

Writing a Good Philosophy Paper

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The following are writing guidelines designed to help you produce a successful philosophy paper. They are not intended to cramp your style, but to provide you with a framework for effective writing and the clear presentation of your own ideas. Authors that follow these guidelines tend to produce better papers. If you have any questions about these guidelines, please speak to me.

1. Follow instructions. Do what you are asked to do. Do not complicate matters by doing things you are not asked to do. If you try to do too much, or cover too many ideas, you will end up with a broad but shallow paper.

If you are not sure what you are supposed to do, ask.

2. Answer the question. The assignment asks you to answer a question (or questions). A necessary—but not sufficient—condition for a good grade is that you answer the question asked. To answer the question you must know what it is asking, so be sure that you know what the question is asking.

Note that sometimes we can adequately answer a question only by asking and answering another question. As an example take the question, “Are Socrates’ arguments in *Crito* against escaping from prison good arguments?” To answer, we need to ask and answer another question: “What are Socrates’ arguments against escaping from prison?”

3. Organize your paper. What you write may be true, but unless your readers can figure out what it is you are saying, or follow your argument, no one will ever know it. An argument will seem less convincing if it is poorly organized. I have found the following format to work best:

a) Introduction. If you want to frame the question with some informative, general remarks, or explain *why* the issue is worth discussing, that is fine. But the most important part of your introduction is your **statement of thesis**. Your statement of thesis is your “short answer” to the assigned question. You should provide your statement of thesis in one or two sentences at or near the start of your paper. Take again the sample assignment to answer the question, “Are Socrates’ arguments against escaping from prison good arguments?” A possible statement of thesis might be, “I will argue that Socrates provides us with ultimately compelling arguments that show why he should not escape from prison.” Another possible statement of thesis might be, “I will show that, though Socrates’ arguments may at first glance appear convincing, they are all fallacious, and thus he should escape from prison.”

Your introduction should usually be only one paragraph long.

b) Strategy Statement. In your strategy statement, a paragraph that follows your introductory remarks, you tell the reader *how* you are going to argue for the conclusion set out in your statement of thesis. That is, you give the

reader a brief summary of what to expect in the coming pages. A philosophy paper is not a murder-mystery novel; suspense and surprise are not highly valued. If at the end of your paper I am surprised by your conclusion, this is usually a very bad sign.

Suppose that my statement of thesis is, “I will argue that Socrates provides us with ultimately compelling arguments that show why he should not escape from prison.” A strategy statement for a ten page paper defending this thesis might look something like this (or shorter, for shorter papers):

I will begin by explaining the three main arguments Socrates makes against escaping from prison. This explanation will show that there are three basic principles at work in Socrates’ thinking, and that Socrates’ judgment in this case does indeed reasonably follow from these principles. But to more thoroughly investigate whether we should accept Socrates’ arguments, we have to determine whether his basic principles are acceptable. To that end, I will discuss a possible objection to Socrates’ basic principles, namely, that they should not be taken as absolute and unbreakable rules. After developing this objection, my reply to it will be twofold. First, I will show that we must indeed take such rules as absolute and unbreakable. Second, I will show that, even if we allowed that these basic principles might sometimes be overridden by other concerns, such concerns are not present in this case, and thus Socrates’ judgment stands.

The point of the strategy statement is to give the reader a roadmap to your paper. This way, if the reader gets confused or lost, he or she can always check back with the strategy statement for directions.

c) Execution of Strategy. Do what you said you were going to do in your strategy statement: explain theories, provide definitions, make arguments, use examples, address objections, and so on. This is the main part of your paper.

d) Concluding Remarks. Include here a restatement of your answer and a summary of your main points. The conclusion is *not* the place to introduce new arguments.

4. Proofread. After you have finished writing your paper, set it aside for at least one hour, preferably a whole day. During this time think about other things, relax, get some sleep, whatever. Then return to your paper and read it—slowly and carefully—as if someone else had written it. If you weren’t the author, would you understand the paper? Would you find the arguments fair and convincing? Do the examples make sense? Would you find the writing style, punctuation, and grammar annoying or distracting? Are words and names spelled correctly? Are quotes accurate? Are other people’s ideas properly cited? Revise the paper based on your answers to these questions.

