

WRITING CENTER BRIEF GUIDE SERIES

A Brief Guide to Writing the Philosophy Paper

The Challenges of Philosophical Writing

The aim of the assignments in your philosophy classes is to get you doing philosophy. But what is philosophy, and how is it to be done? The answer is complicated. Philosophers are often motivated by one or more of what we might call the “Big Questions,” such as: How should we live? Is there free will? How do we know anything? or, What is truth? While philosophers do not agree among themselves on either the range of proper philosophical questions or the proper methods of answering them, they do agree that merely expressing one’s personal opinions on controversial topics like these is not doing philosophy. Rather, philosophers insist on the method of first attaining clarity about the exact question being asked, and then providing answers supported by clear, logically structured arguments.

An ideal philosophical argument should lead the reader in undeniable logical steps from obviously true premises to an unobvious conclusion. A *negative* argument is an *objection* that tries to show that a claim, theory, or argument is mistaken; if it does so successfully, we say that it *refutes* it. A *positive* argument tries to support a claim or theory, for example, the view that there is genuine free will, or the view that we should never eat animals. Positive philosophical arguments about the Big Questions that are ideal are extremely hard to construct, and philosophers interested in formulating or criticizing such arguments usually end up discussing other questions that may at first seem pedantic or contrived. These questions motivate philosophers because they seem, after investigation, to be logically related to the Big Questions and to shed

light on them. So, for example, while trying to answer Big Questions like those above, philosophers might find themselves discussing questions like (respectively): When would it be morally permissible to push someone into the path of a speeding trolley? What is a cause? Do I know that I have hands? Is there an external world? While arguing about these questions may appear silly or pointless, the satisfactions of philosophy are often derived from, first, discovering and explicating how they are logically connected to the Big Questions, and second, constructing and defending philosophical arguments to answer them in turn. Good philosophy proceeds with modest, careful and clear steps.

Structuring a Philosophy Paper

Philosophy assignments generally ask you to consider some thesis or argument, often a thesis or argument that has been presented by another philosopher (a *thesis* is a claim that may be true or false). Given this thesis or argument, you may be asked to do one or more of the following: explain it, offer an argument in support of it, offer an objection to it, defend against an objection to it, evaluate the arguments for and against it, discuss what consequences it might have, determine whether some other thesis or argument commits one to it (i.e., if I accepted the other thesis or argument, would I be rationally required to accept this one *because* I accept the other one?), or determine whether some other view can be held consistently with it. No matter which of these tasks you are asked to complete, your paper should normally meet the following structural requirements:

- **Begin by formulating your precise thesis.** State your thesis clearly and concisely in your introduction so that your reader understands what your paper sets out to achieve. Get to the point quickly and without digression. Don't try to introduce your argument within a grand historical narrative, for example. Your thesis does not have to be the same as any thesis mentioned in the assignment, although in some cases it may be.
- **Explain briefly how you will argue in favor of your thesis.** In the example above, Jen's thesis itself is stated in such a way as to indicate how the argument for it will proceed. Jen might reasonably have chosen to enlarge a little on this explanation, for example by indicating in her introduction which term in Smith's argument is ambiguous, or by indicating why she thinks others may have overlooked the ambiguity.

GOOD WRITING EXAMPLE

Jen was an excellent philosophy writer who received the following assignment:

Evaluate Smith's argument for the claim that people lack free will.

Jen decided before she began writing her paper that Smith's argument ultimately fails because it trades on an ambiguity. Accordingly, she began her paper with the following sentence:

In this paper, I will refute Smith's argument against the existence of free will by showing that it trades on an ambiguity.

Jen's thesis, then, was that Smith's argument is invalid because it trades on an ambiguity – and she stated it clearly right at the beginning of her paper. Note that Jen need not say anything at all about the truth or falsity of the thesis that people lack free will; even if Smith's argument for it is invalid, it might still be true that people lack free will.

- **Define technical or ambiguous terms used in your thesis or your argument.** You will need to define for your reader any special or unclear terms that appear in your thesis, or in the discussion at hand. Write so that you could be clearly understood by a student who has taken some classes in philosophy but not this particular class. (Think of this imaginary reader whenever you need to decide how much you need to say to set up a discussion, or to judge the overall clarity of your work.)
- **If necessary, motivate your thesis (i.e. explain to your reader why they should care about it).** You'll need to do this, especially in longer assignments, when it isn't clear why a reader would care about the truth of the claim you are arguing for.

