

Philosophy Paper Writing Hints

By M. Murray

BEFORE WRITING

1. Explore the arguments on all sides - pro and con.
2. Be **fair** to the opposing side - Don't misrepresent.
3. Be aware of any **assumptions** you may be making. Can these assumptions be supported?
4. **Audience.** You are always writing with someone in mind. Choose your audience as an intelligent, fairly knowledgeable person, who nevertheless holds a position contradictory to your own. Your task is to convince her about the merit of your position. To do so, your **tone** matters.

ORGANIZATION

1. **Introduction.** Clearly explain the issue you are addressing, where you stand on that issue, and roughly how you will attempt to defend that stand. It isn't a detective novel, where the reader must wait until the end to see who did it. Be upfront, be bold.
2. **Body.** In the body is a development of the issue you're addressing, the argumentation for your position, the main objections to your argument, and your replies to those objections. You may also require a reply to the reply of your reply to the objections! The organization of these components can vary. Note: First and second year undergraduate papers are not long. A few well-developed arguments are better than many only sketched. Readers tend to jump on your *worst* argument and forget the rest. So make sure your worst argument is still adequate. If not, delete it. Also, the more arguments you present, the greater the chances of introducing inconsistency.
3. **Conclusion.** Here you sum up what your basic conclusions are. Note: readers assess how well the arguments support that stated conclusion, so don't try to hoodwink your reader by pretending a grander conclusion than that supported by your arguments.

WRITING

1. Use **clear, concrete language.** People tend to think that if they don't understand something, or have no good argument to give, an extra use of large words and never-ending sentences will conceal this from the reader. As Goethe remarked about human nature, when an idea is wanting, a word can always be found to take its place. Remember who your audience is, though: one who is not so easily swayed.
2. **Get to the point** quickly. Don't waste time with fluff. Say, "In this paper I am arguing against the existence of God," or better, "God does not exist," rather than, "Philosophers for centuries have debated about the existence of God..." Your reader has already fallen asleep. She knows this already (recall who your audience is). Plus,

you frankly don't have the space. The more superfluous words and phrases, the less space for good argument. **A note about "I."** It is common to be told not to use "I." Often it is redundant. "I think that ..." is entirely unnecessary. If you didn't think it, you wouldn't write it. When you're saying, "Hello," you don't say, "I'm saying Hello." But I'd rather you say "In this paper I am arguing that ..." rather than "This paper is arguing that ..." Papers don't have mental states. Too often when we delete "I" we're leaving a subjectless sentence, and that is a far worse crime.

3. **Fit conclusion to premises.** Don't claim more than you have shown.
4. **References.** Reference all work you've used, even if merely paraphrased. In fact, use quotations sparingly, if at all. Use quotations only if it is an exceptionally wonderful quotation, or you want to comment on the specific wording: even then, quote only the necessary. Page-length quotations are like fingernails on a blackboard.

REWRITING

1. **Be clear!** You may know exactly what you mean to say. Often, however, it is far from clear to anyone else. Check for missing links in your argument. "There is design in the world; therefore God exists" is missing: "Anything with design requires there to be a designer." (That God should be the designer requires a yet further link.) Explain the connections between your ideas -- even if they seem perfectly obvious to you. Points that *seemed* connected to you may not *really* be connected after all.
2. Check for **grammar**. After you let it sit for a day or two, do you STILL know what you were trying to say? Ask a friend to read it, not for content so much as for clarity. Does your friend understand what you were getting at? If not, assume it is your fault, not your friend's.
3. Check **spelling** and **punctuation**. If this isn't checked, the reader may assume other more important things weren't checked either. The reader loses confidence in your abilities, and the power to persuade is dissipated. **Common errors:** its-it's; their-they're-there; then-than; to-too; apostrophe use in general; run-on sentences; dangling modifiers; punctuation woes, spell-check-approved inanities....*Never* feel bad to look up words or grammatical rules. People think it's a sign of scholarship not to need a dictionary. This is false. It's a sign of scholarship if you use a dictionary.

