

A Rough Guide to Writing Philosophy Papers

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This guide aims to help undergraduate students write papers for philosophy courses. It may be useful for writing shorter pieces, preparing for exams, or with other subjects, but I haven't written with these things in mind. What I have to say is based on my own experience writing and marking philosophy papers—but your experience may be quite different, and you should take from this guide what you find useful. This guide is also a work in progress and I'd appreciate comments and feedback.

The first part of this guide summarises the *process* of writing a paper. The second notes how the *finished product* should look. The third discusses the *structure* of a paper.

The Process

1. Choosing a topic

Choose a topic you're comfortable starting with, but one you'll find interesting enough to pursue. You may be required to come up with your own question, or you may have a list to select from. Either way, do this as soon as possible—it will give you more time to mull over the topic before writing, and you may find you come across useful ideas in the meanwhile. If you've got time, you might explore a topic you're less familiar with and perhaps develop your own question as you work through the material. But if you have less time, choose something you can address in a relatively straightforward manner.

2. Time management

Congratulations, you've started. Now have a quick look at how much time you conceivably have to complete the paper, and come up with a rough plan for what you need to do when. It will be good to give yourself time for thinking and research, time for outlining, time for writing and time for revising. While it's possible to do these things in one go, it's best to space them out over the time you've got—you'll have more time for thinking in between, and spare time in case things take longer than you expect. You'll be less stressed and do better work. If you find you need some stress, give yourself compelling deadlines along the way.

How long these various activities take depends on the kind of question you're answering. For example, historical work tends to require more research than other areas. I find that the research, thinking and outlining always takes by far the most time, but that if it's done well, the writing doesn't take too long. It's also very important to leave time at the end for revising—sensible for any type of writing you do.

3. Thinking and Research

For most undergraduate papers, the material you'll research from includes your lecture notes and assigned readings. Unless a lecturer has specifically requested it, you probably don't need to go beyond these. If the lecturer has suggested further material, that's great, use it, but otherwise proceed with caution. Sometimes further reading, if not selected carefully, can distract you from the main question. If you're unfamiliar with a topic, it's also easy to be misled. Books and paper vary markedly in quality, and can address topics in different and confusing ways. Get advice from the lecturer or TA about sources you're unsure about, or if you need help finding useful ones. The online *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* is a good general resource, but otherwise be wary of internet resources unless they've been specifically recommended.

As you're reading, underline, highlight, take notes, etc. I expect you already have your own methods here. Pay particular attention to what's directly relevant to the question, even if you're reading on the topic more generally. At this stage, if you already have a strong sense of what you'll need to include in your paper, you could start writing a summary of this material for the finished paper. For example, if you know you'll be responding to Searle's Chinese Room Argument, you could start write a summary of his argument, even if you're not sure what your response will be.

As you start to develop your own thoughts about the question, start taking notes on these as well. Write lists, draw mind maps, whatever you find useful. At this stage it's often good to talk to someone too. It's a great way to work things out, and you don't always even need feedback—just someone willing to listen. Feedback is great too. So make use of assigned office hours—this is what they're for. As you think more about the issue, go back and consider the question and the source material again—is your further thinking making other things clearer? Are interesting new aspects of the question developing?

4. Outlining

After all this work, you should have a rough sense of what you want to do in the paper. Outlining is the process of making this clearer. Establish what major claim you want to defend in the paper, and think about what important points will need to be covered to defend this claim. Think about what the main narrative and structure of the paper will be (see below). And then try and write this down in some form, referring back to your notes and readings as necessary. Your outline could take a number of forms. It could be a list of dot points. It could be a series of headings with maybe a sentence written about each—headings you then use in writing your paper. Or you might try to write your introduction—as I'll explain below, your introduction should outline what you're going to do in the paper. Once you've outlined, you're ready to start writing. You may have to revise your outline later, as the paper develops, but that's fine.

5. Writing

Everyone has her or his own way of writing. A few years ago I would take copious notes on the question, usually full sentences, and then restructure these sentences into a coherent piece. This could be entirely done by hand. These days I write directly into a computer document. I might write the paper straight, referring back to my handwritten outline and source material. Or I might have rough notes on the computer, write an introduction and a series of headings, and then use these notes to construct the required paragraphs. Find what works for you.

