

Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper (adapted with permission from and thanks to Mika Lavaque-Manty)

Philosophy writing is argumentative in structure. At its best, it achieves clarity by using ordinary language and avoiding overly complex sentence structures. Technical jargon should be used only when necessary. Write in a straightforward manner. Your style may be personal (it's ok to say "I") but should still be scholarly (no expletives or colloquialism). Keep the following considerations in mind:

1. **Structure your paper around a thesis you intend to defend.** Open your paper with a statement of your thesis, or if it is not obvious what your thesis would be about on a cold read, you may include minimal background context to make the meaning of the thesis clear. Then, explain how you will go about defending your thesis. This should all be done in the first paragraph or two. **State your thesis in substantive, not merely formal terms.** Don't say "I will present an argument that shows that Rawls was wrong about distributive justice." Don't say "I will present two objections to Rousseau's view." Briefly state what you think is wrong with Rawls's argument, or what your two objections to Rousseau are.

2. **Focus on giving *arguments* for your position.** Give complete arguments, making explicit your assumptions. The quality of papers is overwhelmingly determined by the strength of the arguments you offer for your position. Philosophy papers generally concentrate more on defending broad principles than on establishing particular contingent facts. However, in some cases, notably papers in applied ethics where you are defending a position about what actually ought to be done (not just about what ought to be done in some hypothetical circumstance or thought experiment), the actual facts may matter a lot to the outcome, and you should strive for empirical accuracy.

3. **Avoid filler material that does not advance your argument.** It's pointless to write banalities like "philosophers have been wondering about the justification of punishment for thousands of years." Don't dress up your argument with fictional details ("It was a dark and stormy night, as Locke plotted revolution. . ."). Don't write anything that does not advance understanding or argumentation.

4. **Depth is better than breadth.** It is more effective to develop one or two arguments for your thesis in depth, carrying them through several layers of objections and replies, than it is to give dozens of reasons for your thesis, none of which are developed with any seriousness.

5. **Always consider objections to your position.** Sound philosophy depends on taking seriously multiple points of view. Just offering arguments for your position,

while ignoring objections, does not make a strong philosophy paper. Nor does it make for interesting philosophy to only consider weak or silly objections to your position. You should strive to consider the strongest objections you can think of to your position, as well as the objections most commonly voiced, if the position you advocate is one that has received wide discussion. It's worth having a conversation with a thoughtful advocate of a position you disagree with, to engage with an opposed point of view. If you mention a point made by someone you had such a conversation with, you should credit that person in a note.

6. Think through the issue yourself, don't just report what other people say. Philosophy assignments are more like mathematics problem sets than like book reports. They are exercises for your mind, to engage you in philosophical argumentation. If you got a problem set and just asked a mathematician for the correct answers, you wouldn't really have learned any math for yourself. Similarly, if you are assigned a philosophy problem your primary task is to think it through for yourself, not to report back on what your favorite philosopher, or the best philosophers, have said on the matter. This is true even when your task is to interpret a text in the history of philosophy. Your task is to think yourself through to a philosophical understanding of the text, to give arguments that it should be interpreted in this particular way rather than that, rather than to simply summarize what commentators have said.

7. Give arguments, not mere opinions. Don't say "I am an atheist, so Locke is wrong." Construct an argument you think might have a chance of convincing your opponents. Remember, arguments are a form of communication: you want your opponent to understand you, and this often means looking for some common ground or 'shared understandings' to serve as a basis.

8. Write with a critical reader in mind - someone who isn't initially sympathetic to your thesis, but who will listen to reason. You need not defend every assumption you make (most of us agree the Earth is round), but try not to assume something very controversial ("Since capitalism is obviously evil, there will never be social justice for all in the United States."). As a rule of thumb, imagine your reader is another member of the class who disagrees with you and will challenge your points.

9. Acknowledge the limitations of your argument. No argument answers all difficulties. You are encouraged to identify problems and uncertainties in your argument that would require further research to resolve. Note that one way to make a contribution is to open up new questions for investigation that haven't been answered yet, but that look like promising avenues for future investigation. It's refreshingly honest to acknowledge the limitations of one's work, and to turn this into an asset—an opportunity for future research.

10. Follow the **principle of charity**. If you are interpreting what someone else says, don't impute an interpretation that makes that person sound like an idiot. Ask yourself, "how could this person have found this claim plausible"? This is a way of taking others seriously, of treating them with respect. In any event, it is of no philosophical interest to refute idiots.

11. If you want to attribute a view to someone we have read, make sure you **interpret** them **carefully**. On controversial points, cite textual evidence, either by quotation or by giving the page numbers of the relevant text in parenthesis or in a footnote. You must indicate when you are quoting or paraphrasing from someone else's work, and you must cite texts and page numbers. This is particularly true for secondary material, if you choose to use some. (I recommend you don't, though.) Refer to some accepted manual for appropriate ways to cite (MLA, Chicago, etc.). Any generally accepted style is OK, just stay consistent.

12. **Acknowledge other debts** as well. The general rule is that whatever is not a product of your own brain should be acknowledged. You might want to consult a brief guide on plagiarism. [These notes have been adapted, with permission, from notes by Mika Lavaque-Manty, which were in turn inspired by similar notes for philosophical writing by Ed Curley (Univ. of Michigan), Sally Haslanger (MIT) and Steve Yablo (MIT).]

12. **Brief quotes can be helpful**, especially when you attribute a claim or a position to some author. However, don't overdo it: five, or seven, or 10 pages aren't, after all, that much. The paper should be by and large in your own words.

13. **Read over your paper after you have written it**. Make sure you addressed the topic and made good of your initial promises. (Sometimes it makes sense to write your introduction last: Then you know what you have been able to argue for in the paper, and you won't make promises you can't keep.) Rewrite any parts which might be difficult to understand. Remember, you will be only given credit for what you actually say, not what you intended to say (but didn't). No one can tell you are thinking clearly if you are not writing clearly. Correct errors in grammar, spelling and typing. Using a spell-checker is recommended, but not enough: proofread! Grammar, syntax and vocabulary matter.

14. **Type neatly, retain copies of your papers, identify your paper clearly**. Leave one inch margins all around and double-space for legibility. *If you submit your paper electronically, make sure that the paper is in a standard document form-- .doc, .rtf, .htm, .html, or .pdf --and that it is not encrypted in any way.*