Take care to clearly indicate when you are speaking in your own voice, and when you are explicating someone else's argument or point of view but not yourself advocating it.

- **If necessary, explain the argument you will be critiquing.** If your assignment asks you to critique someone else's argument (as in the example above), you will need to explain that argument before presenting your critique of it. Sometimes, the entire task of an assignment will be simply to explain an argument originated by somebody else, rather than to provide an argument for your own thesis. While you will not always be expected to provide your own completely original arguments or theories in philosophy papers, you must always practice philosophy. This means that you should explain the argument in your own words and according to your own understanding of the steps involved in it. You will need to be very clear on the precise *logical structure* of an author's argument (N.B. this may not be clearly represented by the order in which the argument is written down in the readings). Don't try to impress your reader with your wide knowledge by summarizing everything in a particular article, or everything you have learned about the topic: stick to explaining only the details that are essential to the author's argument for the particular thesis and to your own argument for your thesis. Also take care to clearly indicate when you are speaking in your own voice, and when you are explicating someone else's argument or point of view but not yourself advocating it.

POOR WRITING EXAMPLE

In answer to the previously mentioned assignment, George wrote a paper arguing that there was free will, on the grounds that George was himself aware of making all kinds of free choices every day. His conclusion was that Smith's argument (which he had not explained, and mentioned only at the end of the paper) must be false, since there is free will.

George's professor asked him to rewrite, telling him that he had failed to engage with Smith's argument in the first draft. Here is an excerpt from George's less-than-successful rewrite...

... Smith says on p.9, "The truth of causal determinism having been established by this argument from elimination, we shall move on to prove incompatibilism." Smith then says that the source of an agent's actions is some event that occurred before he was even born. If an event occurred before someone was born, it cannot be a product of his choices. Therefore incompatibilism is true. On p.10, Smith addresses the objection that...

George does not properly explain and analyze the logic of Smith's argument (a philosophy paper), but rather reports what Smith says and the way in which it appears in the text (a book report). In the first sentence George quotes Smith directly where there is no need to do so, and he provides no explanation of Smith's sentence or the technical terms in it that shows that George actually understands it. In his second sentence, George just follows Smith's text while paraphrasing it. In his third, George may be attempting to: (i) simply paraphrase Smith, or (ii) paraphrase and endorse Smith's claim, or (iii) make his own personal point – but to the reader it is left ambiguous what George thinks Smith's view is and what George's own view is.

If you use a claim that your reader might find doubtful, then you must try to give the reader convincing reasons for accepting it.

- **Make an argument to support your thesis.**

This is the main focus of your paper. To make the strongest possible argument, do not skip any steps, and try not to rest your argument on any premises that your reader might not be willing to accept. If you use a claim that your reader might find doubtful, then you must try to give the reader convincing reasons for accepting it. It will almost always be more effective to use a single argument and make it as compelling as you can than to use more than one argument supported less comprehensively, so avoid taking a "shotgun" approach by using multiple weaker arguments. In presenting your argument, be straightforward in your language, and say precisely what you mean. At times you will need to use examples or otherwise elaborate, yet you must still be as concise as possible – unnecessary words or information will distract and confuse your reader.

- **In order to strengthen your argument, anticipate and answer objections to it.** In most philosophy assignments, this will be an essential part of your paper; it helps support your main argument and makes it more compelling. When you present an objection, you must always present a reason or reasons for thinking it true; the simple negation of a thesis is not an objection to it.

GOOD WRITING EXAMPLE:

After offering her argument, Jen summarized her conclusion and introduced an objection as follows:

As I have shown clearly in my reconstruction of Smith's argument, the word "free" as it appears in Smith's first premise (meaning uncaused) must be interpreted differently from the word "free" as it appears in Smith's third premise (meaning unforced) – otherwise at least one of those premises would be highly implausible. But in that case, Smith's argument is logically invalid.

