

WRITING A PHILOSOPHY PAPER

Philosophical writing is different from the writing you are asked to do in other courses; these guidelines might be helpful, but do not assume that following them is enough to write a good philosophy paper.

1. What you are trying to accomplish: The virtues of a philosophy paper

A philosophy paper consists in a critical analysis of a thesis and in a reasoned defense of some claims. If you advance a claim, your claim should be supported by argument. If you attribute a view to someone, you should support your attribution with reference to the original text and interpretative remarks. When you make claims about a philosopher you have read, make sure that you support your interpretation with references to specific passages. When you take a specific formulation of a point from a text, use quotations.

The virtues of a philosophy paper are:

- **clarity:** say what you have to say simply and straightforwardly
- **depth of analysis and critical questioning:** offer a critical analysis of a philosophical issue, present and question different approaches to the same issue, and compare them.
- **consideration of arguments:** the reader is not interested in your own opinion, but in the way you reason about a particular issue, how you argue about it, how you defend your claims. You must exhibit reasons for what you hold, not just voice your concern about a particular matter. Make your reasons explicit.
- **logical organization:** everything that you write must be justified: there should be a reason why you wrote what you wrote the way you did. Use only the sentences that you need to express your claims. In order to construct an argument, each step of your reasoning should be clear and in the right order. Each paragraph should follow the previous one logically, that is, your paper should exhibit logical organization. The paper should have a precise structure: remind the reader of where you are in your argument, where are you going, what she should expect. That is, make the structure of your argument clear and the progression of your paragraphs explicit.
- **originality:** you have to show that you wrote your paper for a reason, because you really had something to say about this issue. Your paper should show that you have thought about the issue seriously, and that you have been able to think critically about it. It is not enough to list and summarize all the opinions and arguments you have heard from others: you need to critically examine them and to come up with your own view of the matter. Of course, this does not mean that you are required to give an original contribution to philosophy every time you write a response paper! It simply means that through careful consideration of the arguments, you must show to have formed your reasoned opinion about an issue, and you must be ready to defend your position by argument.

2. How to start

Usually, the most difficult step in writing is to start. The opening section should be devoted to explain to the reader what you are up to. But what it is going to be eventually the opening paragraph of your paper is probably the last to be written. When you start writing, the first step is to focus on the topic and try to understand what you are required to do. The first paragraph should be written after everything else is in place: when you have a claim, an argument, and a conclusion.

To start off: *Listen to the question first.*

You might be asked to write two kinds of papers: one whose aim is mainly *reconstructive and exegetical*, or one whose aim is to *consider an argument* for or against a certain thesis.

- In the first case, you are asked to offer an explanation of a thesis, e.g., what Kant thought of virtue. You are better off starting with selecting the relevant passages. Start your paper with a critical examination of a passage that you think crucial in showing Kant's view of virtue. Then, try to make sense of passages that concur or clash with the one you selected and commented, and offer your conjecture about how to interpret Kant's view of the matter. In case you were required to read some secondary literature, make reference to it by pointing out whether or not your conjecture is supported by other scholars. Compare different interpretations, explain what is best and why. In this kind of exercise, you are often required to comment on a passage and thus to paraphrase a philosopher. Be careful about paraphrasing: try to make your comments valuable, make the philosopher's view explicit. Do not merely repeat what s/he said: try to explain what s/he meant, in the light of other passages and other considerations, make her/his view explicit. Although this kind of paper is mainly exegetical, you might want to state your claims not only about the view to attribute to Kant, but also about whether his view makes sense.
- In the second case, you are asked to address a philosophical problem, e.g. euthanasia, without reference to specific texts. First try to define clearly the issue. What is euthanasia? How do philosophers define it? What are the reasons for it? What are the reasons against it? What are the tacit assumptions on which these arguments rest? Give *most charitable reconstruction* of each argument for and against it. Offer examples that concur with the thesis you are elucidating or proposing, imagine counterexamples that show your thesis does not work, and try to reply. After considering all reasons for and against, reach for a conclusion. In some cases, the conclusion might be merely negative: you conclude that no arguments presented in the most charitable manner are decisive. In some other cases, the conclusion might be positive: you have shown that X is the best argument for Y.

3. How to go on?

General remarks:

- Do not try to do much 'background setting': get to the point!
- Make clear your claims
- Support your claims with reasoning and argument
- Make clear the structure of the argument
- Make sure you are fair in the attribution of a claim
- Be concise, but explain yourself fully
- Use simple prose (do not shoot for literary elegance)
- Be careful when using words with precise philosophical meanings: if you are not clear about a term, look on a philosophy dictionary (see my [Philosophy Links](#) for a list of dictionaries and encyclopedias on line).
- Use examples to illustrate a thesis or to argue that there is a counter-example to the claim you are considering. Examples are crucial in philosophical discussions.

About the structure:

- Make sure that the structure of the paper is obvious to the reader: the reader should not exert any effort to figure it out.
- Give a brief introductory paragraph that says what the paper will do and how it will do it.
- Remind the reader where you are in your argument, why this step is necessary to reach your conclusion, what are we going to do next. Make the structure of your argument explicit.

- State the thesis at stake clearly, directly and straightforwardly: why are you considering this thesis?
- Why is it important?
- Who is committed to such thesis?
- How can you support the attribution?
- State what follows from the thesis and what follows from the attribution.
- What examples might explain the thesis?
- What objections and counter-examples have been offered?
- What objection can you offer?
- What are the author's actual replies?
- What are other possible replies?
- What is the upshot of the critical discussion?

4. Make an outline

A philosophy paper should have a clear structure and its arguments should be well organized. In order to give logical organization you should make an outline of your argument before starting to write. The outline should be very detailed: state precisely your aims and claims, how you want to support them, what arguments you adopt, describe each step of the argument, and say how the conclusion follows. (Example of a first paragraph: "My thesis is that Aristotle holds thesis X. I will argue for this claim on the basis of a critical analysis of Book I. First, I will show that if we interpret Aristotle as defending X, then Y follows. Then, I will show that Y is confirmed by Aristotle's example E, while the contrary claim runs against it.")

5. Make several drafts

A clear exposition and a compelling argument are hard to achieve. Try different ways of organizing your thoughts and arguments before submitting the final draft.

- Do not hold on your first set of sentences: try different ways of arranging and presenting your claims.
- Do not be afraid of editing ruthlessly.
- Try your argument with your roommate, or with somebody who is not a philosopher: is s/he convinced by what you are arguing? how can you convince her/him?

6. Quotations and Footnotes

If you quote from a source, the quotation must be marked by quotes and set off from the rest of the text and footnoted. If you quote an idea without quoting it directly from the source, you should acknowledge it in a footnote. Footnote must the relevant information to allow the reader to find the passage you are referring to (author, title, publisher, date, page/ line)