Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper

Philosophical writing is different from the writing you'll be asked to do in other courses. Most of the strategies described below will also serve you well when writing for other courses, but don't automatically assume that they all will. Nor should you assume that every writing guideline you've been given by other teachers is important when you're writing a philosophy paper. Some of those guidelines are routinely violated in good philosophical prose (e.g., see the guidelines on grammar, below).

Contents

What Does One Do in a Philosophy Paper?

1. A philosophy paper consists of the reasoned defense of some claim

   Your paper must offer an argument. It can't consist in the mere report of your opinions, nor in a mere report of the opinions of the philosophers we discuss. You have to *defend* the claims you make. You have to offer reasons to believe them.

   So you can't just say:

   ```
   "My view is that P."
   ```

   You must say something like:

   ```
   "My view is that P. I believe this because..."
   ```

   or:

"I find that the following considerations...provide a convincing argument for P."

Similarly, don't just say:

"Descartes says that Q."

Instead, say something like:

"Descartes says that Q; however, the following thought-experiment will show that Q is not true..."

or:

"Descartes says that Q. I find this claim plausible, for the following reasons..."

There are a variety of things you might aim to do in your paper. You'll usually begin by putting some thesis or argument on the table for consideration. Then you'll go on to do one or two of the following:

- Criticize that argument or thesis
- Offer counter-examples to the thesis
- Defend the argument or thesis against someone else's criticism
- Offer reasons to believe the thesis
- Give examples which help explain the thesis, or which help to make the thesis more plausible
- Argue that certain philosophers are committed to the thesis by their other views, though they do not come out and explicitly endorse the thesis
- Discuss what consequences the thesis would have, if it were true
- Revise the thesis in the light of some objection

You'll conclude by stating the upshot of your discussion. (For instance, should we accept the thesis? Should we reject it? Or should we conclude that we don't yet have enough information to decide whether the thesis is true or false?)

No matter which of these aims you set for yourself, you have to explicitly present reasons for the claims you make. You should try to provide reasons for these claims that might convince someone who doesn't already accept them.

1. A good philosophy paper is *modest* and makes *a small point*; but it makes that point clearly and straightforwardly, and it offers good reasons in support of it

   People very often attempt to accomplish too much in a philosophy paper. The usual result of this is a paper that's hard to read, and which is full of inadequately defended and poorly explained claims. So don't be over-ambitious. Don't try to establish any earth-shattering conclusions in your 5 page paper. Done properly, philosophy moves at a slow pace.

2. Originality

   The aim of these papers is for you to display familiarity with the material and an ability to think critically about it. Don't be disappointed if you don't make an utterly distinctive contribution to human thought in your first attempts at philosophical writing. There will be plenty of time for that later on. Your critical intelligence will inevitably show up in whatever you write.

An ideal paper will be clear and straightforward (see below), will be accurate when it attributes views to other philosophers (see below), and will contain thoughtful critical responses to the texts we read. It need not always break new ground.

If you do want to demonstrate independent thought, don't think you have to do it by coming up with a novel argument. You can also demonstrate independent thought by offering new examples of familiar points, or new counter-examples, or new analogies.

Major Guidelines

Thinking about a philosophical problem is hard. Writing about it ought not to be. You're not trying to craft some fancy political speech. You're just trying to present a claim and some reasons to believe it or disbelieve it, as straightforwardly as possible.

Here are some guidelines on how to do that.

1. Make an outline

Before you begin to write, you need to think about the questions: In what order should you explain the various terms and positions you'll be discussing? At what point should you present your opponent's position or argument? In what order should you offer your criticisms of your opponent? Do any of the points you're making presuppose that you've already discussed some other point, first? And so on.

The overall clarity of your paper will greatly depend on its structure. That is why it is important to think about these questions before you begin to write.

I strongly recommend that you make an outline of your paper, and of the arguments you'll be presenting, before you begin to write. This lets you organize the points you want to make in your paper and get a sense for how they are going to fit together. For instance, you want to be able to *say* what your main argument or criticism is before you write. If you get stuck writing, it's probably because you don't yet know what you're trying to say.

Give your outline your full attention. It should be fairly detailed. (For a 5-page paper, a suitable outline might take up a full page or even more.)

I find that making an outline is at least 80% of the work of writing a good philosophy paper. If you have a good outline, the rest of the writing process will go much more smoothly.

2. Make the structure of your paper clear

You should make the structure of your paper obvious to the reader. Your reader shouldn't have to exert any effort to figure it out. Beat him over the head with it.

How can you do this?