It might be objected that I have interpreted Smith's argument unfavorably. I can think of only one other reasonable interpretation of Smith's argument. It uses the same first two premises but has a different third premise...

Jen might reply to the objection she has imagined by showing that Smith's argument would suffer some other defect if it were reconstructed in the way the objection suggests, such as resting on a logical fallacy or an implausible premise.

You should always raise and reply to the strongest objections you can think of rather than making up unconvincing objections that you find it easier to reply to. If you cannot think of a decisive reply to an objection, you should admit this, and then give your reader some reason to think the objection might not succeed anyway. If you cannot offer such a reason, you might have to go back and revise the thesis that you want to argue for. In some cases, the correct response to an objection, if you cannot answer it, will be to start your paper over and argue for a point of view opposite to that which you started with. If this happens to you, congratulations on making a philosophical discovery!

Sometimes, an assignment will contain instructions to think of one or more objections to your thesis and defend against them. Generally, except for the very shortest assignments, of three double-spaced pages or less, you should take such a requirement to be implicit even if it isn't mentioned outright. Also except in these very brief papers:

- **Briefly conclude by explaining what you think your argument has established.**

In presenting your argument, be straightforward in your language, and say precisely what you mean. At times you will need to use examples or otherwise elaborate, yet you must still be as concise as possible – unnecessary words or information will distract and confuse your reader.

Don't try to write a philosophy paper from scratch, from beginning to end: you must leave plenty of time to plan things out first. Think about the assigned topic for a while, and figure out a possible thesis and a rough argument for it in your head. If you're finding this hard, start writing rough sketches of relevant ideas. You'll throw a lot of this material away later, but the act of writing can help you to think things through. When you're ready, begin to develop a master *outline* on paper. Your outline should show your thesis and your argument in abbreviated form but with maximal logical clarity; try to use one line for each logical step of your argument. Make sure it includes potential objections and replies, using just a couple of lines for each.

You'll almost certainly find, as you produce your outline, that you need to revise pieces of your argument or even your entire answer. Keep writing sketches of pieces of your paper throughout the outlining process if it helps. Continue revising the outline until the argument in it is completely clear and satisfactory to you. (Try explaining your argument to someone else; if you can't explain it, your outline needs more work!) At this point, write a first complete draft of your paper from your outline, focusing on clarity of the overall structure of your argument.

Once you have a first draft in hand, continue to revise it, with both the argument's structure and your particular word choices in mind. Save your drafts as you go along, so that you can go back if you change your mind. Read your paper out loud or have a friend read it to work out which parts of your argument might confuse or fail to persuade the reader and need more work. Be open to changing your mind and your arguments at all stages of the process, and keep your outline up to date as you do. Your final draft should offer the clearest expression you can manage of your final, properly outlined argument.

Evidence

From your philosophy instructor, a request for evidence for a claim is generally a request for an argument, or for a better argument. While philosophers may from time to time make use of scientific generalizations or results, they generally avoid the messy and specialized business of collecting and arguing about empirical data, and confine their investigations to their armchairs. This is a broad generalization; sometimes empirical evidence from psychology, physics or other fields of inquiry can be put to good use in philosophical arguments. But if you do use such evidence from elsewhere, never just assume that it solves your philosophical question: be careful to explain exactly why it is relevant and exactly what we can conclude from it, and do make sure that you accurately report what the scientists have to tell us.

Philosophers still find a lot to argue about even when they put empirical questions aside. For one thing, the question of what sort of empirical evidence would be needed to decide the answer to a question might itself be a non-empirical question that philosophers discuss. For another, philosophers spend a lot of time discussing how different claims (which may be empirical) relate logically to each other. For example, a common philosophical project is to show how two or more views cannot be held consistently with each other, or to show that although two views are consistent with one another, they together entail an implausible third claim. If successful, this type of argument, known as a *reductio ad absurdum* or *reductio* for short, shows that we have reason to reject at least one of its premises.

EXAMPLE OF A REDUCTIO

- **Premise 1:** People sometimes ought morally to do what they are not in fact going to do.
- **Premise 2:** If a person morally ought to do something, then they could do what they ought to do (Principle that “Ought implies can”).
- **Premise 3:** If a person is in fact going to do one thing, then it is not the case that they could do something else (Determinism).
- **Conclusion (from 2 and 3):** People never ought morally to do what they are not in fact going to do

Here, the conclusion contradicts the first premise. If the argument is logically valid, it shows that the three premises of the argument cannot all be true. A further argument would be needed to show which of the three premises ought to be rejected.

