

Paper Writing Hints
Introduction to Philosophy
Bokulich, Fall 2007

This guide is intended to highlight some of the most important aspects of writing a philosophy paper, and to address some of the most common writing errors that students fall into. It is not a comprehensive guide to writing. I strongly suggest that you consult a good writing handbook, such as *The Allyn & Bacon Handbook* by Rosen and Behrens, for more general writing suggestions, issues of sentence construction, proper grammar, etc. Papers must be double spaced (except for block quotations, which should be single spaced); the APA style convention is preferred, but Chicago or MLA convention will be allowed.

Be Explicit. Write Clearly.

- 1) Explain to your reader the precise point you are trying to make, and exactly how you plan to establish that point. Philosophic writing should aim for clarity. Do not force your reader to guess what you are trying to say.
- 2) Have an explicit thesis. Probably at the end of your first paragraph, almost certainly on your first page, you should have a clear statement of the claim you are arguing for in the paper. This is your thesis statement. You should probably also have a statement of procedure that explains how you intend to establish your claim. Thesis: "Aristotelian virtue ethics provides a stronger foundation for morality than either purely consequentialist accounts or purely deontological accounts." Statement of procedure: "I begin by explaining the shortcomings of both utilitarianism and duty-based ethics. I then explore Aristotle's account of virtue and argue that it is flexible enough to capture the attractive aspects of consequentialist and deontological theories, while avoiding the counterintuitive aspects. Finally, I respond to charge that virtue ethics is *too* flexible to offer a robust moral code."
- 3) Do not simply report your opinions, *argue* for a precise claim. Explain to your reader not merely why you happen to believe something (or worse, merely what you happen to believe), but why she or he should agree with the conclusions you have reached.
- 4) It is perfectly acceptable to use the first person in philosophic writing--it often adds clarity to the presentation, which is one of your central goals--but be sure to avoid the danger of reporting your beliefs without justifying your position.
- 5) Support your assertions. Explain as precisely as you can why your reader should agree with your claims.
- 6) Make the connections between various points in your arguments explicit. It should be clear how your claims fit together and how they are relevant to the thesis you are developing. Good

arguments make their logical structure obvious by carefully using terms such as, *because, therefore, this implies, it follows that, etc.*

7) "Cut the Fat." A good paper is like a good steak--lean. Is every paragraph, sentence, phrase, word, in your essay doing some important work? If you can omit anything without detracting from your argument, do so. Superfluous structure and verbiage distracts the reader from the point you are trying to communicate. The page limits given for a paper are guidelines, not inviolable rules. If you have said everything you have to say in five pages when the assignment calls for seven, you have most likely (although not necessarily) failed to address some important issues. However, you can only lower your grade by filling in with two pages of fat. A short paper that makes its point clearly and concisely is much better than a longer paper that makes the same point in a long-winded fashion.

8) Avoid flowery introductions that do no work. Far too many philosophy papers begin with the phrase, "[Blank] is a problem that philosophers [humans, thinkers, . . .] have been grappling with for hundreds [thousands, . . .] of years." Only include such points if you are actually going to do something with them. (For example, this point would be relevant if you were arguing that the fact that some of the Ancients believed that we were determined, though they did not have an advanced physical science, shows that the belief in human freedom is not as widespread as some argue.) There is nothing wrong with beginning a paper with, "In this paper I will argue . . ."

9) Do say what needs to be said. Bring in examples if they help to clarify your point. Explain terms that are unclear. Draw out the key points of your argument so your reader does not have to guess how you reached your conclusion. Explain how your various points fit together into your argument.

10) Replace any vague phrases or references with carefully chosen constructions that will clearly communicate your point. Avoid jargon, colloquialisms, and verbose constructions.

11) Make sure that your conclusion agrees with your introduction. Typically we learn a great deal about the issue we are discussing while we are writing on it. Sometimes we even change our position in the middle of a paper. This is good: writing is an important form of thinking. However, the paper itself has to be a clear cohesive whole. Once you have reached the end of your paper be prepared to go back and rework the beginning to reflect your new insights.

