

Writing a Philosophy Paper

Good writing is the product of proper training, much practice, and hard work. The following remarks, though they will not guarantee a top quality paper, should help you determine where best to direct your efforts. First, some general comments on philosophical writing, and then some specific do's and don't's.

One of the first points to be clear about is that a philosophical essay is quite different from an essay in most other subjects. That is because it is neither a research paper nor an exercise in literary self-expression. It is not a report of what various scholars have had to say on a particular topic. It does not present the latest findings of tests or experiments. And it does not present your personal feelings or impressions. Instead, it is *a reasoned defense of a thesis*. What does that mean?

Above all, it means that there must be a specific point that you are trying to establish - something that you are trying to convince the reader to accept - together with grounds or justification for its acceptance.

Before you start to write your paper, you should be able to state exactly what it is that you are trying to show. This is harder than it sounds. It simply will not do to have a rough idea of what you want to establish. A rough idea is usually one that is not well worked out, not clearly expressed, and as a result, not likely to be understood. Whether you actually do it in your paper or not, you should be able to state in a *single* short sentence precisely what you want to prove. If you cannot formulate your thesis this way, odds are you are not clear enough about it.

The next task is to determine how to go about convincing the reader that your thesis is correct. In two words, your method must be that of *rational persuasion*. You will present arguments. At this point, students frequently make one or more of several common errors. Sometimes they feel that since it is clear to them that their thesis is true, it doesn't need much argumentation. It is common to over-estimate the strength of your own position. That's because you already accept that point of view. But how will your opponent respond? It is safest to assume that your reader is intelligent and knows a lot about your subject, but disagrees with you.

Another common mistake is to think that your case will be stronger if you mention, even if briefly, virtually every argument that you have come across in support of your position. Sometimes this is called the *fortress approach*. In actual fact, it is almost certain that the fortress approach will not result in a very good paper. There are several reasons for this.

First, your reader is like to find it difficult to keep track of so many different arguments, especially if they approach the topic from different directions.

Second, the ones that will stand out will be the very best ones and the very worst ones. It is important to show some discrimination here. Only the most compelling one or two arguments should be developed. Including weaker ones only gives the impression that you are unable to tell the difference between the two.

Third, including many different arguments will result in spreading yourself too thinly. It is far better to cover less ground in greater depth than to range further afield in a superficial manner. It will also help to give your paper focus.

In order to produce a good philosophy paper, it is first necessary to think very carefully and clearly about your topic. Unfortunately, your reader (likely your marker or instructor) has no access to those thoughts except by way of what actually ends up on the page. He cannot tell what you meant to say but didn't. He cannot read in what you would quickly point out if you were conversing with him in person. For better or for worse, your paper is all he has. It must stand on its own. The responsibility for ensuring the accurate communication of ideas falls on the *writer's* shoulders. You must say exactly what you mean and in a way that minimizes the chances of being misunderstood. It is difficult to overemphasize this point.

There is no such thing as a piece of good philosophical writing that is either unclear, ungrammatical, or unintelligible. Clarity and precision are essential elements here. A poor writing style militates against both of these.

Things to Avoid in your Philosophy Essay

1. ***Lengthy introductions.*** These are entirely unnecessary and of no interest to the informed reader. There is no need to point out that your topic is an important one, and one that has interested philosophers for hundreds of years. Introductions should be as brief as possible. In fact, I recommend that you think of your paper as not having an introduction at all. Go directly to your topic.
2. ***Lengthy quotations.*** Inexperienced writers rely too heavily on quotations and paraphrases. Direct quotation is best restricted to those cases where it is essential to establish another writer's exact selection of words. Even paraphrasing should be kept to a minimum. After all, it is your paper. It is your thoughts that your instructor is concerned with. Keep that in mind, especially when your essay topic requires you to critically assess someone else's views.
3. ***Fence sitting.*** Don't present a number of positions in your paper and then end by saying that you are not qualified to settle the matter. In particular, don't close by saying that philosophers have been divided over this issue for as long as mankind has been keeping record and you can't be expected to resolve the dispute in a few short pages. Your instructor knows that. But you can be expected to take a clear stand based on an evaluation of the argument(s) presented. Go out on a limb. If you have argued well, it will support you.
4. ***Cuteness.*** Good philosophical writing usually has an air of simple dignity about it. Your topic is no joke. No writer whose views you have been asked to read is an idiot. (If you think he is, then you haven't understood him.) Name calling is inappropriate and could never substitute for careful argumentation anyway.