Philosophical arguments are not always in the form of a *reductio*; we often need to start from some basic premises that our ultimate conclusions will depend on. Unless they are scientific results as mentioned above, they should generally be claims that any reasonable reader can be expected to agree with, and they might be drawn from common experience, or from our stronger intuitions. So, for example, one might begin an argument with the intuition that murder is wrong if anything at all is wrong, or with the common experience that things look smaller when they are further away. When you introduce a set of basic premises, you should be careful to avoid the fallacy of *begging the question* – which is to say, using any premises that one would reasonably doubt if not for one’s prior acceptance of the conclusion the argument attempts to establish. (This is the correct logical use of the phrase “begs the question”, by the way. Avoid using the phrase “begs the question” to mean raises the question, at least in philosophy papers.)

EXAMPLE OF A QUESTION-BEGGING ARGUMENT

- **Premise (1):** I have religious experiences.
- **Premise (2):** If anyone has religious experiences, then God exists.
- **Conclusion:** God exists.

Note that in this argument, the term “religious experiences” is ambiguous between two readings. On one reading, it means genuine experiences of something supernatural. On this reading, premise (2) is plausible, but premise (1) is question-begging, since one would have to assume that God exists to think that one has had a religious experience. On a second reading, “religious experiences” means experiences *as if* of something supernatural. But on this reading, premise (2) is implausible. Finally, the argument is not logically valid (it *equivocates*) if the term “religious experiences” means a different thing in each of the two premises. If the writer of this argument had defined his terms more carefully, its weakness would be clear. Ambiguous terms in philosophical arguments are a common problem, and can mask other weaknesses.

Since a lot of the things philosophers talk about are very abstract, it may be difficult to bring our common experiences and intuitions to bear on them. This is one place where examples may be a useful source of evidence. Examples can also help clarify the intended meaning of terms. Philosophers make great use of *hypothetical examples* in particular, and you should feel free to use them yourself.

A GOOD USE OF EXAMPLES

Jen is arguing for the thesis that it is permissible for me to perform some actions that have foreknown side effects which it wouldn't be permissible to aim at directly. She uses examples successfully both to elucidate the notion of a "foreknown side-effect," and to help bring our intuitions to bear on her thesis:

A foreknown side-effect of an action is an event or state of affairs that one does not aim at when one acts, but that one knows will (likely) result from one's action. For example, I decide to drive to class in order to save time. I know that my driving will leave the parking space in front of my house empty. The empty parking space is a foreknown side-effect of my action: I don't aim at it, because my aim is only to get myself to school faster.

...

To help prove my point about the difference in permissibility between aims and foreknown side-effects, I will use the following hypothetical example: Bill the bomber pilot has decided to bomb an important munitions factory. Bill knows that the factory is next to a hospital, and that about 1,000 civilian casualties are likely. But bombing the factory will bring an early defeat to the enemy by cutting their arms flow. This will demoralize them and help end the war. Bill's action, I contend, may be permissible. Now I'll just alter the case slightly: Bob the bomber pilot has decided to bomb a munitions factory. Bob knows that the factory is next to a hospital, and that about 1,000 civilian casualties are likely. In fact, bombing the factory is the best way to bring about such a high number of casualties, and this is why Bob has decided to bomb there. Bringing about this many civilian casualties will help weaken the enemy's resolve and thereby bring an early end to the war. (It will also have a side-effect of cutting their arms flow). I contend that Bob's action is clearly impermissible.

Examples like these might bring clear moral intuitions, and if Jen can construct an example in which she can convince us that it is indeed clear that something would be permitted as a foreknown side-effect but not as an aim, she will have a good argument for her thesis.