12) Start early and write rough drafts. It takes time to understand a philosophic issue and to develop interesting arguments, and it is typically difficult to spot obscure passages and poor arguments when you are too close to a paper. Writing a draft of a paper and setting it aside for a day or two can allow you to see the issue from a fresh perspective when you pick it up again.

13) Read the paper aloud to catch unclear passages that your eye missed. You will be surprised how many awkward phrases and mistakes your ear will catch. Read it to a friend, and ask her if she is able to follow your argument.

Making a Good Philosophic Point

14) When looking for a thesis, look for an interesting, controversial point that you can develop an argument for. Look at a debate that you find interesting, and take a clear position on it. Avoid boring theses that no one would want to disagree with. Also avoid false claims and overly grand theses that can clearly not be established in a short paper.

15) Find a question that can be addressed well in the assigned number of pages. As a general rule, it is better to aim for a deeper treatment of a narrowly focused topic than to discuss a broad range of issues superficially. Focus on the question you are addressing, and do not get sidetracked by issues that do not support your thesis.

16) ARGUE for your thesis. Imagine that you are explaining your thesis to an intelligent person who is not familiar with the issue you are writing on. You want to explain exactly what your claim is, and you want to offer good reasons for accepting your position and rejecting opposing positions. Also imagine that you are trying to convince someone who is familiar with the issue, but who holds a position opposed to yours. How might you convince such a person? Your arguments should (ideally) start from premisses you both agree on, and then move to your conclusion. You should explain why your opponent's claim is mistaken.

17) Develop and discuss counter arguments. Put yourself in your opponent's shoes and develop the most damaging attack you can against your arguments. Then defend yourself against that attack. It is important to be able to see objections that might be raised against your account, and to answer them. An argument that only examines one side of an issue is not likely to be very convincing; it gives the reader an impression that you have simply failed to understand the opposing side. You need to demonstrate that you understand the opposing arguments, and explain why you find them weak.

18) Work to clarify the issue in question. A major part of a philosopher's job is to bring into focus issues that are confused or distorted. Many successful philosophic arguments show how our concepts are inadequate, or point out common misconceptions that lead to difficulties. Often we are working with concepts that are too general, and we need to make careful distinctions. Other times we think that two issues are distinct when in fact they are two sides of the same coin. Philosophy is about good thinking, which means (among other things) clear precise thinking. You should be looking for better ways to think about the topic you are discussing. Can you rephrase the debate in a way that sheds light on it? Are two opposing positions actually addressing the same issue?

19) Because part of a philosopher's job is to explore the concepts we work with, dictionary definitions are almost always out of place in a philosophy paper. A dictionary tells you how people use a word, but it does not clarify the concept that the word relates. A dictionary can tell you when to use the word 'good', but it does not tell you what a good life is. It can tell you when to use the word 'free', but only you (as a philosopher) can clarify whether a human being can have free will in a world that can be completely described by deterministic physical laws.

Quotations

20) **Do not plagiarize.** Any ideas or formulations that are not your own (or from my lectures) must be attributed to their author. Even a word, if distinctive, must be quoted and referenced; an entire phrase taken from another source, and not placed within quotation marks, constitutes flagrant plagiarism. Articles, web-pages, friends' papers, television programs, conversations with tutors, or any other source of concrete ideas or formulations that end up in your paper, must be given proper credit. A failure to do so constitutes plagiarism. All suspected cases of plagiarism will be referred to the Academic Conduct Committee; in addition to failing the course, those found guilty should expect to be suspended or expelled from the University. If you have any questions on what constitutes plagiarism, be sure to speak to the professor or your teaching fellow *before* you turn in your paper.

21) Because philosophy papers generally require close analysis of arguments, it is often necessary to quote key passages from the author under discussion, rather than simply offering a paraphrase. If your reading of an author might be controversial, be sure to indicate key passages that support your interpretation of the author's views.

22) Make sure your quotations are doing some important work. For example, it is appropriate to offer a quotation to support your reading of an author's position, to give that author proper credit, or to share with your reader a particularly nice formulation of some point. However, you should make certain that you explain key issues in your own terms; you should not allow another author to present the essence of your argument for you. Make sure that you are formulating your own argument and not simply reporting on another's work.