What you need to do is to make it clear what sort of move you're making at each point in your paper. Say things like:

```
...We've just seen how X says that P. I will now present two
arguments that not-P. My first argument is...

My second argument that not-P is...

X might respond to my arguments in several ways. For instance, he
could say that...

Another way that X might respond to my arguments is by claiming
that...

So we have seen that none of X's replies to my argument that not-P
succeed. Hence, we should reject X's claim that P.
```

You can't make the structure of your paper obvious if you don't know what the structure of your paper is, or if your paper has no structure. That's why making an outline is so important.

3. Be concise, but explain yourself fully

To write a good philosophy paper, you need to *be concise* but at the same time *explain yourself fully*.

These demands might seem to pull in opposite directions. (It's as if the first said "Don't talk too much," and the second said "Talk a lot.") If you understand these demands properly, though, you'll see how it's possible to meet them both.

- We tell you to be *concise* because we don't want you to ramble on about everything you know about a given topic, trying to show how learned and intelligent you are. Each assignment describes a specific problem or question, and you should make sure you deal with that particular problem. Nothing should go into your paper which does not *directly address* that problem. Prune out everything else. It is always better to concentrate on one or two points and develop them in depth than to try to cram in too much. One or two well-mapped paths are better than an impenetrable jungle.

  Formulate the central problem or question you wish to address at the beginning of your paper, and keep it in mind at all times. Make it clear what the problem is, and why it is a problem. Be sure that everything you write is relevant to that central problem. In addition, be sure to say in the paper *how* it is relevant. Don't make your reader guess.

- We tell you to *explain yourself fully* because it's very easy to confuse yourself or your reader when writing about a philosophical problem. So take special pains to be as clear and as explicit as you possibly can.

  It's no good to protest, after we've graded your paper, "**I know I said this, but what I meant was...**" Say exactly what you mean, in the first place. Part of what you're being graded on is how well you can do that.

  Pretend that your reader has not read the material you're discussing, and has not given the topic much thought in advance. This will of course not be true. But if you write as if it were true, it will force you to explain any technical terms, to illustrate strange or obscure distinctions, and to be as explicit as possible when you summarize what some other philosopher said.

In fact, you can profitably take this one step further and pretend that your reader is *lazy, stupid,* and *mean*. He's *lazy* in that he doesn't want to figure out what your convoluted sentences are supposed to mean, and he doesn't want to figure out what your argument is, if it's not already obvious. He's *stupid,* so you have to explain everything you say to him in simple, bite-sized pieces. And he's *mean,* so he's not going to read your paper charitably. (For example, if something you say admits of more than one interpretation, he's going to assume you meant the less plausible thing.) If you understand the material you're writing about, and if you aim your paper at such a reader, you'll probably get an A.

1. Use simple prose

Don't shoot for literary elegance. Use simple, straightforward prose. Keep your sentences and paragraphs short. Use familiar words. We'll make fun of you if you use big words where simple words will do. These issues are deep and difficult enough without your having to muddy them up with pretentious or verbose language. **Don't write using prose you wouldn't use in conversation. If you wouldn't say it, don't write it.**

If your paper sounds as if it were written a third-grade audience, then you've probably achieved the right sort of clarity.

It's OK to show a draft of your paper to your friends and get their comments and advice. In fact, I encourage you to do this. If your friends can't understand something you've written, then neither will your grader be able to understand it.

Read your paper out loud. This is an excellent way to tell whether it's easy to read and understand. As you read your paper, keep saying to yourself:

> "Does this really make sense?" "That's not at all clear!" "That sounds pretentious." "What does *that* mean?" "What's the connection between this sentence and the previous one?" "Does this sentence do anything more than repeat what I just said?" and so on.

2. Presenting and assessing the views of others

If you plan to discuss the views of Philosopher X, begin by isolating his arguments or central assumptions. Then ask yourself: Are the arguments good ones? Are X's assumptions clearly stated? Are they plausible? Are they reasonable starting-points for X's argument, or ought he have provided some independent argument for them?

Keep in mind that philosophy demands a high level of precision. It's not good enough for you merely to get *the general idea* of somebody else's position or argument. You have to get it exactly right. (In this respect, philosophy is more like a science than the other humanities.) Hence, when you discuss the views or arguments of Philosopher X, it's important that you establish that X really does say what you think he says. If you don't explain what you take Philosopher X's view to be, your reader cannot judge whether the criticism you offer of X is a good criticism, or whether it is simply based on your misunderstanding or misinterpretation of X's views.

At least half of the work in philosophy is making sure that you've got your opponent's position right. Don't think of this as an annoying preliminary to doing the real philosophy. This is part of the real philosophical work.

