health to think that I am writing for the latter sort of audience, though as I'm drafting I often find it helpful to keep the former sort in mind.

### Narrative

Philosophy is not like creative fiction. The goal is *not* to surprise your readers. You want to make it clear from the get-go what the point of your paper is; that is, what *conclusion* of your argument is. And you want to make it clear how you will arrive at that conclusion along the way (see Signpost, below).

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\*Adapted in part from Jim Pryor's “Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper”

## 2 Writing

1. Use simple words. Keep your sentences and paragraphs short. Use familiar words. Don't toss in \$5 words when \$.20 words will do. Philosophy is hard enough without pretentious language. Don't write using prose you wouldn't use in conversation: if you wouldn't say it, don't write it. A nice heuristic: try to keep sentences around 30 words or fewer.
2. You may think that since I already know a lot about this subject, you can leave out a lot of basic explanation and write like one expert talking to another. Please don't. This will make your paper incomprehensible . . . which will hurt your grade.
3. Signpost: Make the structure of your paper obvious to the reader. Your reader shouldn't have to exert any effort to figure it out. To make it obvious, you need to leave signs for your reader. Here are some ways to leave signs:
  - Use connective words, such as: because, since, given this argument, thus, therefore, hence, it follows that, consequently, nevertheless, however, but, in the first case, on the other hand
  - Take a hint from speechwriters: Tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em, tell 'em, tell 'em what you told 'em. Use phrases 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..."
  - Eyes on the prize: 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.
4. Say what's yours and what isn't: make it explicit when you're reporting your own view and when you're reporting the views of some other philosopher or scientist. The reader should never be in doubt about whose claims you're presenting in a given paragraph.
5. Use plenty of examples and definitions:
  - Examples are miniature narratives that help make your argumentative point. Many of the claims philosophers make are very abstract and hard to understand, and examples are a great way to make those claims clearer.
  - Be careful with your vocabulary: 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 that 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.

### 3 Elements of a Philosophy Article

These are mostly necessary, not always sufficient (or in J.L. Mackie's words, "Insufficient but Necessary parts of a condition which is itself Unnecessary but Sufficient") elements of a standard contemporary analytic philosophy paper. Often, authors will separate these elements into separate sections of a paper, which makes it easier for readers (and the writer!) to keep track of the elements.

1. Introduction: Introduce and motivate the problem to be addressed in the paper. Why should readers care? Who is this a problem for? Give an overview of how the problem will be solved over the course of the paper.
2. Literature Review: Summarize the views of other people who have written about the problem, identifying their views and whether or not these views are adequate, and why. Identify any views you plan to criticize in the argument.
3. Argument: Start with some premises; end with a conclusion. Check for validity and soundness, and make sure that the conclusion addresses the problem you identified in the introduction.
4. Objections/Replies (optional): How would someone who disagrees with your point of view respond? Are there premises that are particularly contentious? If so, defend them. Is your conclusion surprising? Give further reasons to accept it.
5. Conclusions: Summarize the problem and your solution. Remind the reader why they should care about the problem by revisiting the motivation in the introduction. Optional: Discuss any implications of your argument that are particularly interesting/exciting/surprising. Optional: Offer suggestions for how further work in this area might develop.

### 4 Quoting, Citing, Footnotes

1. Direct quotations should be used judiciously and should never be used as a substitute for your own explanation. If you do quote an author, you still have to explain what the quotation says in your own words.
2. Paraphrases need to show that you understand the text you are paraphrasing, rather than just replacing one word with a synonym.
3. Citing should happen. Make sure you use a well-recognized (e.g. MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.) citation style and stick with it. Full bibliographies should follow at the end of your paper.
4. If you prefer a citation style that is footnote-based, that is fine. Use footnotes for substantive follow-up on a point if you must, but do so sparingly.
5. For sanity's sake, don't use endnotes.

## 5 Notes on Style

1. Try to avoid *italicizing*, **bolding**, or underlining words and phrases as a means of getting your *point* across. Make your point with clear arguments, not tricks of text.
2. “I” and “We”: You may use the word “I” freely, especially to tell the reader what you’re up to (e.g., “I’ve just explained why X. Now I consider the argument that Y.”). N.B.: “I” has overtaken “we” as the predominant first-person pronoun in at least some areas of philosophy. I prefer “I” but won’t be upset if you use “we.” I will be upset if you mix the two.
3. Gendered pronouns and the singular “They”: 2015 was the year of the singular “they,” as in, “Bihui went to the store. They bought some coffee beans.” There are good, political reasons to adopt this practice when discussing examples in philosophy papers. If it grates on you terribly and you cannot get over it, make sure your pronoun genders are balanced and consistent.
4. Forget the f\*ing inverted pyramid: Don’t begin with a sentence like “Down through the ages, mankind has pondered the problem of...” There’s no need to warm up to your topic. You should get right to the point.
5. Throw out the dictionary, too: Don’t begin with a sentence like “Webster’s Dictionary defines science as...” Dictionaries aren’t philosophical authorities. They record the way words are used in everyday discourse. Many of the same words have different, specialized meanings in philosophy.
6. Don’t worry about using the verb “is” or “to be” too much. In philosophy papers, it’s OK to use this verb more often than in, say, a news story or creative fiction. But don’t take this as an excuse to write in passive voice the whole time, since active voice is often clearer and more direct.
7. Don’t use slang or overly informal language. Do not, in general, use contractions. Keep your sentences short and to the point. Don’t use second-person voice. Don’t mix past, present, and future tenses. Don’t routinely misspell words.
8. If I can’t follow your sentences from the beginning to the end, I won’t be able to assign your paper a passing grade. If you’re concerned, a) know that you’re not alone, and b) ask a friend to look over your paper, or go to the writing center for advice.