Writing a Philosophy Paper

Writing a good philosophy paper is in many ways just like writing any other good paper, but is in some ways very different from the kinds of papers you may be asked to write in other disciplines. Certain elements common to all papers—for example, structure and organization—are particularly important in philosophy papers, and certain practices forbidden or required in other disciplines will not be here. Above all, what you should aim to produce is a *reasoned defense of a thesis.* The thesis is what you are trying to get your reader to accept, and the reasoned defense is the argument or arguments that justify the acceptance of your thesis. Of course, "argument" here means a *philosophical argument consisting of premises and a conclusion.*

This handout explains the **three main criteria** by which your philosophy paper will be graded, along with more specific expectations and guidelines.

1. Show that you understand the problem.

One major function of the paper assignment is to provide you with an opportunity to demonstrate your understanding of the philosophical issues we have covered. Unlike classroom discussions, papers allow you as much time as you need to think and plan carefully exactly what it is you mean to say, as well as the option of revising once you've said it.

Most of your paper topics will ask you to respond to the arguments of philosophers we have studied together in class. Even if you create your own topic, it is very unlikely that you will be able to write a good paper without engaging with these arguments. In presenting other philosophers' views, you should always strive to be *accurate.* What's more, you should strive to be *charitable.* This means giving the strongest, most plausible interpretation of their views (even if it will make your work harder!). We would not be studying these philosophers if they didn't have something valuable to offer; if you don't see anything valuable in the argument, chances are that you've somehow misunderstood it.

You should not think of paraphrasing and summarizing others' arguments as mere filler. You want to situate your paper in the context of the larger "narrative" of the philosophical problem; this will show that you are making a valuable contribution. Moreover, even summarizing involves some philosophical work. For starters, a good paraphrase or summary involves putting others' claims *into your own words*, which requires both comprehension and interpretation. Also, it should include only the claims that are *important and relevant*: important for accurately representing the argument, and relevant for the purposes of your response to the argument. Presenting others' arguments is, in effect, setting the stage for your own arguments.

2. Be clear.

Even better: be perspicuous!

per·spic·u·ous adj \pər-ˈspi-kyə-wəs\
plain to the understanding especially because of clarity and precision of presentation; not subject to misinterpretation or more than one interpretation

This is exactly what you should be aiming for! (Try saying "perspicuous" out loud a few times. This is not a philosophically useful exercise, just a fun one.)

Philosophy deals with extremely difficult problems—because the subject matter is often highly abstract, not subject to empirical investigation, and controversial, and also because the arguments can be long, intricate, and subtle. For these reasons, *clarity and precision* of thought and writing are the greatest of philosophical virtues.

Here are some ways to make your writing clear and precise:

Define your terms. You should define any term that 1) is technical, such that an ordinary person might not know its meaning, 2) refers to an abstract or controversial concept, such that people might disagree about its meaning, or 3) is being used with a meaning other than its ordinary meaning. It is fine to use such terms in these ways—and often the philosophers you're responding to will do just that—but it is extremely important that you specify exactly what you will mean when you use the term. If you decide to define your own usage of some term, you should not let it stray implausibly far from its ordinary meaning or beg the question.

Make the structure obvious. In your introduction, lay out a plan for the paper. Set up the problem, then describe how you will approach it and the thesis you will be defending. You can do this by referring to your major premises and the ultimate conclusion you will reach, along with any objections you will consider. This isn't a mystery novel- you should give away the ending! It's also not a scientific research paper: the first-person voice is entirely acceptable. Good introductions often include statements like "I will begin by...and then proceed to...", "I will defend/reject the claim that...by arguing that...", and "I will consider the objection that...and conclude that this objection succeeds/fails."

In the rest of the paper, use *transitions and connectives.* These words are your best friends! Examples include "because," "furthermore," "therefore," "however", "despite," "similarly," "after all," "for instance," and "in conclusion". You should use them whenever you introduce a new point or idea to show how this new piece fits in with the rest of the pieces. You will need them at the beginning of paragraphs, and also between different parts of the same paragraph. What these words do is point out the logical relations between claims (whether some claim supports, contradicts, or follows from another), which makes your writing more fluent and easier to understand.

Distinguish your arguments from others'. Whenever you engage with another philosopher's arguments, be sure to indicate which claims are hers and which claims are yours.