When a passage from a text is particularly useful in supporting your interpretation of some philosopher's views, it may be helpful to quote the passage directly. (Be sure to specify where the passage can be found.) However, direct quotations should be used *sparingly*. It is seldom necessary to quote more than a few sentences. Often it will be more appropriate to paraphrase what X says, rather than to quote him directly. When you are paraphrasing what somebody else said, be sure to say so. (And here too, cite the pages you're referring to.)

Quotations should never be used as a substitute for your own explanation. When you do quote an author, always explain what the quotation says *in your own words*. If the quoted passage contains an argument, reconstruct the argument in more explicit, straightforward terms. If the quoted passage contains a central claim or assumption, give examples to illustrate the author's point, and, if necessary, distinguish the author's claim from other claims with which it might be confused.

Philosophers sometimes do say outrageous things, but if the view you're attributing to a philosopher seems to be *obviously crazy,* then you should think hard about whether he really does say what you think he says. Use your imagination. Try to figure out what reasonable position the philosopher could have had in mind, and direct your arguments against *that*. It is pointless to argue against a position so ridiculous that no one ever believed it in the first place, and that can be refuted effortlessly.

It *is* permissible for you to discuss a view you think a philosopher *might* have held, or should have held, though you can't find any evidence of that view in the text. When you do this, though, you should explicitly say so. Say something like, "Philosopher X doesn't explicitly say that P, but it seems to me that he *might* have believed it, because..."

You don't want to summarize any more of a philosopher's views than is necessary. Don't try to say everything you know about X's views. You have to go on to offer your own philosophical contribution. **Only summarize those parts of X's views that are directly relevant to what you're going to go on to do.**

3. Miscellaneous points

- Try to anticipate objections to your view and respond to them.

  Don't be afraid to bring up objections to your own thesis. It is better to bring up an objection yourself than to hope your reader won't think of it. Of course, there's no way to deal with *all* the objections someone might raise; so choose the ones that seem strongest or most pressing, and say how you think they might be answered.

- Your paper doesn't always have to provide a definite solution to a problem, or a straight yes or no answer to a question. Many excellent philosophy papers don't offer straight yes or no answers to a question. Sometimes they argue that the question needs to be clarified, or that certain further questions need to be raised. Sometimes they argue that certain assumptions of the question need to be challenged. Sometimes they argue that certain easy answers to the question are *too* easy, that the arguments for these answers are unsuccessful. Hence, if these papers are right, the question will be *harder* to answer than we might previously have thought. This is an important and philosophically valuable result.

  If the strengths and weaknesses of two competing positions seem to you to be roughly equally balanced, you should feel free to say so. But note that this too is a

claim that requires explanation and reasoned defense, just like any other. You should try to provide reasons for this claim that might be found convincing by someone who didn't already think that the two views were equally balanced.

- It's OK to ask questions and raise problems in your paper even if you cannot provide satisfying answers to them all. You can leave some questions unanswered at the end of the paper (though you should make it clear to the reader that you're leaving such questions unanswered *on purpose*).

  If you raise a question, though, you should at least *begin* to address it, or say how one might set about trying to answer it; and you must explain what makes the question interesting and relevant to the issue at hand.

Minor Guidelines

Start Work Early

Philosophical problems and philosophical writing require careful and extended reflection. Don't wait until the night before to start your paper. This is very stupid. Writing a good philosophy paper takes a great deal of preparation.
You should leave yourself enough time to think about your topic and write a detailed outline (this will take several days). Then write a draft (this will take one day). Set your draft aside for a day or two. If you can, show it to your friends and get their reactions to it. Do they understand your main point? Are parts of your draft unclear or confusing? Finally, sit down in front of the computer again and compose the final version (this will take one day).
When you're writing the final version of your paper, it's *much* more important to work on the structure and overall clarity of your paper, than it is to clean up a word or a phrase here or there. See the tips on revising your paper (below).
If your paper is going to be late, check out our policy for late papers.

Mechanics

Please *double-space* your papers and include wide margins.
Your papers should be *less than* or equal to the assigned word limit. Your grade will suffer if your paper is too long. So it's important to ask yourself: What are the most important things you have to say? What can be left out?
Include your name on the paper, and number the pages.
Don't turn in your only copy of your paper.

Secondary sources

For most classes, I will put some articles and books on reserve in Robbins Library for additional reading. These are optional, and are for your independent study.
When you are writing your papers, I do *not* expect you to consult these or any other secondary sources we haven't discussed in class.

Beginning your paper

Don't begin with a sentence like "Down through the ages, mankind has pondered the problem of..." There's no need to warm up to your topic. You should get right to the point, with the first sentence.

