

Writing Philosophy Papers

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1. **Starting Early.** I hope that people will enjoy writing their papers—or at least that the process will be as painless as possible. The best way for this to happen is for you to write a draft fairly early on and then rework the paper at least once. You'll make yourself miserable if you try to do the whole thing in one sitting.
2. **Audience and Clarity.** Don't think of your professor as your audience, as your intended reader. Rather, your intended audience should be *the uninitiated reader*: the reasonably intelligent person who has neither attended this class nor read any of the course material. Write with enough clarity that such a person could understand every sentence of your paper and follow the train of thought. That means you'll need to explain things carefully, clearly, and thoroughly—especially anything with which the uninitiated reader would be unfamiliar such as technical terminology, or familiar words used with a special meaning. In grading your paper I consider how much the uninitiated reader would learn about the subject by reading it.
3. **Perspective.** Effective communicators are able to keep two perspectives simultaneously in view: their own, and that of their intended audience. It can be difficult simultaneously to keep the other person's perspective fully in mind, yet doing so is essential to good communication. It is partly a matter of knowing (and remembering) how familiar the audience is with the subject, including its vocabulary and methods; and partly a matter of monitoring how well the audience is likely to follow the discussion, given that degree of familiarity. As with everything else, practice makes perfect. Try to work on maintaining both perspectives, remembering that for papers in this course your intended audience is the uninitiated reader.
4. **Ears versus Eyes.** The ear is a far better critic than the eye. One of the best ways to improve a piece of writing is read to it aloud, placing tick marks at the spots you want to rework or revise. Even better, have someone else read your work aloud to you.
5. **Completeness.** To the astonishment of both students and instructors, the most common problem in students' philosophy papers is that not all the assigned questions are addressed. It is a good idea, after you have written your first draft, to confirm that you have fully addressed all the assignment questions.
6. **Focus.** Assignment questions are always formulated carefully. Treat them as exact guides, not just approximate hints, as to what to discuss in your paper. Take the instructions literally.
7. **Multiple Drafts.** Most good writers begin with a draft that is of only fair quality (or worse) and work and rework many times over it until it is good to excellent. For them, most of the work comes in making the revisions. Write a rough draft of your paper, leave it aside for at least a day, and then go back and reread it. You will see lots of ways in which the paper could, or should, be improved—especially if you work closely with these guidelines in developing your subsequent drafts. You should run your paper through at least two drafts, possibly more. Most of us have a tendency to fall

hopelessly in love with our first attempt, and are very reluctant to make any but the most minor alterations. That can be a real block to improvement.