Here is some general advice: Pretend that your audience is impatient and skeptical. They're too impatient to take any time figuring out what long, awkward sentences mean or to fill in missing links between parts of an argument. They'll just skip over anything that isn't clearly and simply presented, or broken down into many small steps. And they're too skeptical to interpret what you say charitably; if your claim is unclear or could be understood in more than one way, they'll go with the less plausible interpretation. Of course, your grader will not be like this imaginary audience! But it will help your writing if you try to be so clear, precise, and perspicuous that an impatient and skeptical audience can't misunderstand.

3. Give reasons for everything you say.

Remember, a philosophy paper is a *reasoned* defense of a thesis. It's not enough just to reject some view, you need to show *why* it's wrong. And it's not enough just to state the view that you believe is true, you need to show *why* it's right. This means giving arguments of your own. There are two ways for an argument to be unsound: one or more of the premises is false, or the conclusion does not follow from the premises. So if you attack another philosopher's argument, you should give reasons to think that her premises are false, or that her conclusion doesn't follow from her premises. (To show the latter, you can *give a counterexample*: some way that the premises might still be true even if the conclusion is false.) On the other hand, when you defend your own argument, you should give reasons to think that your premises are true, and show how your conclusion follows from your premises.

You don't have to consult secondary sources. The paper should consist primarily of your own ideas, not other people's, except those to which you are responding. The texts covered in class should provide you with plenty of material to respond to. You may use secondary philosophical sources to get ideas about how to approach the problem, but you should not expect to find "the answer" there. You may use empirical information as support or examples for your claims—a real-life case, some statistical data, an incident in books or movies—but these should not make up the bulk of your arguments. (Often, there will be little information of this sort, and it will only lend limited support to your arguments.) You should cite any additional sources that you use.

You don't have to defend a completely original view. That "Philosophers have argued for centuries whether…" is true (but makes a terrible introduction, so don't do it!), which might make you feel that whatever you want to say has already been more or less said by some other philosopher. What you can do, however, is make some *original contribution* to that view. This could be a counterexample to some claim, an application of some principle, a thought experiment that supports some intuition, a previously overlooked distinction, or a new and promising interpretation of some text. These are the kinds of tools you can use to construct your own arguments.

You don't have to be able to answer every objection. If you don't have a good reply to some objection, you should still mention it; otherwise, it will look like you just failed to think of that possibility. But even if you acknowledge upfront that you can't answer an objection—which you should—it's not the end of the story. You can point out that the opposing view can't answer it either or faces even stronger objections, or that the cost of accepting this undesired conclusion is small relative to the other benefits of your view.

A note on gender pronouns: It used to be accepted convention to use men or masculine pronouns to represent humankind in general (eg. "All men are created equal." "He who…") However, many people argue that this kind of language reinforces sexist norms of privileging the masculine over the feminine. While this language use is subtle and not intended to be sexist, it is precisely through such conventionally and uncritically accepted micro-level practices that gender stereotypes and prejudice are maintained today. I urge you to consider using gender-sensitive language ("he or she", "she" rather than "he", the singular "they") in your examples and claims, or at least to make sure that your use of gender pronouns reflects your considered views on these issues.

Further Resources and Bibliography

Anderson, Elizabeth. Grading Standards.

Campbell, Gregory, and Dowell, John. Transition Words.
https://www.msu.edu/~jdowell/135/transw.html
        (highly recommended)

Cruz, Joseph. Writing Tutor for Introductory Moral Philosophy Courses.
http://web.williams.edu/wp-etc/philosophy/jcruz/moraltutor/index.html
        (highly recommended)

"perspicuous." Merriam-Webster.com. Merriam-Webster, 2011.
        (perspicuity is highly recommended)

Portmore. Douglas. Tips on Writing a Philosophy Paper.
http://www.public.asu.edu/~dportmor/tips.pdf
        (recommended sections:
        1. Constructing a Thesis Statement
        11. Writing Clearly and Precisely)

Pryor, Jim. Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper.
http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html
        (recommended sections:
        Paraphrases
        What Happens If You're Stuck?
        How You'll Be Graded)

Tooley, Michael. Writing Philosophy Essays. http://spot.colorado.edu/~tooley/WritingEssays.html
        (recommended sections:
        II. An Overall Structure for Essays Focusing Upon an Argument
        III. An Overall Structure for Essays Focusing Upon a Thesis)