

PHILOSOPHY DEPARTMENT WRITING GUIDE

Overview

Writing papers for a philosophy class can seem daunting, especially for those new to philosophy. But students can relieve themselves of much of the anxiety that surrounds writing philosophy papers by paying attention to a few fundamental elements common to philosophy papers. This document provides some general guidelines for both how to structure your essay and what you should work to accomplish in the various parts of your essay.

Essay Structure

Your essay can be broadly divided into three main parts: the introduction; the body, and the conclusion. Your objective for these respective parts is quite different, and it is important be aware of the distinct goals for each.

Introduction

The introduction of your essay is the doorway to your paper. Accordingly, your reader should finish the introduction understanding the subject matter of your paper and what the aim of your paper is.

The most important part of an introduction is the thesis. A thesis is that part of the introduction that states clearly what you intend to do in the essay; indeed, it represents the overarching objective for writing the paper. Broadly conceived, a philosophical issue might be described as involving an open-minded examination and rational defense of some subject matter upon which there may be some question raised. Correspondingly, a good introduction leads your reader to understand that there is a genuine issue to examine (i.e. it sets the context for the reader) and lets your reader know both what your view is on the subject matter and that you intend to develop an argument in favor of that view (i.e. it offers a clear and identifiable thesis).

A sample thesis for an essay on the morality of capital punishment (the morality of capital punishment is the philosophical issue and the sentence below is the thesis):

In this essay, I argue that state sponsored executions are morally indefensible since they do not serve as an effective deterrent for violent crime.

Some additional advice for writing introductions:

- (1) *Proportion your introduction to the length of your essay.* If your paper is 3 pages in length, your introduction shouldn't be 1.5 pages. Alternatively, if you are writing a 20 page paper, your introduction can and should be much more robust.
- (2) *Limit the content of your introduction to context setting and a thesis and avoid providing any of the meaty argumentation in defense of your thesis* (see the "Body" section of this guide).
- (3) *Consider the strategic use of the first person 'I' and 'My' etc. in formulating your thesis* (and indeed throughout your writing). Note for example the sample thesis above stating "I argue that..."

Body

The body of your essay is where all the interesting philosophical work is done. Your introduction lets your reader know what you are going to do, but the body is where you actually do it. Generally speaking there are 2 core objectives for the body of your essay (1) Explaining the philosophical issue you are engaging and (2) Developing an argument to support your view on that issue.

- (1) Explain the Philosophical Issue

In order for your reader to fully appreciate your position on some philosophical issue, the reader must first understand what that issue is. To successfully explain a philosophical issue, keep in mind the following:

- (a) Define key terms, particularly central concepts and philosophical theories. Philosophy is riddled with jargon that both characterizes philosophical problems and serves as answers to those problems. Make sure your essay integrates the appropriate jargon and your reader (who you should presume doesn't know anything about the subject matter) understands the meanings of those terms.
- (b) Survey the views and arguments influential thinkers have had on the issue you are engaging. Influential thinkers are influential for a reason: they have been seen as having important things to say. Intelligent philosophical papers show familiarity with what influential thinkers have had to say on a subject matter. Note too that sometimes this surveying may seem easy, precisely because the philosophical issue just is an interpretation of, or critical response to a view or argument from an influential thinker. But even in those cases, there are often OTHER influential thinkers, past or present who have had important things to say about the original thinker and it may be helpful to integrate their ideas into your paper.
- (c) Use illustrations. General descriptions of ideas and terms are great, but leading your reader to true understanding often requires the use of examples.

Some additional advice:

Explaining philosophical issues is one of the elements of essay writing that can give essays greater depth. Once concepts and theories are first introduced and explained, and/or a first survey of influential thinkers is offered, and/or illustrations outlined, NEW philosophical issues arise, there are additional concepts and theories that are brought in, more influential thinkers weigh in, and the demand for more illustrations increases. One has to, of course, be selective depending on the length of one's essay; but if you wonder "in what way can I build-up the contents of my essay?" you might consider first making sure you've fully explained the initial philosophical issue(s) but subsequently you should consider digging deeper into the various issues that arise as a result of how to think about the first issue(s).

-- Develop an Argument in Defense of your View

Philosophical writing almost invariably will require you to construct an argument (i.e. give reasons, provide evidence, offer a justification) for the view you favor as revealed in your thesis. Remember, the thesis presents your overarching objective for your paper, and you are now bound to execute what you've promised. Here is some advice for thinking about how to successfully construct an argument for your view:

- (1) *Don't beg the question!* That is, don't just say X must be true, because it is (versions of this problem also come in the form of one saying "it just makes sense that X" or "it is evident that X")
- (2) *Rely on allies.* Too frequently students mistakenly believe that constructing an argument for one's view on a philosophical problem requires them to bake the argument from scratch, so-to-speak. In reality, even the most famous of philosophers associated themselves with the thinking of others or further developed well-known arguments and ideas already in place. If you did a really good job of surveying influential thinkers in your efforts to explain the philosophical issue, some argument or theory should resonate with you, and the best approach for developing your own argument is to simply make good use (by extending or clarifying e.g.) of ideas that are already in place.
- (3) *Think about objections!* Good philosophical writing involves not only introducing reasons for thinking a position is correct, but also in engaging the reasons your

opponent would give for his/her view. Part of your opponent's argument can, and ideally (for him or her) would, work to show why your position is mistaken, and you can strengthen significantly your own view by successfully responding to objections your opponent would likely give.

