

How to write a good philosophy paper

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The Challenge

Philosophy is a very abstract and difficult subject.

Often, we're writing about issues that we, ourselves, do not fully comprehend.

It's very easy, therefore, to write a paper that is hard to understand.

Part of becoming a good philosopher is learning to communicate your ideas clearly and effectively via the written word (it's a pretty useful skill outside philosophy too).

However, there's no one 'correct' style, and you have to find your own way of writing (this guide is **not** definitive!).

The people marking your papers will have a number of criteria in mind:

- (1) Does the paper make a *clear* argument?
- (2) Are the steps of reasoning *justified* and *cogent*? Does the strength of the conclusions match the strength of the arguments?
- (3) How sensitive is the author to the *range* of issues?

In this short guide, I'll provide some advice for improving your writing (at least as far as my marking is concerned), and common mistakes (many of which I used to make, and still fall foul of occasionally).

1 Clarity

In order to assess whether or not an argument is good, one first needs to understand what the author is intending.

This is perhaps the area where most philosophy papers fall down.

Common mistakes:

- (a) *The Unclear Conclusion*: Often one sees a paper in which it's not clear what is being argued. It's much easier to follow reasoning when you know what the target is.
- (b) *The Pull Back and Reveal*: Even if the conclusion is clear, sometimes you only get it in the last few sentences. While this may give the paper a 'punchy' feel, it just means you have to read the whole thing again.
- (c) *The Finnegans Wake*: Everyone likes a paper that reads well and uses fancy words. This should never come at the expense of clarity.
- (d) *The 'What are we talking about again?'*: Sometimes, a paper will ascend to such high levels of abstraction that it's hard to see exactly what the author is driving at.

What you can do:

- (i) Have a clear *structure*. Provide an introduction outlining what you'll do, the main body of the paper (possibly divided into sections) where you make your arguments, and a conclusion where you clearly state what has been argued and how.
- (ii) *Signpost* where you are going. Repetition is fine as long as it aids clarity. For example:

Introduction

In this paper, I argue that *X*. My strategy is as follows: After these introductory remarks, in section 1 I do *Y*. I then, in section 2, use *Y* to argue that *Z*. Having established *Z*, section 3 concludes that *X*.

1 *Y*

I begin by establishing *Y*. Argument, argument, argument...

(iii) Write in *short* sentences in the *simplest* language possible.

Bad style: If I were to speak to you in an overly convoluted tone, one on which I use a veritable menagerie of different linguistic items characteristic of an overly pretentious sesquipedalian, then, given long enough exposure to this idiosyncratic writing style, the reader finds it hard to evaluate what the original point of the discussion at hand was (this is especially so when there are a wide variety of different cases to talk about, such as when writing a negative argument, a positive argument, or trying to reach some other conclusion *et cetera*)—the manner is somewhat reminiscent of certain historical figures who confuse complicated vocabulary with conceptual clarity.

In other words, the use of overly complicated language just makes your writing hard to understand and frustrating to read. Short, clear sentences are easy to parse. They sometimes also have far more impact on the reader.

(iv) *Highlight* especially important points. For instance this guide was written for the following reason:

The Writing Improvement Thesis.

It is possible to improve a person's writing on the basis of discussion about style and content.

(v) Provide *examples*. In many of the above pieces of advice, I've added an example to help clarify what's going on and make the discussion more concrete.

2 Justification

We've discussed how to explain your arguments *clearly*. You still need to make *good* and *convincing* arguments, however.

Common mistakes:

- (a) *The Obvious Fallacy*: Simply making a very bad step of reasoning. We've all done it, but should avoid it where possible.
- (b) *The Dogmatic Philosopher*: Asserting claims without further justification. e.g. "Some people say *X*, but I think *Y*." No further argument given.
- (c) *The Devil in the Details*: Failing to provide argument for non-trivial steps in reasoning. e.g. "We have already argued that *X*. Clearly then, *Y*."
- (d) *The Name Drop*: Simply stating famous philosophers arguments without explaining them or giving further critique. e.g. "The ontological argument attempts to establish the existence of God on the basis of the concept of a perfect being. But as Kant taught us: Existence is not a predicate." The argument is then not explained.

What you can do:

- (i) *Question* yourself. When writing, imagine that your interlocutor is someone who disagrees strongly with you. Try and see your argument from their position, and think about whether or not you'd then find it convincing.
- (ii) *Check* your arguments. If you can't yet state your steps of reasoning in an itemised list, you probably don't yet understand it.
- (iii) *Back up* any positive claim you make with further argument or points, even if it is just to flag that most people find the statement intuitively plausible. For example "This results in *Y*. But *Y* is hugely controversial, not least because it means that [counter-intuitive stuff]."

- (iv) *Explain* any sources you use. Almost any time you cite or quote someone, you should explain what it is they say, and how it is relevant, and why it is either bad or good.
- (v) Be *humble*. Make sure your conclusions actually reflect the strength of your arguments. e.g. Arguing that a position conflicts with empirical data and then concluding that it is incoherent is too strong.

3 Range

We've reached a point where we can (i) make a clear argument, and (ii) make it well. We just need now to figure out what we're going to talk *about*.

Common mistakes:

- (a) *The Grand Theory of Everything*: The paper tries to present an original 'from scratch' theory that really needs a book-length treatment.
- (b) *The Encyclopedia*: The paper tries to cover every topic relevant to the subject at hand, and as a result fails to discuss any of them in detail.
- (c) *The Niche*: The paper uses the question as a 'hook' to address a very small area of study, and ignores relevance to the bigger picture.

Note: It looks like (b) and (c) are in *tension*! What you can do:

- (i) Be *precise* about the question you are answering and how you are planning to understand it.
- (ii) Aim for a *manageable* level of breadth that allows you to really get into the details of the problem.
- (iii) Use *footnotes* to flag areas that you'd like to discuss, but don't have the space to do so.

- (iv) *Read* the literature and be aware of what has been said so you can attack the question appropriately and show your knowledge by briefly stating how your conclusions fit into the debate.

4 Resources

These are just a few ideas and there's *lots* out there.

It's definitely a good idea to pull writing advice from different sources. Here's a few more:

Very good: Jim Pryor's 'Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper':

<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing>

More informal writing advice: 'Orwell's Five Rules for Effective Writing':

<http://www.pickthebrain.com/blog/george-orwells-5-rules-for-effective-writing/>

To get an idea of the literature out there, look up topics on the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (it's like a peer-reviewed Wikipedia written by experts):

<http://plato.stanford.edu>