There are a couple of types of "evidence" that you should not use in philosophy papers: Do not argue that a claim is true, or is likely to be true, just because someone of great authority believed it. Authorities can be wrong, and

philosophers want to see the arguments for a view. And do not argue from what the dictionary says about something. If the dictionary defines truth as "correspondence with reality", you cannot use this as an argument that truth is correspondence with reality because either you are treating the dictionary as an authority, or you are citing it as a reporter of common usage. But philosophers don't want to know what most people think or assume about what truth is, they want to know what is actually the case! (N.B.: you may also be misled when you consult the dictionary because some words have technical, philosophical meanings within the subject that differ from their ordinary usage.)

Sources

You may freely use the arguments of other philosophers in your papers as long as you credit them appropriately, and also do your own philosophical thinking. Again, if you need to explain someone else's argument, you must do so in your own words and according to your own clear understanding of the logical steps involved in it. It is also extremely important that when you explain the arguments of other philosophers, you interpret them *charitably*. This does not mean that you are barred from criticizing them, but rather that you must interpret each author as holding the strongest possible argument consistent with what they have written. If a philosopher's argument seems obviously wrong, then you probably do not understand it properly. Even if a philosopher's argument seems right, you must take great care to avoid confusing their argument with any other argument that sounds similar to it.

You can help yourself to avoid these difficulties by training yourself to read philosophy articles extremely slowly and carefully in order to understand the precise steps of the author's argument. It is not unusual to have to read a philosophy article several times in order to grasp its details. Philosophy is difficult by nature: to avoid making things even harder, make sure that the argument in *your* paper is absolutely as clear and easy to understand as possible!

If you are asked to offer an argument or an objection and the assignment does not require that it be your own, then you may generally use one that you have learned in class or from the readings, with proper credit. In this case, you should not only put the argument in your own words and in the logical form that seems clearest to you, but also see whether there is any way in which you can improve on the argument you have heard. Perhaps you can offer reason to modify it, or offer extra considerations in defense of it that help explain why you yourself find it plausible. Look for ways to show that you are doing your own philosophical reasoning.

Conventions

Certain conventions are helpful and generally expected in philosophical writing:

- **Avoid direct quotes.** If you need to quote, quote sparingly, and follow your quotes by explaining what the author means in your own words. (There are times when brief direct quotes can be helpful, for example when you want to present and interpret a potential ambiguity in the text of an author's argument.) When you paraphrase, you must do philosophical work in doing so: explain any ambiguous terms or technical terms in the source, and remember that your task is not to explain the author's sentences in the text but his or her argument: aim to show that you've understood it and aren't merely repeating it in different words.
- **Use first person personal pronouns and possessive pronouns freely; signpost.** Phrases such as "I will use the term 'realist' to mean..." are useful in clarifying your use of concepts and terminology. Phrases such as, "I will argue that...", "I will now show that...", "I will give three examples...", "My second objection is..." or "My argument has shown that..." are an extremely useful aid to communicating the structure of your arguments and your paper overall. Use "sign-posting" phrases like these frequently in your papers in order to give your reader a clear sense of *where your argument is going* at all times (note that such sign-posting phrases are not always formulated first-personally, e.g. "Smith offers three main objections ... Smith's first objection is ... but it might be replied that ... Smith's second objection is ...").
- **Say exactly what you mean, and no more than you need to say.** Use simple prose and short, simple sentences. If you can complete your argument in fewer pages than the assignment allows, look for premises or steps that might need further support, or anticipate and answer additional objections. Add examples where they may help to clarify the meaning of a concept or a claim or to persuade a doubtful reader of something. A philosophy paper should establish a modest point as clearly, carefully, and concisely as possible.
- **Be careful with specialized language.** Certain terms and phrases are reserved in philosophy for special, narrow meanings that are peculiar to the subject. These include *deduction*, *begs the question*, *valid*, *invalid*, *sound*, and *unsound* (used to describe arguments), and *vague* (used to describe terms or concepts). Understand how these words are used in philosophy before you use any of them in your writing.

Use "sign-posting" phrases frequently to give your reader a clear sense of where your argument is going

- For a longer guide on this topic, see: A Guide to Philosophical Writing by Elijah Chudnoff. <http://isites.harvard.edu/k24101>
- Jim Pryor's web page at: <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching> has some other introductory resources you will find useful, including his "Guidelines on Reading Philosophy" (because you need to learn to read in philosophy before you can write!) and some notes on "Philosophical Terms and Methods."