Guidelines for Writing a Philosophy Paper
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# 1 Philosophical writing

Compared to some forms of writing, philosophical writing is straightforward. This reflects that the goal of a given piece of philosophical writing is usually directed at a fairly straightforward task, such as presenting and criticizing another philosopher's argument for a given conclusion, or presenting a new philosophical argument or account. Philosophy papers are thus closer to the "proof" end of the writing spectrum than the narrative, free association "journaling" end of the spectrum.

**What you are doing in a philosophy paper should be clearly reflected in the structure and content of the paper, at each step of the way.**

# 2 Format requirements

These are the format requirements for papers written for my courses:

1. Adhere to the page count requirements for the paper.

2. Use 11 or 12 point Times Roman or Times New Roman font, with 1" margins.

3. Double space your paper.

4. Use page numbers.

5. Put page references in parentheses in the text, not in footnotes—and avoid the dreaded 'ibid.'s Put your bibliography in a separate 'References' section at the end of your paper.

# 3 Who are you writing for?

At this stage of the philosophical game, you should be writing in such a way that **an intelligent person who is unfamiliar with the topic at hand will be able to follow your discussion**, at each and every step along the way. Your mother or father, or one of your non-philosophy friends, should be able to read your paper and understand what is going on.

# 4 Structuring your discussion

Help your reader out by **dividing your paper into sections**.

1. Start with a short introduction (usually just a single paragraph), where you say in a concise and general way what problem or issue you will be addressing, and how you will be addressing it. The intro is effectively a general map to the rest of your paper. Remember that your reader needs to be able to follow you every step of the way, so don't use terminology that hasn't been introduced yet, and don't go into any confusing detail.

   For example, if your topic concerns raising an objection to Wilson's account of what makes modal claims true, you might start with a couple of examples of modal claims, provide a general description of Wilson's account of such claims, and say that in your paper, you will be raising an objection to this account. It is useful to your reader if you conclude your intro by briefly saying what you will be doing in each section. ('In Section 1, I will present Wilson's account of modal claims. In Section 2, I will argue that Wilson's account has the consequence that everything we believe is false. In Section 3, I'll consider, on Wilson's behalf, a possible response to my objection, and I will argue that the response fails.')

   Note: While it is nice to briefly situate the interest of your topic, avoid starting your paper with this sort of cliché:

   > Down through the ages, the problem of X has troubled the deepest of minds . . . .

2. The rest of your paper should also be divided into sections, with informative section headings indicating what you are doing in each section.

3. For papers under 20 pages, there is generally no need to have a concluding section at the end of your paper. If you do have such a section, don't just repeat what you've already said; add value to the discussion by, e.g., flagging some consequences of your discussion, or indicating how further investigation into the topic might proceed.

Be just as clear about what you are doing inside each section. Help your reader at each step of the way. Don't be (too) afraid to state the obvious. **Clarity** is one of the main virtues of philosophical writing. For example, if you are presenting an argument (your own or some other author's) be explicit about the content and structure of the argument. What are the premises? Why might someone believe the premises? What is the conclusion, and how does it follow from the premises? If the argument is an instance of a specific argument type—modus tollens, reductio ad absurdum, etc.—say so at some useful point.

## 5   Concrete illustrations

Philosophical arguments and views can sometimes be pretty abstract. It is usually very helpful to your reader if you can **give a concrete illustration of what is under discussion**. For example, if you are discussing claims of type C, give some specific examples of such claims. Similarly, if you are presenting objection O to a given account, provide a concrete case illustrating the problem.

## 6   Argumentation

Reasoned argument, of course, is the heart and soul of philosophy. There's nothing mysterious about this. Arguing in a reasoned fashion is just what you are doing when, for example, you pro-

vide a counterexample to some account, or note that a given thesis has a certain (good or bad) consequence.

There are certain terms and expressions philosophers use to let their readers know where they are in a given stage of an argument. These include:

- Quantifiers: all, any, every, most, some, none, a, an, the

- Qualifiers: but, however, still, on the other hand

- Necessary and/or sufficient conditions (e.g., "free will is necessary for moral responsibility")

- Disjunction: either P or Q; neither P nor Q

- Existence: is, are

- Negation: not

- Inference: therefore, thus, hence, so, because, since, follows, implies, infer, consequence

- Additional inference: moreover, furthermore

- Qualified inference: and, but, however, despite, notwithstanding, nevertheless, even, though, still

- Possibility/probability: possibly, necessarily, can, must, may, might, ought, should

- Truth/falsity: true, false, probable, certain

- Soundness and validity: sound, unsound, valid, invalid, fallacious, supported

- Reasonableness: logical, illogical, reasonable, unreasonable, rational, irrational

- Argument constituents: assumption, premise, belief, claim, proposition

- Arguments: argument, reason, reasoning, evidence, proof

Make sure you understand and help yourself to these terms in your paper. Your reader will thank you.