23) Give a reference for each quotation in your paper. The APA uses an author-date convention for citations, examples of which follow. Notice that there is no period immediately before or after the ending quotation mark.

“I think, therefore I am” (Descartes, 1637, p. 32).

Descartes said, “I think, therefore I am” (1637, p. 32).

In Descartes (1637) one finds the claim: “I think, therefore I am” (p. 32).

24) Other Sentence Endings:

Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am."

Descartes asked, "Do I exist?"

Descartes asked, "Do I exist?" (1637, p. 32).

Did Descartes believe that “the soul . . . is easier known than the body” (1637, p. 24)?

Descartes asks, "Do I exist?" and then proceeds to demonstrate that he does.

Did Descartes claim, "I think, therefore I am"?

Did Descartes ask, "Do I exist?"

Why did Descartes ask, “Do I exist?” (1637, p. 24)?

25) Block quotations should be used whenever you quote more than forty words. Indent a single tab space (1/2 inch), and use the standard right margin. The usual APA style calls for double spacing, but we shall single space block quotations. Do not use quotation marks. The parenthetical citation follows the punctuated end of the quotation. No period follows the parentheses.

Here is the beginning of the quoted material. Here we have further sentences to fill in the forty words that are required to put a quotation into block format according to the APA style convention. This is the end of the block quotation. (Bokulich, 2007, p. 5)

26) Include a bibliography of all works cited in your essay. Here are some sample entries:

Churchland, P. (1984). "A Critique of Dualism." In *Matter and Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Reprinted in L. P. Pojman (Ed.), *Introduction to Philosophy: Classical and Contemporary Readings* (2nd ed.) (pp. 306-316). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Descartes, R. (1637). *Discourse on the Method of rightly conducting one's reason and seeking the truth in the sciences, and in addition the Optics, the Meteorology and the Geometry, which are essays in this Method*. Leiden: Imaginary English Press.

27) You are discouraged from using the Internet for research in this course, and in general you should be very cautious with sources from the Web. While it is a tremendous information resource, most of the pages available on the Internet are not refereed and are therefore far less reliable than works put out by reputable publishers. Web pages must be cited like any other source. Because information on the Internet can be changed or removed, you should include the date that you accessed the page in question, and also print up a hard copy of any page that you reference.

Common Mechanical Errors

28) It is no longer acceptable to use gender exclusive language. There are many ways to avoid this problem, such as using plural nouns, substituting 'humanity' for 'man', etc. If you do need to use a generic third person singular pronoun in some situation, alternate between using 'she' and 'he.' The pronoun 'one' is handy, but can be awkward if overused.

29) Do NOT slip into the all-too-common colloquialism of using a plural pronoun ('they', 'them', 'their') when the context requires a singular pronoun. "When someone breaks his [not 'their'] promise, he [not 'they'] feels guilty." "A person recognizes her [not 'their'] responsibilities, and then she [not 'they'] acts accordingly." Note that both of these sentences could be easily recast in the plural: "When people break their promises, they feel guilty."

30) Abbreviations should generally be avoided in college essays. If you do use them, be certain to use the correct one:

e.g. = *exempli gratia* = "for example"

i.e. = *id est* = "that is"

viz. = *videlicet* = "namely"

cf. = *confer* = "compare"

N.B. = *nota bene* = "note well"

31) Do not arbitrarily substitute 'to exist' for 'to be.' Try to keep 'exists' for technical issues that are actually addressing the existence versus nonexistence of something.

Poor: "There exist three responses to this argument."

Better: "There are three responses to this argument," or "Three responses can be made to this argument."

32) Avoid contractions in formal prose generally, and in college essays specifically. "Cannot" is a single word.

33) Number the pages of your paper and staple the pages. Put your name on the paper. Also include your teaching fellow's name, your discussion section, and the date. Title your paper. Do not justify right (the right edge of the text should be uneven).

34) Make an extra copy of your paper. If the copy you hand in should happen to get lost, you will be responsible for providing a new copy. When your paper is returned to you, save it until you receive your course grade.