Grammar

- It's OK to end a sentence with a preposition. It's also OK to split an infinitive, if you need to. (Sometimes the easiest way to say what you mean is by splitting an infinitive. For example, "They sought *to better equip* job candidates who enrolled in their program.") Efforts to avoid these often end up just confusing your prose.
- Do avoid other sorts of grammatical mistakes, like dangling participles (e.g., "*Hurt by her fall,* the tree fell right on *Mary*'s leg before she could get out of the way"), and the like.
- You may use the word "I" freely, especially to tell the reader what you're up to (e.g., "I've just explained why... Now I'm going to consider an argument that...").
- Don't worry about using the verb "is" or "to be" too much. In a philosophy paper, it's OK to use this verb as much as you need to.

Using words with precise philosophical meanings

Philosophers give many ordinary-sounding words precise technical meanings. Consult the handouts on Philosophical Terms and Methods to make sure you're using these words correctly.
Use technical philosophical terms only where you need them. You don't need to explain general philosophical terms, like "valid argument" and "necessary truth." But you should explain any technical terms you use which bear on the specific topic you're discussing. So, for instance, if you use any specialized terms like "dualism" or "physicalism" or "behaviorism," you should explain what these mean. Likewise if you use technical terms like "supervenience" and the like. Even professional philosophers writing for other professional philosophers need to explain the special technical vocabulary they're using. Different people sometimes use this special vocabulary in different ways, so it's important to make sure that you and your readers are all giving these words the same meaning. Pretend that your readers have never heard them before.

Don't vary your vocabulary just for the sake of variety

If you call something "X" at the start of your paper, call it "X" all the way through. So, for instance, don't start talking about "Plato's view of the *self,*" and then switch to talking about "Plato's view of the *soul,*" and then switch to talking about "Plato's view of the *mind*." If you mean to be talking about the same thing in all three cases, then call it by the same name. In philosophy, a slight change in vocabulary usually signals that you intend to be speaking about something new.

Can you write your paper as a dialogue?

Many students find the dialogue form attractive. Done well, it can be very effective. But it's *extremely* difficult to do well. The form tempts the author to cuteness, needless metaphor, and imprecision. So you shouldn't try to write dialogues for this class.

How You'll Be Graded

When we grade your paper, we will be asking ourselves questions like these:

- Do you clearly state what you're trying to accomplish in your paper? Is it obvious to the reader what your main thesis is?
- Do you offer supporting arguments for the claims you make? Is it obvious to the reader what these arguments are?
- Is the structure of your paper clear? For instance, is it clear what parts of your paper are expository, and what parts are your own positive contribution?
- Is your prose simple, easy to read, and easy to understand?
- Do you illustrate your claims with good examples?
- Do you present other philosophers' views accurately and charitably?

The comments I find myself making on students' philosophy papers most often are these:

- "Explain this claim," or "What do you mean by this?" or "I don't understand what you're saying here."
- "This passage is unclear (or awkward, or otherwise hard to read)."
- "Why do you think this?"
- "Explain why this is a reason to believe that P."
- "Explain why this follows."

Revising Your Paper

Responding to comments

When you have the opportunity to rewrite a graded paper, keep the following points in mind.
Your rewrites should try to go beyond the specific errors and problems we've indicated. If you got below an A-, then your draft was generally difficult to read, it was difficult to see what your argument was and what the structure of your paper was supposed to be, and so on. You can only correct these sorts of failings by rewriting your paper from scratch. (Start with a new, empty window in your word processor.) Use your draft and the comments you received on it to construct a new outline, and write from *that*.
Keep in mind that when I or your TF grade a rewrite, we may sometimes notice strengths or weaknesses in unchanged parts of your paper that we missed the first time around.
Also keep in mind that it's possible to improve a paper without improving it enough to raise it to the next grade level.
Most often, you won't have the opportunity to rewrite your papers after they've been graded. So you need to teach yourself to write a draft, scrutinize the draft, and revise and rewrite your paper *before* turning it in to be graded.

How to revise a draft

When you're revising a paper, it's much more important to work on the structure and overall clarity of your paper, than it is to clean up a word or a phrase here or there. Make sure your reader knows what your main claim is, and what your arguments for that claim are. Make sure that your reader can tell what the point of every paragraph is. It's not enough that *you* know what their point is. It has to be obvious to your reader, even to a lazy, stupid, and mean reader.
It's OK for you to show your drafts to your friends and get their comments and advice. I *encourage* you to do this.

Further Advice

The following sites offer excellent further advice on writing good philosophy papers:

- Writing tutor for Introductory Philosophy Courses
  This site walks you through the process of writing a philosophy paper in several drafts.

THIS DOCUMENT IS COPIED MORE OR LESS WORD FOR WORD FROM JIM PRYOR'S UNBEATABLY WONDERFUL "GUIDELINES ON WRITING A PHILOSOPHY PAPER," WHICH CAN BE FOUND AT http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~jpryor/general/writing.html.