

# WRITING A PHILOSOPHY PAPER

Good writing is the product of proper training, much practice, and hard work. The following remarks, though they will not guarantee a top quality paper, should help you determine where best to direct your efforts. I offer first some general comments on philosophical writing, and then some specific "do"s and "don't"s.

One of the first points to be clear about is that a philosophical essay is quite different from an essay in most other subjects. That is because it is neither a research paper nor an exercise in literary self-expression. It is not a report of what various scholars have had to say on a particular topic. It does not present the latest findings of tests or experiments. And it does not present your personal feelings or impressions. Instead, it is a reasoned defense of a thesis. What does that mean?

Above all, it means that there must be a specific point that you are trying to establish - something that you are trying to convince the reader to accept - together with grounds or justification for its acceptance.

Before you start to write your paper, you should be able to state exactly what it is that you are trying to show. This is harder than it sounds. It simply will not do to have a rough idea of what you want to establish. A rough idea is usually one that is not well worked out, not clearly expressed, and as a result, not likely to be understood. Whether you actually do it in your paper or not, you should be able to state in a single short sentence precisely what you want to prove. If you cannot formulate your thesis this way, odds are you are not clear enough about it.

The next task is to determine how to go about convincing the reader that your thesis is correct. In two words, your method must be that of rational persuasion. You will present arguments. At this point, students frequently make one or more of several common errors. Sometimes they feel that since it is clear to them that their thesis is true, it does not need much argumentation. It is common to overestimate the strength of your own position. That is because you already accept that point of view. But how will your opponent respond? It is safest to assume that your reader is intelligent and knows a lot about your subject, but disagrees with you.

Another common mistake is to think that your case will be stronger if you mention, even if briefly, virtually every argument that you have come across in support of your position. Sometimes this is called the "fortress approach." In actual fact, it is almost certain that the fortress approach will not result in a very good paper. There are several reasons for this.

First, your reader is likely to find it difficult to keep track of so many different arguments, especially if these arguments approach the topic from different directions.

Second, the ones that will stand out will be the very best ones and the very worst ones. It is important to show some discrimination here. Only the most compelling one or two arguments should be developed. Including weaker ones only gives the impression that you are unable to tell the difference between the two.

Third, including many different arguments will result in spreading yourself too thinly. It is far better to cover less ground in greater depth than to range further afield in a superficial manner. It will also help to give your paper focus.

In order to produce a good philosophy paper, it is first necessary to think very carefully and clearly about your topic. Unfortunately, your reader (likely your marker or instructor) has no access to those thoughts except by way of what actually ends up on the page. He or she cannot tell what you meant to say but did not, and cannot read in what you would quickly point out if you were conversing face to face. For better or for worse, your paper is all that is available. It must stand on its own. The responsibility for ensuring the accurate communication of ideas falls on the writer's shoulders. You must say exactly what you mean and in a way that minimizes the chances of being misunderstood. It is difficult to overemphasize this point.

There is no such thing as a piece of good philosophical writing that is unclear, ungrammatical, or unintelligible. Clarity and precision are essential elements here. A poor writing style militates against both of these.

## **THINGS TO AVOID IN YOUR PHILOSOPHY ESSAY**

1. **Lengthy introductions.** These are entirely unnecessary and of no interest to the informed reader. There is no need to point out that your topic is an important one, and one that has interested philosophers for hundreds of years. Introductions should be as brief as possible. In fact, I recommend that you think of your paper as not having an introduction at all. Go directly to your topic.
2. **Lengthy quotations.** Inexperienced writers rely too heavily on quotations and paraphrases. Direct quotation is best restricted to those cases where it is essential to establish another writer's exact selection of words. Even paraphrasing should be kept to a minimum. After all, it is your paper. It is your thoughts that your instructor is concerned with. Keep that in mind, especially when your essay topic requires you to critically assess someone else's views.
3. **Fence sitting.** Do not present a number of positions in your paper and then end by saying that you are not qualified to settle the matter. In particular, do not close by saying that philosophers have been divided over this issue for as long as humans have been keeping record and you cannot be expected to resolve the dispute in a

few short pages. Your instructor knows that. But you can be expected to take a clear stand based on an evaluation of the argument(s) presented. Go out on a limb. If you have argued well, it will support you.

