

Guidelines for Writing a Philosophy Paper

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Working on the paper

- Spend a little time thinking about which topic you would like to write on as soon as you get the questions. Then, at some level, your mind will be focused on the topic, and you can think about it at odd moments (walking between classes, etc.).
- Re-read the readings and your notes for your topic. Get straight on what the issue or position being discussed is. Make a note if you think one or two particular issues or arguments are the key to this topic.
- Don't fall into the trap of merely summarizing the readings. You should focus on the issues and arguments you think need to be considered in answering the question. It's unlikely these will coincide exactly with what one or more of the writers you are reading for the topic think the right way to do this is. It's no more interesting for your reader to read a summary of the readings than it is to attend a lecture that merely summarizes the reading you have just done.
- Make sure your paper is largely philosophical discussion, that is, that you always (i) give reasons for your claims, and (ii) consider possible objections to them.

The degree to which you do this is a matter of judgment, of course. You won't need to cite anyone for the claim that 'dogs exist', but you will need to provide an argument for the claim that 'dogs are people, too'. If you make a claim somewhere in between, and you're not sure about it, talk to your professor about it. Similarly, you might be able to think of five pages of objections and replies to the claim that 'dogs exist', but this probably won't be relevant in a paper on animal rights. Again, if you're unsure, talk to your professor about it.

- When giving examples, you should use your own, rather than ones out of the text you're using. This shows you've understood the point being made.
- Don't vary your vocabulary in an attempt to keep the paper interesting. This is fine in some disciplines, but not in philosophy. Since philosophy places a lot of weight on clarity, it's important to use the same word for the same idea each time.
- Write as simply as possible. It can be tempting to use big words to sound impressive. But at best this results a paper that's difficult to read. More often it results in misused words that result in your saying something you didn't mean. If there is a big word or technical term you feel you have to use, make sure you gloss it for your reader the first time you use it.

- Make sure that you've answered the actual question, if there is one. Consider a question such as

Is Descartes's or Ryle's solution to the mind-body problem more satisfactory?

This is probably an invitation to set out both their views, and get some critical discussion going. But by the end of the paper, you *must* have said which of the solutions is more satisfactory (or that they're both as good or bad as each other, or whatever). And, of course, the critical discussion you've engaged in throughout the paper should make your answer unsurprising to your reader.

- Re-read your paper *at least once* before you hand it in. You will be surprised what your spell-checker hasn't picked up. It's a really good idea to read your paper out to someone you know, but who doesn't know anything about your topic. Anything they can't follow you should consider revising. Of course, the more often you read your paper, the more you'll want to revise it, and the better it will get.
- You can get full marks for simply doing well what your professor asks. If you want to do something a little bit 'out there' make sure you talk to your professor about it ahead of time.

Little things

- Use standard formatting for your paper. This includes:

12 point font (preferably Times New Roman).

Double line-spacing.

Standard margins (1" top & bottom, 1.25" left & right).

Page numbers.

No extra gaps between paragraphs, or at the beginning of the paper.

- Clearly indicate somewhere (e.g. title page or title) which question you are answering.
- *Use present tense throughout.*

The idea behind this is that arguments don't change no matter how old they get. Descartes's arguments for the existence of God, for instance, are just as good or bad now as they were when he wrote them down several centuries ago.

- *Apostrophes*

Usually an apostrophe indicates an abbreviation.

I'm pleased to hear you won't steal your paper off the web.

But it is also used to indicate possession.

Bob's argument for the existence of God was terrible.

When the possessor's name ends in an 's', you can simply follow the rule, but it is also acceptable just to add an apostrophe.

Descartes's argument for the existence of God is better than Bob's.

OR

Descartes' argument for the existence of God is better than Bob's.

The one exception to the possession rule is when something belongs to 'it'. *In this case you must not use an apostrophe.* Thus, "its" means "of it" or "belonging to it", while "it's" is an abbreviation for "it is".

It's difficult to follow the argument, in part because of its circularity.

is equivalent to

It is difficult to follow the argument, in part because of the circularity it possesses.

- *Do not begin your paper with sweeping statements.*

Bad old examples include (but are not restricted to):

For thousands of years, man has...

Since the dawn of time, philosophers have...

These claims are usually just false, but even if they're not, you probably aren't engaged on a complete history of the problem you're addressing. It's better to begin with a simple statement of the problem, or a short, concrete example that throws it into relief.

- *Some tricky plurals: criterion, criteria; phenomenon, phenomena.*

There is only one criterion of truth, while there are many criteria for value.

There are many strange phenomena in the world, but Sasquatch is the weirdest phenomenon of all.

- *Abbreviations*

E.g. = *exempli gratia* = for example

I.e. = *id est* = that is

The standard meter, i.e. the actual metal bar in Paris, has many properties, e.g. color, weight, and mass.

It actually looks better to avoid these abbreviations altogether and just use the phrases 'for example' and 'that is'.

- *Titles*

Title of large works (books, films, operas, etc.) should be italicized. Titles of smaller works (articles, short stories, songs, etc.) should be placed in inverted commas. If you are unsure about a particular case, ask your instructor.

- *Acknowledge your sources.*

The rule of thumb here is that your reader must be able to find the passage you're referring to. So you at least need to give enough information about the book or article so that anyone could find it in the library. *For a book*, author, title, publisher, and year are standard. *For a journal article*, author, article title, journal title, volume number, and year are standard.

If you have used a quotation, you must give a page number (together with the above information) so that your reader can find the passage.

Also, make sure you get the names of the philosophers whose work you are discussing right. If you don't, it looks like you haven't even looked at their work.

If you really needed an ‘A’...

Don't tell your professor how much you need an 'A' in a course. Nobody will grade you lower for having been told this, but here are three things you might want to consider:

- (i) Your professor would like everyone to give everyone an 'A'. But she'd like to do this because everyone has done all the reading, participated in class, and come to office hours for clarification about difficult material.
- (ii) She won't grade you down for having come to see her, because she will want to grade fairly. However, if your grade is borderline, she may resist bumping you up, because she does not want to think she has been unjust to the other students. Hence, you may actually end up with a *lower* grade than you would have, had you not mentioned it.
- (iii) It is a little offensive to your professor to imply that she might give you a higher grade just because you asked. What do you take her for?

A friendly reminder about academic (dis)honesty

I take incidents of academic dishonesty very seriously. I will forward to the office of judicial programs any suspected cases that come to my attention.

The Student Honor Council identifies four types of academic dishonesty: cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, and plagiarism. *It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes dishonesty of these four types.* Please consult the Student Honor Council website:

<http://www.studenthonorcouncil.umd.edu/whatis.html>

If you would like any further clarification, for example on what constitutes plagiarism, please feel free to come and talk to me about it.