

Some Remarks on Writing a Philosophy Paper

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(1) Writing a paper might be tough, no matter what area you are writing it in. And it is always difficult to write a paper in some discipline for the first time. If you have trouble doing it, keep in mind that everybody has similar problems. That does not always help, but it sometimes does. In what follows, you will find some remarks on writing a philosophy paper that may give you some assistance. However, since every topic and every paper is different, there is no recipe for writing a good paper. Put differently: *There are many different ways of writing a good paper.*

(2) Consider writing your paper an exercise in *clear, well-structured, and concise writing*. Do not just start writing, but construct the train of thought of your essay in advance. The bulk of your time spent working on your paper should be spent on thinking things through. When you actually write the essay, it might be helpful for both the reader and for yourself to structure the discussion using numbers.

After completing the first version of your essay, reconsider your ideas. Consider whether and how each section contributes to the development of your argument. If you realize that a section does not contribute much, erase it, or at least shorten it. If you think that its contribution is not as clear as it should be, rewrite it. Include all the relevant ideas without being redundant. Do not make the same point several times. Repetition does not solve problems that otherwise remain unsolved. (Needless to say, occasional summaries are not meant by “repetition” here.) Once you see how each section

contributes to your argument, reconsider the subsections or paragraphs. Ask whether and how they contribute to that part of your argument that is covered in that very section. And finally, check the sentences. Do they contribute to your argument in their respective paragraph? Are they clear, or may they be obscure? Are the words well-chosen? Try to put yourself into the position of the reader, try to see whether you would be able to follow your discussion if it had not been you who wrote it down. Keep in mind that you will not sit next to the reader of your paper when he or she studies it! Try to say things as briefly as possible without sacrificing substance. If you take some time to re-write a paper (possibly repeatedly) according to this pattern, you may profit from this exercise for the rest of your student career (and beyond). Good writing skills only grow out of hard work. Start working on your paper early. It is extremely unlikely that you will be able to write as good a paper as you are capable of if you start writing it two hours before it is due.

Stylistically, avoid run-on sentences. Be careful with references: What is “it”? Who is “he”? Use structuring words/phrases like “but”, “however”, “yet”, “nevertheless”, “on the one hand/on the other hand”, “in conclusion”, “to sum up”, “from this it follows”, “first/second/third, etc.”, “therefore”, “as opposed to that”, etc. These words help the reader follow your discussion. But use such phrases with caution and do not overuse them. Do not just say “Thus it follows...” if it is not at all clear how and why and from what “it” follows. Do not just say “Therefore” if it is not at all clear what logical relation you are exploiting here. Carefully use expressions like “claim”, “argument”, “defense”, “criticism”, “follows from”, “is derived from”, “supports”, “proves”, “underlines”, “contributes to”, “shows”, “demonstrates”, “makes plausible”. Such words/phrases are of central importance to philosophical craftsmanship, and they should be used with the appropriate care. (Your TF will pay a lot of attention to such phrases when reading your paper!) Do not write sentences like “I feel that this

is correct". Philosophy may at times be very emotional, but whether or not one feels that something is correct does not support or reject the claim one is discussing.

It is very helpful for a reader if you start your paper by motivating why the question you are addressing is an interesting one. It is also helpful if you briefly summarize your train of thought at the beginning – it is good for you because it forces you to put your ideas in a nutshell, and it is good for the reader because it is likely to render your essay a lot more readable.

(3) Keep in mind that you are writing a philosophy paper, not a psychology, sociology, or history paper. We do not mainly want to know how someone's background or life story could explain how he could come to hold certain views (even though, of course, that is very interesting in general). We want to know the reasons he/she gives us, or does not give us to defend his/her position.