6. Revising

Once you've finished writing, it's best to let the paper rest for a day or so (or as long as you can) before looking at it again. This helps you revise with fresh eyes. Other techniques you can use include printing out a fresh copy to look over or reading the paper aloud. In revising, you're looking for minor errors and simple corrections you can make. And you're also looking for how the paper reads overall and how it hangs together. Are the points you make convincing? Is the reader left with a satisfied feeling of having learned something? While you may not have time for extensive revisions, there's a lot you can still do to improve things at this stage—and the sooner you started the process, the more time you'll have. The more writing you do, the longer revising takes.

The Finished Product

Logical Structure: In philosophy papers, it's particularly important that your ideas and arguments connect in a clear and logical fashion. This doesn't mean you have to use formal notation, but you do have to be careful about how your various claims fit together. This is particularly important when the argument is difficult or complex. The resources suggested at the end of this guide offer good advice on this topic.

Narrative Structure: It's also important for your paper to tell a good story and draw the reader along. This is often the difference between a good, capable paper and an engaging one. So your paper might be the story of a downfall of a promising theory. It might be the story of a defeat and a comeback. It might be two views fighting against one another—with a clear victor, or perhaps without (but with a clear sense of the advantages of each). It might be a competition between two views that points to a third possibility. You should keep with this main plot throughout the paper.

You also need to think about how much your own views will feature in the narrative. If you're doing difficult historical exegesis, it may be enough to explain the view clearly in your own terms. But tell the reader that this is what you're doing. You may also need to argue for your own interpretation of the text against other possible interpretations. In this case, your own voice should feature more prominently. Whatever the balance, it should

always be clear to the reader whether the view you're expressing is your own, or simply one you're discussing.

Signposting: It's always a good idea to let readers know where they're up to in a paper. The introduction helps, but you should also provide other cues throughout the paper so that the reader can recall what you've done and see what's to come.

Audience: In writing, it's useful to have in mind a potential audience, to help you set the tone and decide what's relevant. In writing a philosophy paper, pretend you're writing for someone informed, who's read some philosophy in general, but doesn't know much about this particular topic—perhaps someone in your class who happened to miss that week. Think about the things you'll need to explain to them and the kind of style that will be appropriate—keep them in mind constantly while writing.

Style: You should aim to write as simply, clearly and accurately as possible. Try to minimise your use of technical terms, difficult language and complex constructions. If you have to use technical language, define and explain the terms in your own words when you first introduce them. Sentences should not contain too many clauses, and paragraphs should not be too long. You're welcome to develop your own voice, and you're certainly welcome to use the first person pronoun 'I'. But it's usually best to stick with a relatively neutral tone that is not too informal. While metaphors and stylistic language can be fun, it can also put people off-side, and obscure the main message of the paper.

Being a good reader: When reading other material, try and figure out what kinds of writing you find interesting and engaging—this will help you find what kind of style and structure will work for you.

Quoting: Quotes can be important, especially when you're trying to interpret a difficult passage. They can also be used to back up the points you're making and show you've read appropriately. But they should not replace your own writing. If you're explaining a difficult concept or argument, it's better to put things in your own words to show your understanding. In general, you won't get assessed on your ability to quote, but on what you say yourself.

Examples: Examples are great. Sometimes it will be appropriate to use a standard example from the literature, but it's good practice to come up with your own. The best are vivid examples that will help you illustrate a number of points. And while you can introduce several examples, it's usual better to have a single example that can be used and adapted throughout the paper.

Word Limit: Don't go over the word limit. It's frustrating to whoever is reading it, and it doesn't usually help the paper—there's usually extraneous material that should be left out.

Formatting: Follow any guidelines you're given. Otherwise use a 12-point standard font (such as Times New Roman), double-spaced lines, margins of at least an inch and page

numbers. Include your name and course details on the first page. To facilitate blind marking, consider using a cover page.

Plagiarism: Don't plagiarise. Cite any works you quote or draw ideas from (not including lecture notes). If you're unsure of what might constitute plagiarism, ask.

Referencing: You can use any standard and consistent method of referencing, unless one is specifically requested.

Structure of a Paper

1. Introduction

A paragraph or two of introduction is very important. Its main purpose is to help orient the reader: to give him a clear sense of the topic, the main thesis you'll argue for and how you'll do this. You need to be very clear and explicit about the main points you'll be making. This doesn't spoil things for the reader. It helps engage him in the narrative. Depending on the structure of the paper, you may also want to motivate the topic here—why is the topic interesting or worth exploring?