8. **Wording.** Philosophy strives for clarity and precision. Take the time to find the words to express exactly, not just approximately, what you mean. Sometimes a Thesaurus can help. It is frequently very hard to think of how to say something precisely. Frequently you'll have to experiment with different ways of trying to say it. Don't be satisfied with the first phrasing that occurs to you. Write it down, then try to make it more precise.
9. **Logical Terminology.** Philosophical terminology — words like 'argument', 'theory', 'evidence', 'premise', 'conclusion', 'principle', 'example', 'counterexample', 'objection', 'response', 'reply', 'deductively valid' — can help greatly to make your paper clearer. Make them part of your working vocabulary. (Consult your instructor if you have questions about the proper use of these terms)
10. **Including Guides to Structure.** The clearest papers contain frequent guides to structure: sentences or phrases that indicate what has been accomplished, or what is going to happen next. You will improve the quality of your writing if you include these. Here are some illustrative examples: "We have seen two arguments for the existence of God." "Let's begin by considering Descartes' argument for the position I just described." "Locke offers two arguments for the first premise above. The first is that" "Let us now turn to consider the plausibility of Berkeley's view. I will consider two possible objections." "So we have seen that the first objection is ultimately not very forceful, but the second one seriously undermines Hume's position." You need to make the structure of your paper transparent to your reader, and these kinds of remarks accomplish that. (Notice how helpful you find these kinds of signposts, when you are reading through the pieces assigned for the course.)
11. **Examples.** Use an example whenever this would help clarify a point. Often there's nothing like a good example to bring home a point, or to explain just what you mean. Actually, there are many different uses of examples in philosophy: to explicate or support a premise, to show a premise is false, to explain a concept, to show that a conclusion wouldn't follow from the premises even if they were all true, to pose a philosophical problem or puzzle, to show a principle is false, to help arrive at an analysis of a concept, and more. You should provide an example when it helps in any of these respects. (Remember that your intended audience the uninitiated reader, and examples will really help such a person to understand what you are saying.) When giving an example it is much better to, make up your own, rather than borrowing it from the readings or class discussion.
12. **Elaboration.** When you are explaining a theory, argument, premise, principle, objection, or reply, make sure you develop your discussion fully. Try to avoid one-liners. For instance, it's not sufficient to say, "Aquinas says there is a series of causes." Rather, explain fully and in detail what is meant. When you claim that an argument is (or is not) deductively valid, explain why.
13. **Making Premises Explicit.** When you are setting out an argument you will be discussing, make sure you state all the assumptions used in the argument, even ones the philosopher doesn't bother to state explicitly. This is really important. Suppose you set out someone's argument but you leave out a premise. Then, when you go on to critically evaluate the argument, you may well have problems because the premise you really would want to reject isn't stated in your paper. Often a student will overlook an important objection to someone's argument simply because they didn't state all the premises when they were setting out the argument.
14. **Critical Evaluation.** When critically evaluating a position (or an argument for a position), it is not sufficient simply to say whether or not one agrees with it. One must provide a well-developed

discussion. To critically evaluate a position, one must raise possible objections and consider possible replies to those objections. These objections and replies should be explained very carefully, and discussed in detail. First explain the objection carefully, and try to develop it so that it is as convincing as possible (whether you agree with the objection or not). Then go on to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of that objection. How convincing is it? What is the best possible reply to the objection, and how successful would that reply be? In selecting which objection(s) to discuss in critical evaluation, it's best either to choose either the one(s) you regard as the strongest (even if you do not regard it as ultimately successful), or the one(s) you think will lead to the most interesting discussion. Unless I say otherwise, you can always discuss objections from our textbook, from lectures, or from section meetings.

15. **Depth in Critical Evaluation.** As you can see from the above description, critical evaluation is a matter of considering objections, considering possible responses to those objections, considering possible replies to those responses, possible objections to the replies, and so on. Perhaps we can speak of "levels" here: the original objection lies at the first level, replies lie at the second level, responses to the replies at the third level, and so on. So, you'll want to ask, "When do I stop? How many levels deep do I need to go in my paper?" Unfortunately, there is no simple answer to that question. In some cases, albeit rarely, an objection is so powerful and convincing that there is no conceivable way to even *attempt* to undermine or get around it, so a writer has to stop at the first level. In most cases, the natural stopping place might be two or three or more levels deep (if space limitations allow). How deep to go is a judgment call, and part of learning how to do philosophy well is learning how far to go in a paper (again, given space requirements). Other things being equal, a paper that carries the discussion of a particular objection to deeper levels in an interesting way is better than one that stops short of that. If you think about the issues, you will probably arrive at a response or a reply that you didn't anticipate before. Remember that doing philosophy well is partly a matter of *anticipating* how people might try to reply or respond to what one has said.
16. **Controversial Assumptions.** If you rely on a controversial assumption in arguing for a given conclusion, you need to provide a convincing argument for that assumption. For instance, suppose you argue: "God exists, and God prohibits commit murder. It is morally wrong to do what God prohibits. Abortion is murder. Therefore abortion is morally wrong." The problem here is that at least two of the premises are controversial. Very many intelligent people believe in God, but many do not; many intelligent people believe that abortion is murder, but many do not. So either the argument must be replaced by another one, or the two controversial premises must be defended by argument. What counts as controversial depends greatly on the context. A rule of thumb: if a premise is as controversial as the conclusion you are trying to support by using it, it needs to be defended.
17. **Packaging Objections.** There are a lot of ways of raising objections to an argument or to a theory. But when you raise an objection, *always say what kind of objection you are raising*. Here are some illustrative examples: "The conclusion would not follow from the premises even if they were all true, as one can see by considering" "The second premise of the argument is surely questionable" "If the conclusion of the argument were accepted, it would have some very absurd consequences; for instance" "The proposed theory does not satisfactorily explain what is introduced to explain." "This theory does explain the relevant phenomena, but not in the simplest way possible." In other words, state both the objection and what kind of objection it is. This helps enormously to make your paper clearer. Most of the time, it actually helps to state what type of objection you are going to raise before you actually state it in detail.
18. **Checking the Text.** If you raise an objection to what a philosopher has written, check to see whether he or she addresses the objection you offer. If she does, you might want to state your objection, and her reply, and then go on to explain why you think her reply is inadequate to your objection. What