When you write a paper in response to a question, your essay will contain an *expository* part and an *argumentative* part. That is, you will have to figure out what your author's argument is, and then evaluate and criticize it. When you write the expository part, do not just quote extended parts of the text – try to give a *rational reconstruction* of the author's point. That is, state, in your own words, what his or her claim is (and quote only the key passages or terms) and how it is defended, that is, what reasons the authors gives for it. Of course, your rational reconstruction of the argument needs to be connected to the text; you have to say what passages you have in mind when making your point. After all, you are giving a textual interpretation. Try to do justice to the author's point of view. If there are passages in the text that would be difficult to reconcile with your interpretation, you need to mention those passages and acknowledge the difficulties.

Even if you completely disagree with what the author says, even if you hate her, faithfully

figure out what his points are and give her position as benevolent a reading as you can reconcile with the text. Try to understand what's plausible about it. Try to assess how else one might support such a claim. That is, even if you disagree with an author in the end, try to give as much support to her position as possible. Refuting a strong position is more exciting than making sure that your opponent's position looks silly only in order to point out then that it is a misguided view anyway. Keep in mind that your paper is not a political flyer. The point is not to "win" but to develop a balanced discussion. There are good arguments "even" for claims that are very different from Western mainstream thought as we know it today. Realizing that can be a very enriching experience.

When you develop arguments for your own view, try to imagine what one could say against them. Think about the issues from different angles. You do not necessarily have to come up with a definitive answer to a question if you see that there are equally strong reasons on both sides. *But notice that the claim that both sides are equally strong also needs to be defended!* It is not a default position to be adopted when one cannot think of any convincing arguments!

(4) Keep in mind the precise wording of the question (if you write your paper in response to one). Do not work on anything nearby. Do not try to do too much. Philosophy begins by pursuing claims to some depth, not by trying to look superficially at as many things as possible. Do not make any large claims that you cannot possibly defend in your paper, or at least indicate that you have a sense that you are making a big assumption for which you might not be able to argue in full in a short paper.

When composing your paper, try to get the proportions right. Write a short introduction to motivate the question and to introduce your argument. But in a 6-8 pages paper, this introduction

should not be much longer than half a page. Focus on the important issues, try not to neglect a significant point in favor of an extensive elaboration of an unimportant one.

What matters most for us is not what position you are defending and what answers you come up with, but how you explain them, how you argue for them, how you look at counterarguments, and to what extent you assess the relative merits and weaknesses of reasons and how they support your claim. So do not worry too much about coming up with the “right” answer. What matters is the right way of doing it.

Use “technical” aids such as spell checkers and grammar checkers. However, using such tools does by no means deprive you of rereading your paper after you revised it. For obvious reasons, in particular the spell checkers find precisely those mistakes that are annoying, but do not interfere with the meaning of a sentence!

(5) A few words on plagiarism are in order. Plagiarism is any use of another person’s work without giving proper credit to that person. Plagiarism is a very serious matter in academic life, so please be sure to give proper credit to any sources you may consult. You do not have to provide any special references if you refer to material that was introduced in lectures. That is, there is no need to say things like “As we discussed in lecture on Sep. 27, ...”. But if you use a book or an article, you have to provide proper references to this work.

When assessing the merits of your paper, we will be asking questions like these:

- Do you clearly state what you are trying to accomplish in your paper? Is it obvious to

the reader what your main thesis is?

- Do you offer supporting arguments for the claims you make? Is it obvious to the reader what these arguments are?
- Is the structure of your essay clear? Is it clear what parts of your paper are expository and what parts include your own critical discussion?
- Do your contributions go beyond what we have discussed in the lectures? This does not mean, of course, that you need to present ground-breaking new theories. But you should develop your own arguments, your own way of elaborating or criticizing or defending some argument we looked at in class. Do not just summarize what others have said.
- Is your prose easy to read and easy to understand?
- Do you present other writers' view accurately?

Typical comments on student papers would be:

- "This is unclear"
- "Explain this claim"
- "Too hard to follow"
- "Why do you think this is true?"
- "This is not relevant"
- "Give an example"