

HOW TO WRITE A PHILOSOPHY PAPER

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0. INTRODUCTION

1. **Keep in mind two main goals:**
 - a. To *think deeply* about a philosophical issue (preferably an issue that you find interesting, important, and puzzling), *reaching a (tentative) conclusion* that leaves you to a large degree satisfied.
 - Philosophy is not sophistry: you should only defend conclusions in which you believe. You should be open, however, to the possibility that your views will change while you are thinking or writing about an issue: you may start with the intention of defending a particular conclusion and end up defending an opposite conclusion.
 - Even if philosophical questions have no unique right answer, they do have *better* and *worse* answers; if you believe that anything goes, then you are not in a proper frame of mind for writing a philosophy paper.
 - b. To *write down your thoughts* in a clear, precise, concise, and organized way.
2. **How to choose a paper topic**
 - a. Choose a topic that you find *important* and *exciting*: it's better if working on the paper feels worthwhile and fun.
 - b. Choose a topic on which you have something *new* to say: if you agree with everything the readings or your instructor said on a particular issue, then you have no paper topic (related to that issue).
 - c. Especially for short papers, choose a very *narrow* topic and examine it in detail: *depth* is much more important than *breadth*. (E.g., don't try to defend—or attack—relativism in general; choose a specific version of relativism.)
3. **The content of a philosophy paper**
 - a. When writing about an issue, start with what other people have said about the issue: don't reinvent the wheel.
 - b. But other people's views should be only a starting point: the bulk of the paper should consist of your own views, not of exposition.
 - c. And your own views should be not just stated, but should be supported by arguments.
 - d. Rather than passing over in silence objections to your views, you should consider the most plausible objections you can think of, you should reply to these objections, you should consider plausible rejoinders to your replies, and you should respond to these rejoinders. It's like a dialogue; the longer it gets, the better, provided that the participants keep making new points rather than repeating themselves. (Note that one might object to an argument in *three* ways: by objecting to the argument's *premises*, to its *reasoning*, or to its *conclusion*.)

1. FIRST STEP: PREPARATION

1. Start working as *early* as possible. Don't expect to produce a decent paper if you start on the eve of the due date.
2. Consulting extra sources is often helpful but is *not* necessary: it's far more important to study carefully the required readings and to *think* deeply about your topic.
3. Before you start writing the paper, make an *outline* that lists in an organized way the points you want to make.

2. SECOND STEP: WRITING

1. **Organization**
 - a. The paper should have a concise and informative *title*. ('First paper' is *not* an acceptable title.) The title should make clear the *topic* of the paper (e.g.: 'The death penalty') or, even better, the *thesis* you are going to defend (e.g.: 'Against the death penalty'). Avoid 'journalistic' or 'literary' titles (e.g.: 'Death of a penalty') whose point the reader cannot understand before reading the paper itself.
 - b. The *introductory paragraph* is very important and you should do three things in it. (i) State briefly the *topic* of the paper. (Avoid banal openings like 'Topic X has been a great mystery and source of controversy since the dawn of humanity'.) (ii) Take a stand on the topic: formulate your *thesis* as precisely as it's possible at this early stage. (iii) Announce the *plan* of the paper; namely, what you will do in the remainder (or in each section) of the paper.
 - c. It's advisable to divide the paper into numbered and titled sections. Start each section by saying what you will do in the section. End each longer section by summarizing what you have done in the section.
2. **Reasoning**: Make sure that your arguments are either deductively valid or inductively strong, and that they contain no irrelevant or redundant premises. It helps to lay out the arguments in standard premise/conclusion form.
3. **Justification**
 - a. Every statement in the paper must be justified, except for uncontroversial statements ('The Earth is round'). Avoid uncontroversial statements that just express your personal opinion ('I feel that the death penalty prevents many murders').
 - b. One way to justify a statement is to provide a reference ('Jones (1996: 437) concluded that the death penalty prevents many murders'). References should be precise so that they can be checked: *include page numbers*. Keep quotations to a minimum: paraphrasing usually demonstrates better your grasp of the material.
 - c. It's not justified to ridicule people or views. Remember that the authors of most readings are intelligent people: try to present the most plausible understanding of their views ('*Principle of Charity*') rather than presenting these views in a way that makes them appear to be obviously false.
 - d. Acknowledge your debts: presenting other people's ideas as if they were your own is called 'plagiarism' and is a serious violation of ethical conduct. (Example of acknowledging debts: this handout is partly based on handouts by David Brink, Edwin Curley, Jeanine Diller, Mika Manty, and Katie McShane, and feedback from Elizabeth Anderson.)

