

## Writing Philosophy Papers

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**1. Starting Early.** I'd like for people to enjoy writing their papers—or at least for the process to be as painless as possible. The best way for this to happen is for you to write a draft as early on as possible, and then come back to it later to rework it. You'll discover that writing a rough draft stimulates new and useful ideas in the days that follow. You'll make yourself miserable if you try to do the whole thing in one sitting.

**2. Audience and Clarity.** *Please don't think of your professor as your audience, as your intended reader!* Rather, your intended audience should be the reasonably intelligent person who has never attended this class nor read any of the course material. I call such a person "the uninitiated reader." Write with sufficient clarity that the uninitiated reader could understand every sentence of your paper, and follow the train of thought. You'll need to explain things carefully and very thoroughly, especially anything that your intended audience would not be familiar with such as unfamiliar terminology, or familiar words used with a special meaning. In grading your paper I will determine how much the uninitiated reader would learn about the subject just by reading your paper. (Close friends and relatives are generally poor test cases for whether your paper meets these standards. A better test is for you to read your paper, pretending that you know nothing at all about the subject.)

**3. Completeness.** To the surprise of students and instructor alike, the most common problem in students' philosophy papers is that not all the assigned questions are addressed. It is a good idea, after you have written your rough draft, to confirm that you have fully addressed all the assignment questions.

**4. Focus.** Assignment questions are always formulated very carefully. Treat them as exact guides, not just approximate hints, as to what to discuss in your paper. Take the instructions literally.

**5. Multiple Drafts.** First drafts almost always read like first drafts. Write a rough draft of your paper, leave it aside for at least a day, and then go back and reread it. You will see lots of ways in which the paper could, or should, be improved— especially if you work closely with these guidelines in developing your subsequent drafts. This is one of the best ways to work up a good paper, and to improve your writing generally. (Most of us have a tendency to fall hopelessly in love with our first attempt, and are very reluctant to make any but the most minor alterations. That can be a real block to improvement. In revising, start with a bulldozer, then take up the spade, finish with the hand trowel.)

**6. Wording.** *Take the time to find the words to express exactly, not just approximately, what you mean.* Philosophy strives for clarity and precision. It is frequently very hard to think of how to say something precisely. You often will have to experiment with different ways of trying to say it. Don't be satisfied with the first phrasing that occurs to you. Write it down, then try to make it more precise.

**7. Logical Terminology.** Philosophical terminology — words like 'argument', 'theory', 'evidence', 'premise', 'conclusion', 'principle', 'example', 'counterexample', 'deductively valid' — can help greatly to make your paper clearer. Make them part of your working vocabulary. (Consult your instructor if you have questions about the proper use of these terms.)

**8. Including Guides to Structure.** At all the appropriate places in your paper, tell your reader where you are going, and where you have been. For instance, say, "Let's begin by considering Descartes' argument for the position I just described." Or say, "Locke offers two arguments for the first premise above. The first is that . . . ." Or say, "Let us now turn to consider the plausibility of Berkeley's view. I will consider two possible objections." Or say, "So we have seen that the first objection is ultimately not very forceful, but the second one seriously undermines Hume's position." You need to make the structure of your paper easily transparent to your reader, and these kinds of remarks accomplish that. (Notice how helpful you find these kinds of signposts, when you are reading through the pieces assigned for the course.)

**9. Examples.** Use an example wherever this would help clarify a point. Often there's nothing like a good example to bring home a point, or to explain just what you mean. Actually, there are many different uses of examples in philosophy: to explicate or support a premise, to show a premise is false, to explain a concept, to show that a conclusion wouldn't follow from the premises even if they were all true, to pose a philosophical problem or puzzle, to show a principle is false, to help arrive at an analysis of a concept, and more. You should provide an example when it helps in any of these respects, just as I do in class. (Remember that your intended audience is a reasonably intelligent person who hasn't attended the class or read the material, and examples will really help such a person to understand what you are saying.) *When giving an example, make up your own, rather than borrowing one from the readings or class discussion.*

**10. Elaboration.** When you are explaining a theory, argument, premise, principle, objection, or reply, make sure you develop your discussion fully. Try to avoid one-liners. For instance, it's not sufficient to say, "Aquinas says there is a series of causes." Rather, explain fully and in detail what is meant. When you claim that an argument is (or is not) deductively valid, explain why.

**11. Making Premises Explicit.** When you are setting out an argument you will be discussing, make sure you state all the assumptions used in the argument, even ones the philosopher doesn't bother to state explicitly. This is really important. Suppose you set out someone's argument but you leave out a premise. Then, when you go on to critically evaluate the argument, you may well have problems because the premise you really

would want to reject isn't stated in your paper. Often a student will overlook an important objection to someone's argument simply because they didn't state all the premises when they were setting out the argument.