# 7 Some remarks on style

## 7.1 Write clearly and straightforwardly

Write clearly and straightforwardly. Avoid ambiguity. Avoid pretentious or overly formal prose.

## 7.2 Using "I"

It is perfectly OK—and indeed, desirable—for you to insert yourself into the discussion (using "I", "in my view", etc.). Ultimately, a philosophy paper is supposed to be an investigation into what *you* think about a given position, problem, argument, etc.

Indeed, it is very important that you **cue your reader about who is claiming (assuming, arguing, etc.) what**. Use language in such a way as to distinguish the following cases:

1. Cases where someone you are discussing has made a claim (e.g., "Lewis claims that BLAH").

2. Cases where you are making a claim (e.g., "In my view, Lewis's claim is too strong, for the following reasons").

3. Cases where the claim reflects some general consensus, philosophical, commonsensical, scientific or otherwise (e.g., "It is generally thought that Lewis's claim is too strong, for the following reasons", or "It is commonly assumed that morality requires free will"). Be careful of over-generalizing, however.

## 7.3 Attitude and tone

1. In philosophy, opinions and feelings don't count for much, so in general it isn't useful or illuminating to simply express your opinions to your reader. You may not like a given claim, but what counts in philosophy is giving some principled reason for not liking the claim.

2. On the other hand, *intuitions* can be worth noting, since in philosophy our intuitions can be important guides when we're trying to figure out how to understand some phenomenon or other, or when we're trying to figure out whether a given consequence is acceptable or not. Again, you should back up claims about intuitions with a concrete illustration or two.

3. Strive for a neutral tone. Generally speaking, try to avoid expressions of overt enthusiasm or hostility. In nearly all cases, they are distracting and besides the point.

4. **Be charitable**. You should present positions and arguments in the best possible light (do unto others . . . ). This is not only the nice thing to do, it's also good philosophy. You don't want to attack a "straw man"—not least because you don't want your criticisms to be easily cast aside on grounds that they are misdirected. Moreover, if you can make a good case against your opponent's best possible position, then you will have accomplished more. Some of the best critics of a given position are those who are able to sympathetically "get inside" the position, so as to see both its strong and its weak points.

# 8 Quotations and citations

## 8.1 Quotations

**Don't "over-quote"** when presenting a given author's position or argumentation. **Paraphrase except when the exact wording is somehow crucial to what you are saying**.

## 8.2 Citations

1. You should cite, one way or another, all ideas that are not your own. There's nothing wrong with being inspired by something you saw or read elsewhere (in an article, book, or on the web). Just be sure to reference the source. This is mainly to inform your reader about who thought or said what, but it's also in your interest to **cover your butt against charges of plagarism**.

2. Again, put detailed bibliographic references in a separate section (under 'References') at the end of your paper. Don't use footnotes for this purpose—it's inconvenient for your reader.

3. For in-text citations, it is usually enough to list the author (if needed), year (if needed) and page number (if needed) in parentheses. For example, I might have the following in one of my papers:

   > As Hempel notes, "a good many scientific explanations may be regarded as deductive-nomological in character" (1998, p. 686).

   If you are only discussing one article by the author, you only need to reference the year the first time you cite the author. Afterwards, you only need the page number:

   > Hempel goes on to note, however, that some scientific explanations are probabilistic or statistical in form (p. 688).

   **In citing text, you need to use your common sense**. Put enough into your in-text citations that your reader can locate the relevant text if need be.

## 8.3 Bibliographic formats

1. For a book, the bibliographical reference is as follows:

   > Nagel, Thomas, 1985. *The View from Nowhere.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

   Here Thomas Nagel is the author; '1985' is the year the book was published; '*The View from Nowhere*' is the title of the book (note: the book title is italicized or textbfd); 'Oxford' refers to the place where the book was published; 'Clarendon Press' refers to the publisher. All this information can be found in the first few pages of the book.

2. For an article, the bibliographical reference is as follows:

   > Montero, Barbara, 2001. 'Post-Physicalism'. *Journal of Consciousness Studies.* 8:61–80.

   Here Barbara Montero is the author of the article; 'Post-Physicalism' is the title of the article (note: the article title is put inside single quote marks); '*Journal of Consciousness Studies* is the name of the journal that the article appeared in; '8' refers to the journal volume number; '61–80' refers to the page numbers of the article in the journal.

3. For an article in a collection, the bibliographical reference is as follows:

Paul, Laurie, 2004. 'The Context of Essence'. In Frank Jackson and Graham Priest, eds., *Lewisian Themes*. New York: Oxford University Press: 181–195.

Here Laurie Paul is the author of the article in the collection; 2004 is the year the collection was published; Frank Jackson and Graham Priest are the editors of the collection; 'Lewisian Themes' is the title of the anthology (note: the book title is italicized); 'New York' refers to the city the collection was published; 'Oxford University Press' refers to the publisher; 1982 is the year the anthology was published; '181–195' are the page numbers of the article inside the collection.