

How to Write a Philosophy Paper

Note: this is meant to be a quick and dirty introduction for early-stage undergraduate philosophy students. Those in search of a more comprehensive guide should check out Jim Pryor's famous guide to writing in philosophy (it's on his website). More advanced students should already be aware that almost any rule can be broken (so don't treat any of this as gospel). But those early-stage students tempted to break these rules should beware: don't break a rule until you know how (and why) to follow it!

Overall Goals

- Pith: Say only what is necessary for your argument
- Thoroughness: Explicitly state each step in your explication and argument
- Clarity: Structure and write your paper so each step is clear and obviously important

Introduction

- Don't waste time on irrelevant points (i.e. do not begin any sentence with "Since the dawn of time philosophers have contemplated...")
- Provide background information only if necessary
- The main purpose of your introduction is to perform the following three tasks:
 - o State the problem or question you plan to address in your paper
 - o State your thesis
 - o Give a brief sketch of the structure of your paper.
- Summarize the structure of your explication and argument in thorough, concise prose
- Keep the introduction to one *short* paragraph (approx. five short sentences)
- Style Note: English teachers likely will have told you not to use 'I' when writing essays. Forget that rule *right now*. In philosophy clarity comes first, and style a distant second. If you don't use 'I' (or something similar), someone reading your paper won't know who is talking (you, someone you are explicating, a hypothetical opponent, or a Cartesian Demon).
 - o Related Style Note: philosophy is hard. Reading philosophy takes many hours, and a ridiculous amount of concentration. So do not make life more difficult for your reader than necessary. Use 'signpost' expressions such as 'Descartes argues' or 'I will argue' or 'Hence' or 'Thus' or 'So'... and so on (you get the idea). These expression tell your reader what you are doing, and so relieve some of the cognitive load. They also serve to articulate the logical structure of arguments (i.e. which bits are premises, which claims follow from others, and which claim is meant to be the conclusion).

Explication

- Explicate only important arguments that are
 - o a) Relevant to your comparison with another philosopher
 - o b) Relevant to your own argumentation

- Explain all of the important steps of a philosopher's argument
 - o Before you explain an argument, be sure to define any technical terms that exhibit one or both of the following two properties:
 - The term would not be understood by a reasonably intelligent reader. Your paper should ideally be intelligible even to a reader who has little or no background in philosophy.
 - A thinker has used the term in a non-standard fashion. For example, while Kant takes the term 'analytic' to mean something like *cannot consistently be denied without self-contradiction*, the German mathematician and philosopher Gottlob Frege used 'analytic' to mean *having an ultimate justification based only on either general logical laws or definitions*.
 - o Explain the **reasoning** behind each premise and how the premises entail the conclusion. This can usually be accomplished by setting out the steps of the thinker's argument in a clear and organized fashion that demonstrates the logical progression of the thinker's argument. The reader should not have to work hard to follow the steps of the argument.
 - o Don't just state the philosopher's position
- Don't "straw man"
 - o If you build a weak version of an argument (i.e. a "straw man") your counter arguments will tend to be weak. An argument against a philosopher is most effective when leveled at the strongest version of the thinker's position.
 - o If a philosopher's argument appears weak:
 - Think of what you might be missing
 - Fill in missing steps in the argument to the best of your ability
 - If you cannot find any means to improve a philosopher's argument, consider exploring why the argument might be unsalvageable. Do not take this route unless you are confident that you have exhausted all available avenues for improving the position.

Argument

- As a rough heuristic, half of your paper should be original argumentation
- Clash with a philosopher's argument, not her position
 - o Undermine the **validity or soundness** of a philosopher's argument (i.e. show either that the conclusion doesn't follow from the premises, or that some of the premises are false). You could, for example, attempt to show the premises of the philosopher's argument actually entail a weaker/stronger conclusion than the one she endorses. If it is a stronger position, you might then argue that this new conclusion causes problems for the philosopher's other philosophical commitments.
 - o So it isn't enough to simply say 'I don't believe philosopher X's conclusion'
- Develop your argument
 - o Don't leave a promising argument unsupported

- Pick between one and three arguments and develop them clearly and thoroughly. In general it tends to be more effective to develop a single strong line of argument than to quickly outline a number of weaker arguments.
- Each argument should be **at least** one well-developed paragraph. Complex arguments often span several paragraphs, with each paragraph developing one aspect of the argument.
- Consider counter-arguments
 - How might the philosopher in question respond?
 - Are these responses convincing? If not, why not?

Miscellaneous Points

- Quotations
 - A quotation should never take the place of analysis
 - Only quote if you directly analyze the quotation. Quotation is **not a substitute** for your own explication, for if your reader wanted to read the philosopher's own words then she would not have bothered to read your paper.
- Citation
 - Cite whenever you quote from **or paraphrase** anyone
 - Cite any lecture or tutorial you borrow analysis from
 - Secondary sources may look impressive when you write a paper in another subject, but they have no place in a first or second year philosophy paper. If you cannot deal with the text on your own then you should not hide behind secondary sources – it will not help you, and you will just annoy your TA.
- Planning
 - Have a well-developed structure in mind before you write. An even better plan would be to write a detailed outline of your essay, with a notion of how each paragraph will be structured.
 - If available, talk to your professor or TA about your essay
- Punctuation
 - Do not use semicolons. Please!
 - Do not separate sentences with commas... what do you think periods are for?