2. Main Body

The main body of the paper is where you'll be making your major points. Generally you want to make one point per paragraph: you should be able to summarise what you say in each paragraph in a single sentence. Here are some things you may want to include:

Summarising the topic or views

Often your paper will begin by explaining the question you're concerned with or summarising a particular view. You want to give your reader a sense of why the question is important, interesting or deeply philosophical, and what it is concerned with. You might also summarise someone's view directly. Understanding someone else's view and explaining it accurately and concisely in your own words is a difficult skill in itself. It is not merely a prelude to doing real philosophy.

Being critical

Unless the material is very difficult, you'll usually be required to be critical of the views you've considered, and not merely summarise them. Even if you're in complete agreement with a view, say what it is about the view that strikes you as particularly worthwhile, or suggest why you found the argument powerful and convincing. Can the view be extended to cover new cases in interesting ways? Does it fit in well with other views you accept?

More often you'll find yourself objecting to the view. Be especially clear about what parts of the view you agree with, and what parts you don't. Try to be charitable in your assessments. Is it likely that Kant proceeded 'without any thought to the problem at

hand'? Or that 'the entire tradition is baseless and utterly misguided'? Try to see the good in what you criticise, and understand why philosophers were motivated to say what they did.

Here are some types of criticisms, roughly in order of increasing effectiveness:

- 1) *Theory X might be wrong*. While usually true, it's not particularly interesting or compelling to point out.
- 2) *Theory X doesn't cover all cases it possibly could*. Again, while often true, you have to consider whether a) the theory can be easily extended to cover such cases and b) the theory was intended to or needs to cover all these cases. Some theories in their present form may have limited scope and this isn't necessarily a problem. (Is it a problem that Kant's theory of aesthetics does not extend well to film? If so, why?)
- 3) *It's not clear how it could be extended to cover all cases*. This is slightly stronger than the above objection and slightly more interesting. Here we're starting to consider variations to the theory and whether they'd be successful. You still need to explain why it needs to cover all cases and consider some plausible variations. And this still doesn't show that the theory fails—just that you haven't thought of a way to make it succeed.
- 4) *The arguments for theory X fail or the theory is poorly motivated*. If the point of your paper is to critique the arguments or motivations, then this is a good objection. But if what you're doing is critiquing the theory itself, then this isn't enough. Showing some arguments or motivations for a view are poor does not imply the view is false or can't be motivated in some other way. Try to explain why these arguments or motivations are particularly central or important for the view. Two important ways of critiquing an argument are showing that its form is invalid or showing that it rests on false premises. (See resources below.)
- 5) *There's a counterexample to theory X*. Counterexamples are troubling, but try to say more. Is it just a limited case? How might one respond?
- 6) *There's a whole set of counterexamples to theory X*. One way to expand on the above objection is to show that there are lots of counterexamples to a theory, or show that these cases are particularly central or important—that the theory cannot survive these failures. It's even better if you can show that simple adaptations of the theory cannot meet this objection.
- 7) *Theory X is committed to a false principle*. Here you object to a major underlying principle of a theory. You show that the theory is committed to a particularly central claim and show that this claim is false. While you may want to begin with a counterexample, at this point you've gone on to identify what exactly it is the

theory that's causing the trouble. To be strong, this objection needs to be about a particularly central claim—one the theory cannot easily do without.

- 8) *Theory X is inconsistent*. An excellent objection. This is a case of showing that theory fails by its own lights. Even if you accept what the theory sets out to do and try to be charitable about the principles it commits to, these commitments cannot all be held together. To be powerful, you need to show that the inconsistency concerns deep and central aspects of the theory.

Presenting your own view

After you've criticised a view, you often need to express your own. If you're putting forward a complete theory, be clear on its sources—is it your own invention, or have you adapted it from somewhere? As usual, you're aiming for clarity and simplicity: what are the main commitments of the view? What are its advantages? How does it compare with other views? What problems might arise, and do you think these can be solved? Use examples to help demonstrate these points.

3. Conclusion

It's important to end with a concluding statement or paragraph that summarises what has gone on in the paper. What view have you looked at and at what specific points have you made? Be honest in what you think you have achieved. While you may not have 'shown the view to be entirely indefensible' perhaps you have 'shown crucial weaknesses that must be addressed' or 'shown that a major motivation for the view is misguided'. Your conclusion will often look a bit like your introduction, but it can afford to be more precise because it's reminding readers of the points you've already made. The conclusion can also be used to suggest directions that the work could go in next, or further things you'd like to explore.

Further Resources:

A Rulebook for Arguments, Anthony Weston

Writing Philosophy, Lewis Vaughn