I recommend that you purchase *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White. It is a short, very useful, and inexpensive guide to good writing.

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5. Use examples carefully. Sometimes it helps to illustrate a point with an example. Examples are often used because they seem to instantly and single-handedly show the truth of the view you are laboring to defend. Alas, they may not. Even the greatest examples can be misinterpreted by the reader, or fail on their own to persuade. Therefore, you should always take the time to explain what it is about an example that lends support to your argument.

6. Address objections. John Stuart Mill said it best: “He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that” (*On Liberty*, Ch. 2). I do not expect your arguments to be invulnerable to criticism. I do, however, expect you to take into consideration and respond to at least some reasonable objections or counterarguments to your argument. This requires you first to think of how someone might challenge your argument—perhaps by alleging a flaw in your reasoning or interpretation, or perhaps by presenting you with a difficult counter-example—and second, to show how that challenge can be met.

The objections you address should be specifically about your thesis or argument. Irrelevant objections and unexplained denials of your thesis should be avoided.

It might help to think of this part of your paper as subjecting yourself to a cross-examination. Your opponents will question and try to defeat your case. How will they do it? And how will you defend yourself?

If you decide that a challenge is too strong for you to answer, you should probably revise your own position in light of it.

7. Cite your sources.

- a) You must note the source for any quotations you insert in your paper.
- b) You must note the source for any passages that you paraphrase in your paper.
- c) You must note the source for any ideas that are not your own that you mention in your paper.

A good rule to follow about citation is: “If you are in doubt about whether it should be cited, *cite it*” (Professor Mark Murphy).

Quote carefully! Do not insert grammatical mistakes or misspellings into the works of others. Also, preceding or following quotations, it is usually helpful to take the time to explain in your own words what you take the author to be saying.

FAILURE TO CITE YOUR SOURCES—INTENTIONALLY OR NOT—IS PLAGIARISM. If I suspect you of plagiarism, I will report you to the appropriate university officials. Please do not do anything foolish.

Footnotes, endnotes, and parenthetical references are all acceptable forms of citation. Pick one method and use it consistently.

8. Know your audience. Who are you writing for? Though I will grade your papers, ultimately, you are writing for yourself. Writing a paper is a learning experience and an opportunity for you to develop and refine your thoughts about certain philosophical issues. It is one of the ways by which you can become smarter.

Still, there is the question of the level at which you should pitch your paper. If you write solely for yourself, you may not take enough care to defend things you take for granted. If you write solely for me, you may not take enough care to explain things, assuming that, since I am the instructor, I will know exactly what you are writing about. Since you must both *argue* for what you take to be acceptable and *show* me that you understand arguments, ideas, and concepts you think I am familiar with, neither target audience will do.

Instead, take your audience to be your fellow students. Not all of them will agree with you, so you will need to be convincing; not all of them will know what you are talking about, so you may need to explain some things. But they are somewhat familiar with the subject matter, so you don’t have to start at the very beginning, with something like “The word ‘philosophy’ is derived from the Greek words for ‘love’ and ‘wisdom.’”

9. Argue! Remember, you are trying to persuade the reader of the truth of your thesis, that your answer to the question is the right one. It is not enough to simply state your view or summarize the views of others. You must support your view with arguments and reasons. If these reasons are controversial, it is not enough to merely assert them; you must provide evidence or further argument for them. Do not assume that a dictionary can provide an adequate account of a controversial concept.

A helpful book about arguments and fallacies is *With Good Reason*, by S. Morris Engel.

10. Properly format your paper.

- a) Your paper should be typed and double-spaced.
- b) Use 11-12 point characters and leave approximately 1-inch margins.
- c) Avoid silly fonts.
- d) Use a printer that prints legibly.
- e) Do not make a cover sheet. Put the usual information (including, if applicable, which question you are answering) at the top of the 1st page.
- f) Give your paper a title.
- g) Number your pages and staple them together.