5. **Begging the question.** You are guilty of begging the question (or circular reasoning) on a particular issue if you somehow presuppose the truth of whatever it is that you are trying to show in the course of arguing for it. Here's a quick example. If someone argues that abortion is morally wrong on the grounds that it amounts to murder, that person begs the question. He *presupposes* a particular stand on the moral status of abortion - the stand represented by the conclusion of his argument. To see that this is so, notice that the person who denies the conclusion that abortion is morally wrong will not accept the premise that it amounts to murder, since murder is, by definition, morally wrong.

When arguing against another position, it is important to realize that you cannot *show* that your opponent is mistaken just by claiming that his overall conclusion is false. Nor will it do simply to claim that at least one of his premises is false. You must *demonstrate* these sort of things, and in a fashion that does not presuppose that your position is correct.

Some Suggestions for Writing Your Philosophy Paper

1. **Organize carefully.** Before you start to write make an outline of how you want to argue. There should be a logical progression of ideas - one that will be easy for the reader to follow. If your paper is well organized the reader will be led along in what seems to natural way. If you jump about in your essay, the reader will balk. It will take a real effort on his part to follow you, and he may feel it not worthwhile. It is a good idea to let your outline simmer for a few days before you write your first draft. Does it still seem to flow smoothly when you come back to it? If not, the best prose in the world won't be enough to make it work.
2. **Use the right words.** Once you have determined your outline, you must select the exact words that will convey your meaning to the reader. A dictionary is almost essential here. Don't settle for a word that (you think) comes close to capturing the sense you have in mind. Notice that "infer" doesn't mean "imply"; "disinterested" doesn't mean "uninterested"; and "reference" doesn't mean either "illusion" or "allusion." Make certain that you can use "its" and "it's" correctly. Notice that certain words such as "therefore," "hence," "since," and "follows from" are strong logical connectives. When you use expressions like these you are asserting that certain tight logical relations hold between the claims in question. You'd better be right. Finally, check the spelling of any word you are not sure of. There is no excuse for "existance" appearing in any philosophy essay.
3. **Support your claims.** Assume that your reader is constantly asking such questions as "Why should I accept that?" If you presuppose that he is at least mildly skeptical of most of your claims you are more likely to succeed in writing a paper that *argues* for a position. Most first attempts at writing philosophy essays fall down on this point. Substantiate your claims whenever there is reason to think that your critic would not grant them.
4. **Give credit.** When quoting or paraphrasing, always give some citation. Indicate

your indebtedness, whether it is for specific words, general ideas, or a particular line of argument. To use another writer's words, ideas, or arguments as if they were your own is to plagiarize. Plagiarism is against the rules of academic institutions and is dishonest. It can jeopardize or even terminate your academic career. Why run that risk when your paper is improved (it appears *stronger* not weaker) if you give credit where credit is due? That's because appropriately citing the works of others indicates an awareness of some of the relevant literature on the subject.

5. ***Anticipate objections.*** If your position is worth arguing for, there are going to be reasons which have led some people to reject it. Such reasons will amount to criticisms of your stand. A good way to demonstrate the strength of your position is to consider one or two of the best of these objections and show how they can be overcome. This amounts to rejecting the grounds for rejecting your case, and is analogous to stealing your enemy's ammunition before he has a chance to fire it at you. The trick here is to anticipate the kinds of objections that your critic would actually raise against you if you did not disarm him first. The other challenge is to genuinely come to grips with the criticisms you have cited. You must *argue* that they miss the mark as far as your case is concerned, or that they are in some sense ill-conceived despite their plausibility. It takes considerable practice and exposure to philosophical writing to develop this engaging style of argumentation, but it is worth it.
6. ***Edit boldly.*** I've never met a person whose first draft of a paper could not be improved significantly by rewriting. The secret to good writing is rewriting - often. Of course it won't do just to reproduce the same thing again. Better drafts are almost always shorter drafts - not because ideas have been left out, but because words have been cut out as ideas have been clarified. Every word that is not needed only clutters. Clear sentences do not just happen. They are the result of tough-minded editing.

There is much more that could be said about clear writing. I haven't stopped to talk about grammatical and stylistic points. For help in these matters (and we *all* need reference works in these areas) I recommend a couple of the many helpful books available in the campus bookstore. My favourite little book on good writing is *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk and E.B. White. Another good book, more general in scope, is William Zinsser's *On Writing Well*. Both of these books have gone through several editions.

Some final words should be added about proofreading. Do it. Again. After that, have someone else read your paper. Is this person able to understand you completely? Can he read your entire paper through without getting stuck on a single sentence. If not, go back and smooth it out.

In general terms, don't be content simply to get your paper out of your hands. Take pride in it. Clear writing reflects clear thinking; and that, after all, is what you're really trying to show.

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