you definitely want to avoid is offering an objection the philosopher responds to, and writing as if you were unaware that she discusses it. Let your reader know you are aware she discusses the problem you are raising, and go on to explain why you think her treatment of it isn't satisfactory. Of course it's fine to raise objections a philosopher has herself overlooked.

19. **Diagnosing Flaws in Arguments.** Suppose someone else offers an argument for a conclusion you do not accept. You go on to offer an argument that the conclusion in question is false. For instance, suppose someone offers an argument that we *lack* free will, and you offer an argument, using different premises, that we *have* free will. In this situation—*be on the lookout for it*—you have argued that the other person's conclusion is false, which is fine. But you need to do more; because if your argument is sound, then the other person's argument is somehow flawed. What you need to do under these circumstances is provide an exact diagnosis of the flaw(s) in their argument. That is, you need to say which premise of your opponent's argument you reject, and why. Or, if you accept all her premises, you need to explain why those premises do not provide a good reason for believing the conclusion. Remember, if your argument is correct, your opponent's is wrong, and you need to say just where and how her argument goes wrong.
20. **Crediting Others.** Provide proper credit for all words *and ideas* that you draw from others. Failure to do so is plagiarism, which carries heavy penalties. All students are responsible for knowing the information contained in *Crediting Others in Writing — 11 FAQ's*. This is available online at www.uic.edu/~edelberg.
21. **Use Gender-Neutral Language.** Many of the writings we read use gender-biased language, but it is preferable not to. "Before Man existed, there was no evil" sounds pompous, and it carries unintended ideological implications. The same could be said for "Before Woman existed, there was no evil." "Before people existed, there was no evil" is a better formulation of the intended assertion.
22. **When 'You' and 'I' Are Okay.** Feel free to use 'you' and 'I' in your papers for this course. Many professional philosophers do so in their published work. This makes it a lot easier to say certain things, and the prose is often much more readable. So you can say things like, "I disagree with the third premise," or "You don't have to have a body in order to exist." But don't include autobiographical material, like "This is what I was brought up to believe." Saying you were brought up to believe something provides a psychological explanation of why you believe what you do. But it is of absolutely no interest in a philosophy paper, where you want to be explaining why certain views are actually true, or false; or at least why some views are objectively preferable to others.
23. **Titles.** Choose an appropriate title for your paper. Don't just call it "First Paper Assignment."
24. **Introductions.** Begin with a lively introduction. Grab your reader's interest by presenting the topic of the paper in an interesting way. *Boring:* "For many centuries, brilliant philosophers have discussed the question of free will. Even today there are differing viewpoints on this important and difficult question. Although it is impossible to do justice to the many positions on the topic of free will, in this paper we will examine one argument." *Better:* "In 1946, T. H. Huxley presented a powerful argument that you never choose anything freely. If Huxley is right, no one is truly the author of their own actions, and no one is ever the least bit responsible for what they do. Huxley's argument *appears* invincible. Yet I shall argue that it rests on a subtle confusion. Let's begin by seeing exactly how Huxley makes his case."
25. **Proofread Your Work.** Always proofread your work carefully and correct errors.