4. **Cuteness.** Good philosophical writing usually has an air of simple dignity about it. Your topic is no joke. No writers whose views you have been asked to read are idiots. (If you think they are, then you have not understood them.) Name calling is inappropriate and could never substitute for careful argumentation anyway.
5. **Begging the question.** You are guilty of begging the question (or circular reasoning) on a particular issue if you somehow presuppose the truth of whatever it is that you are trying to show in the course of arguing for it. Here is a quick example. If Smith argues that abortion is morally wrong on the grounds that it amounts to murder, Smith begs the question. Smith presupposes a particular stand on the moral status of abortion - the stand represented by the conclusion of the argument. To see that this is so, notice that the person who denies the conclusion - that abortion is morally wrong - will not accept Smith's premise that it amounts to murder, since murder is, by definition, morally wrong.
6. When arguing against other positions, it is important to realize that you cannot show that your opponents are mistaken just by claiming that their overall conclusions are false. Nor will it do simply to claim that at least one of their premises is false. You must demonstrate these sorts of things, and in a fashion that does not presuppose that your position is correct.

## **SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING YOUR PHILOSOPHY PAPER**

1. **Organize carefully.** Before you start to write make an outline of how you want to argue. There should be a logical progression of ideas - one that will be easy for the reader to follow. If your paper is well organized, the reader will be led along in what seems a natural way. If you jump about in your essay, the reader will balk. It will take a real effort to follow you, and he or she may feel it not worthwhile. It is a good idea to let your outline simmer for a few days before you write your first draft. Does it still seem to flow smoothly when you come back to it? If not, the best prose in the world will not be enough to make it work.
2. **Use the right words.** Once you have determined your outline, you must select the exact words that will convey your meaning to the reader. A dictionary is almost essential here. Do not settle for a word that (you think) comes close to capturing the sense you have in mind. Notice that "infer" does not mean "imply"; "disinterested" does not mean "uninterested"; and "reference" does not mean either "illusion" or "allusion." Make certain that you can use "its" and "it's"

correctly. Notice that certain words such as "therefore," "hence," "since," and "follows from" are strong logical connectives. When you use such expressions you are asserting that certain tight logical relations hold between the claims in question. You had better be right. Finally, check the spelling of any word you are not sure of. There is no excuse for "existance" appearing in any philosophy essay.

3. **Support your claims.** Assume that your reader is constantly asking such questions as "Why should I accept that?" If you presuppose that he or she is at least mildly skeptical of most of your claims, you are more likely to succeed in writing a paper that argues for a position. Most first attempts at writing philosophy essays fall down on this point. Substantiate your claims whenever there is reason to think that your critics would not grant them.
4. **Give credit.** When quoting or paraphrasing, always give some citation. Indicate your indebtedness, whether it is for specific words, general ideas, or a particular line of argument. To use another writer's words, ideas, or arguments as if they were your own is to plagiarize. Plagiarism is against the rules of academic institutions and is dishonest. It can jeopardize or even terminate your academic career. Why run that risk when your paper is improved (it appears stronger not weaker) if you give credit where credit is due? That is because appropriately citing the works of others indicates an awareness of some of the relevant literature on the subject.
5. **Anticipate objections.** If your position is worth arguing for, there are going to be reasons which have led some people to reject it. Such reasons will amount to criticisms of your stand. A good way to demonstrate the strength of your position is to consider one or two of the best of these objections and show how they can be overcome. This amounts to rejecting the grounds for rejecting your case, and is analogous to stealing your enemies' ammunition before they have a chance to fire it at you. The trick here is to anticipate the kinds of objections that your critics would actually raise against you if you did not disarm them first. The other challenge is to come to grips with the criticisms you have cited. You must argue that these criticisms miss the mark as far as your case is concerned, or that they are in some sense ill-conceived despite their plausibility. It takes considerable practice and exposure to philosophical writing to develop this engaging style of argumentation, but it is worth it.
6. **Edit boldly.** I have never met a person whose first draft of a paper could not be improved significantly by rewriting. The secret to good writing is rewriting - often. Of course it will not do just to reproduce the same thing again. Better drafts are almost always shorter drafts - not because ideas have been left out, but because words have been cut out as ideas have been clarified. Every word that is not needed only clutters. Clear sentences do not just happen. They are the result of tough-minded editing.

There is much more that could be said about clear writing. I have not stopped to talk about grammatical and stylistic points. For help in these matters (and we all need

reference works in these areas) I recommend a few of the many helpful books available in the campus bookstore. My favorite little book on good writing is *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk and E.B. White. Another good book, more general in scope, is William Zinsser's, *On Writing Well*. Both of these books have gone through several editions. More advanced students might do well to read *Philosophical Writing: An Introduction*, by A.P. Martinich.

Some final words should be added about proofreading. Do it. Again. After that, have someone else read your paper. Is this person able to understand you completely? Can he or she read your entire paper through without getting stuck on a single sentence? If not, go back and smooth it out.

In general terms, do not be content simply to get your paper out of your hands. Take pride in it. Clear writing reflects clear thinking; and that, after all, is what you are really trying to show.