Some additional advice:

Like explaining a philosophical issue, developing an argument is one of the elements in essay writing where you can increase the depth of the essay. In particular, creating a dialectic where you present your view, think of objections, respond to those objections and repeat, is an effective way not only to build content but really work to show the reasonableness of your position.

Conclusion

The conclusion is the final part of your paper, and in it you want simply to make certain your reader understands what you've done in your essay. To this end, your conclusion should at least restate your thesis and provide a very brief summary of the core argument you offered in defense of your thesis. In lengthier papers, one might also gesture to what remains to be done (e.g. acknowledge open questions or cite other applications to which your thinking might be applied). One important piece of advice as you consider your conclusion: you should not be springing anything central to your paper on your reader at this point. Not infrequently beginners to philosophy wait until the end of the paper to tell their reader their view and their reasons. It should be clear from the advice about introductions and the bodies of essays that this is a mistake, and, in reviewing your essay make sure you do not make this mistake.

Final Bits of Advice:

A few final notes on writing philosophical essays:

- (1) It is very important to be conscious of the language you choose to express ideas. Students frequently misuse words or choose language that is imprecise. One must be aware of the meaning of words and be sure to choose language that is appropriate—a word that seems “close to” or “something like” or “good enough” for expressing what you want is never actually good enough. Even more, in some cases the core of the philosophical issue being discussed turns crucially on the meaning of a term, a term that is interpreted differently by different people. In those cases, you need to not only make explicit how you understand that crucial term, but also work to provide some supporting argument that that is the best way to interpret that term.
- (2) The worst mistake that students make in writing is just plain carelessness. Proofreading should be a routine part of essay writing, so much so that you should not consider your essay finished until it has been proofread with a fresh mind.
- (3) There is a great deal of variability in philosophy classes and even between assignments within a single class about use of secondary sources/references and formatting, so make sure to understand the instructor's expectations; however, every paper should have a title and page numbers. Additionally, there is one notable sub-point to the issue of referencing and formatting worth making explicit.
 - (i) As a general rule, every paper should be composed primarily of one's own words (not simply a collection of quotations or replications of words from PowerPoint slides). This point is particularly relevant for understanding issues of plagiarism. Here is the SIUE student handbook policy on plagiarism:

“Plagiarism is presenting another existing work, original ideas, or creative expressions as one's own without proper attribution. Any ideas or materials taken from another source, including one's own work, must be fully acknowledged unless the information is common knowledge. What is considered ‘common knowledge’ may differ from subject to subject. To

avoid plagiarizing, one must not adopt or reproduce material from existing work without acknowledging the original source. Existing work includes but is not limited to ideas, opinions, theories, formulas, graphics, and pictures. Examples of plagiarism, subject to interpretation, include but are not limited to directly quoting another's actual words, whether oral or written; using another's ideas, opinions, or theories; paraphrasing the words, ideas, opinions, or theories of others, whether oral or written; borrowing facts, statistics, or illustrative material; and offering materials assembled or collected by others in the form of projects or collections without acknowledgment... Normally a student who plagiarizes shall receive a grade of E [F EFFECTIVE FALL 2001] in the course in which the act occurs. The offense shall also be reported to the Provost."

This guide is offered to help students better understand how to write philosophy papers. It is, however, far from comprehensive and universally agreeable. There is much about philosophy writing that goes unmentioned here, and there will be many ways in which expectations for individual paper assignments in individual classes might deviate from the recommendations of the guide; you may, in fact, find some instructors who plainly disagree with advice given in the guide. Students should ALWAYS defer to the expectations and directions of their instructor. Still, students should find these suggestions appropriate across most of their philosophy classes.

Some Additional Resources:

This guide provides general advice, but in keeping with the aforementioned advice about providing illustrations, there is an accompanying sample essay that illustrates many of the points laid out in this guide. To view the sample essay, go to: http://prezi.com/e3g97b1zf9lp/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy

Writing Philosophy: A Student's Guide to Writing Philosophy Papers, Lewis Vaughn, Oxford University Press, 2005. This is an excellent book-length guide to writing philosophy papers, often used as a textbook for Philosophy 480: Senior Assignment.

James Pryor, a philosopher at NYU, has constructed an extremely helpful online resource for writing philosophy papers. The web address is: <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

As mentioned previously, expectations for formatting your essay can be rather puzzling. If your instructor does not provide strict guidelines, it's best to have a default style of formatting. MLA (Modern Language Association) is a common formatting style, and you can review details about this style of formatting here: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>