**12. Critical Evaluation.** When critically evaluating a position, it isn't sufficient simply to say whether or not one agrees with it. One must provide a well-developed discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of the view. Raising possible objections and considering possible replies to them is an essential part of critical evaluation. These objections and replies should be explained very carefully, and discussed in detail. (1) Suppose that you want ultimately to reject the philosopher's viewpoint. Begin by carefully presenting one or more objections to it. Then explain how the philosopher could (or does) best try to respond to the objections you presented. Finally, provide reasons for thinking that the philosopher's responses would be (or are) inadequate. (2) Suppose that you want ultimately to support the philosopher's view. Begin by carefully presenting one or more objections to it. Make the objections as strong and compelling as possible. Then explain how you can defeat the objections and defend the philosopher's view. If possible, show how the objector has no good rejoinder to your defense of the view. The main point of critical evaluation is that you want to show, by means of a careful discussion, how the position you are discussing either (1) succumbs ultimately to one or more objections, or (2) emerges victorious against them. You add depth to critical evaluation by considering not just the objections, but possible replies to those objections, possible responses to those replies, and so on.

**13. Controversial Assumptions.** If you rely on a controversial assumption in arguing for a given conclusion, you need to provide a convincing argument for that assumption. For instance, suppose you argue: "God exists. God says thou shalt not commit murder. It is morally wrong to do what God prohibits. Abortion is murder. Therefore abortion is morally wrong." The problem here is that at least two of the premises are controversial. Very many intelligent people believe in God, but many do not; many intelligent people believe that abortion is murder, but many do not. So either the argument must be replaced by another one, or the two controversial premises must be defended by argument. What counts as controversial depends greatly on the context. A rule of thumb: if a premise is as controversial as the conclusion you are trying to support by using it, it needs to be defended.

**14. Packaging Objections.** There are a lot of ways of raising objections to an argument. But when you raise an objection, *always say what kind of objection you are raising*. For instance, say, "The conclusion would not follow from the premises even if they were all true, as one can see by considering . . . ." Or say, "The second premise of the argument is surely questionable. . . ." Or say, "If the conclusion of the argument were accepted, it would have some very absurd consequences; for instance . . . ." In other words, state both the objection and what kind of objection it is. This helps enormously to make your paper clearer. Most of the time, it actually helps to state what type of objection you are going to raise before you actually state it in detail.

**15. Checking the Text.** If you raise an objection to what a philosopher has written, check to see whether he or she addresses the objection you offer. If she does, you might want to state your objection, and her reply, and then go on to explain why you think her reply is inadequate to your objection. What you definitely want to avoid is offering an objection the philosopher responds to, and writing as if you were unaware that she discusses it. Let your reader know you are aware she discusses the problem you are raising, and go on to explain why you think her treatment of it isn't satisfactory. Of course it's fine to raise objections a philosopher has herself overlooked.

**16. Diagnosing Arguments.** Suppose someone else offers an argument for a conclusion you do not accept. You go on to offer an argument that the conclusion in question is false. For instance, suppose someone offers an argument that we lack free will, and you offer an argument, using different premises, that we have free will. In this situation—be on the lookout for it—you have offered evidence that the other person's conclusion is erroneous, which is fine. But you need to do more; because if your argument is sound, then the other person's argument is somehow flawed. What you need to do under these circumstances is provide an exact diagnosis of the problem in their argument. That is, you need to say which premise of your opponent's argument you reject, and why. Or, if you accept all her premises, you need to explain why those premises do not provide a good reason for believing the conclusion. Remember, if your argument is correct, your opponent's is wrong, and you need to say just where and how her argument goes wrong.

**17. Crediting Others.** Provide proper credit for all words *and ideas* that you draw from others. Failure to do so is plagiarism, which carries heavy penalties. See [Course Policies](#). All students are responsible for knowing the information contained in [Crediting Others in Writing — 11 FAQ's](#).

**18. Using Neutral Language.** Try to avoid phrases and or stereotypes that carry sexist, racist, or other unwanted overtones. For instance, "Man often seems to act altruistically" and "Woman often seems to act altruistically" carry unintended ideological implications (and both sound pompous). "People often seem to act altruistically" is preferable.

**19. When 'You' and 'I' Are Okay.** Feel free to use 'you' and 'I' in your papers for this course. Many professional philosophers do so in their published work. This makes it a lot easier to say certain kinds of things, and makes the prose much more readable. So you can say things like, "I disagree with the third premise," or "You don't have to have a body in order to exist." But don't include autobiographical material, like "This is what I was brought up to believe." Saying you were brought up to believe something provides a sociological or psychological explanation of why you believe what you do. But that is of absolutely no interest in a philosophy paper, where you want to be explaining why certain views are actually true, or false; or at least why some views are objectively preferable to others.

**20. Titles.** Choose an appropriate title for your paper. Don't just call it "First Paper Assignment."

**21. Introductions.** Begin with a lively introduction. Grab your reader's interest by presenting the topic of the paper in an interesting way. *Boring:* "For many centuries, brilliant philosophers have discussed the question of free will. Even today there are differing viewpoints on this important and difficult question. Although it is impossible to do justice to the many positions on the topic of free will, in this paper we will examine one argument." *Better:* "In 1946, T. H. Huxley presented a powerful argument that you never choose anything freely. If Huxley is right, no one is truly the author of their own actions, and no one is ever the least bit responsible for what they do. Huxley's argument *appears* invincible. Yet I shall argue that it rests on a subtle confusion. Let's begin by seeing exactly how Huxley makes his case."

**22. Proofread Your Work.** Always proofread your work carefully, and correct errors you find.