4. **Originality** consists in producing new ideas. A minimal degree of originality, which consists in going beyond the readings, is required; originality exceeding this minimal degree is highly desirable.
5. **Clarity** is probably the most important virtue that philosophical writing must have.
 - a. Don't presuppose that your reader is familiar with the texts to which you are referring: your intended audience should not be the instructor, but should rather be an intelligent philosopher possibly unfamiliar with the texts.
 - b. If your instructor doesn't understand what you want to say by a sentence, then the sentence is probably not sufficiently clear. To see if your instructor finds your writing sufficiently clear, give to your instructor a draft of the paper.
 - c. It's *not* OK to write *first* an obscure sentence and *then* to explain what you meant.
 - d. To promote clarity: (i) use short sentences; (ii) prefer active to passive voice and affirmative to negative constructions; (iii) avoid pretentious words and jargon; (iv) define the technical terms that you use.
 - e. It is very important for clarity to use *transition phrases* indicating (i) that you are moving to a new step in the reasoning (e.g., to a new objection, or from an objection to a reply to that objection) and (ii) whether what you are saying is supposed to support *your* view or the view of an *opponent*. Examples: 'I turn now to my argument for the second premise'; 'One might object to the first premise that ...'; 'My reply to this objection is ...'; 'One might rejoin that ...'; 'I reply ...'.
6. **Conciseness** consists in saying many things in few words.
 - a. Think of the *maximum* length of the paper as a limit within which you are trying to cram as much thought as you can (*not* as a number of pages you have to fill by multiplying the number of words you use to make your points). But don't let the quest for conciseness result in obscurity: *clarity* is paramount.
 - b. To promote conciseness, *avoid*: (a) wordiness; (b) digressions; (c) banalities; (d) too long quotations; (e) unnecessary repetitions. (It is *not unnecessary* repetition to summarize at the end of a section what you have done in the section.)
7. **Precision** is almost as important as clarity. General rule: be *meticulous*, even nit-picking, in saying *exactly* what you mean and in avoiding ambiguity. Achieving precision requires thinking about every single word.
 - a. **Avoid ambiguous pronouns** (like 'this', 'that', 'it', 'he', 'his'): repeat nouns. 'John used Bill's gun to kill his dog' should be 'John used Bill's gun to kill John's dog' or 'John killed his dog by using Bill's gun'.
 - b. **Avoid extreme words** (like 'completely', 'absolutely', 'always'). Replace 'It is always wrong to X' with 'It is usually wrong to X' or 'It is almost always wrong to X' (except if you show in the paper that it's really *always* wrong to X).
 - c. **Avoid immodest expressions**. 'In this paper I will prove conclusively that X' should be something like 'In this paper I will argue that X' or 'In this paper I will give reason to believe that X'. Avoid words like 'proof' or 'demonstration'.
 - d. **Avoid category mistakes**. Incorrect: 'the likelihood of this situation is quite improbable'. A *likelihood* is a *number* and thus can be *high* or *low* but not *probable* or *improbable*; it's a *situation* that can be probable or improbable. Correct: 'the likelihood of this situation is quite low'; or: 'this situation is quite improbable'.
 - e. **Avoid unnecessary variation** (which is encouraged in literature papers). If you are making three points, don't say 'The first argument ... The second remark ... The third point'; choose the most accurate word and repeat it.
 - f. **Give names to theses (arguments, etc) for ease of reference**. It's much easier and clearer to refer to a thesis as 'conclusion C3' rather than as 'the conclusion of the first argument in this section'.
8. **Language**
 - a. A philosophy paper differs from a literature paper. The style should be factual: avoid excessive use of metaphors. *It's OK to use 'I'; it's even advisable*, because it facilitates the use of the active voice.
 - b. The style need not be excessively formal, but the paper should not be a transcript of how you talk: avoid slang.
 - c. Plural of 'phenomenon': 'phenomena'. Similarly: criterion/criteria; thesis/theses; hypothesis/hypotheses. Avoid confusing: then/than; their/there; principal/principle; adapt/adopt; affect/effect; complementary/complimentary; its/it's.
9. **Other matters**
 - a. Don't spend too much time on the concluding paragraph: it can be as short as a single sentence that repeats your thesis. On the other hand, the concluding paragraph is a good place at which to mention possible extensions of your argument or problems that you were unable to address.
 - b. The format of the paper (e.g., font size and type, margins, single- vs double-spaced, title page or not, footnotes vs end-notes, references in footnotes or in a list of references) does not matter except if your instructor indicates otherwise. But it's a good idea to *number the pages* so that the instructor's comments can refer to specific page numbers.
 - c. There is no minimum length requirement, but keep close to the *maximum* length unless you write very concisely.

3. THIRD STEP: REVISING

1. Write the paper in (at least) two drafts. After writing the first draft, set it aside for a while, then read it through and make handwritten changes and corrections before typing the second draft.
2. It's a very good idea to give a draft to your instructor for comments. The more complete your draft is, the more you should benefit from this process. But *don't expect your instructor to catch every problem*.
3. Spell-check the final draft and *proofread* it carefully for spelling, grammar, punctuation, and coherence of argument. Check also that you in fact do in the paper what you promise in the introductory paragraph that you will do.