WRITING A PHILOSOPHICAL ESSAY (2005 version) by Professor Tony Couture

1. One should know the standard requirements and usual techniques involved in good writing in order to take responsibility for one's own development of the many skills that enable consistent performance. Two standards are particularly important in philosophy: showing one's knowledge, and communicating appropriately. The student should a) show that he or she can give an accurate explanation of philosophical distinctions, doctrines or positions and b) communicate in the right tone, mainly by rehearsing arguments and stating relevant truisms in an original and compelling way. One of the most important skills that you can develop is the ability to understand how some one else would read what you have written, or to imagine yourself as another person receiving these communications. Philosophers are mainly concerned with the best arguments, and sorting out the good, the

bad and the ugly arguments is the main way that you show your knowledge.

2. A common error by students learning to write in philosophy is to write the wrong kind of essay. A philosophy essay is a persuasive essay or a contemplative essay, but not an expository essay, or a free association essay. Thesis defense papers are the most common form of persuasive essay writing in philosophy, and require that you state an original proposition to be debated in the essay which guides the reader to your conclusion and creates an editing tool for you to revise your essay and organize it better. There is also a tradition of meditative writing in philosophy (illustrated by Descartes in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Tolstoy in *A Confession*, or Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*) which explores and contemplates a topic in a more speculative way. Nevertheless, a contemplative essay has organization and is heavily revised, unlike a simple free association essay which represents stream of consciousness and does not need editing. Always remember the different types of essay, know what type your professor is asking you to write, and follow the directions or get help if you don't understand the directions well enough.

Research

3. Make sure that you understand how much and what kind of research the professor expects in the paper. Often, the best places to start are traditional reference sources such as *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Paul Edwards, New York: Macmillan, 1967. This reference book contains many valuable articles that provide an overview and show you what philosophers usually say or have said about many topics. It is located in the Reference Section of the library. Also, introductory texts to philosophy are available in the stacks that may be helpful. There are many internet sources now, including the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, or Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

4. The main point in reading up on your subject is to make yourself into an expert who knows the arguments on all sides. You need to find out what others have written about your topics, take notes of the key points, and educate yourself first. You then are in a position to state a proposition which is not just your OPINION. Your thesis should never be a tautology (an apple is an apple), or an uncontroversial statement which is true by definition, a fact, or a statement about yourself and what you believe. Your thesis should represent what you have learned in your research and show that you know the difference between simply stating an opinion and a well-informed position on the matter.

5. Learn to use your source material properly. Look at the references that your source makes, or that several sources make concerning the same topic, and this will help you determine where the best work on that topic is commonly believed to be. Also, you should be able to evaluate your source material critically. You should be able to distinguish between facts (straightforward information) and the writer's interpretations and opinions (more controversial, idiosyncratic views). You do not have to believe everything you read. There may be other, more plausible interpretations of the facts, and the writer's opinions may not be well supported by the evidence.

Organization of the paper

6. The most important feature of a philosophical essay is its organization. At the start, it states an interesting and manageable point (also known as your "thesis statement") that is to be supported or proved through the essay. This is a precise assertion that can be shown to be right or wrong, not an ambiguous or fuzzy claim. The start of the essay also lets the reader know what to expect concerning how the argument will proceed and what task you have set for yourself. It is very useful to place a short plan of the essay in the second paragraph. Ask the professor to explain her or his criteria if needed. You should always know what is required (minimum standards), what is optimal (standards of excellence), and what is to be avoided (standard flaws).

7. One does not organize the paper completely before one writes. Rather, one begins with a very rough outline, writes a good deal, makes an outline of the contents of that rough writing, and then edits oneself thoroughly. It is in this final editing process that a successful paper is created.

8. The organization should reflect your aim: you are trying to convince the reader that the arguments for your conclusion(s) are better than the arguments against your conclusion(s). The best papers are single-mindedly focussed on this important task. The main point of your paper must be explicitly identified in an introduction. It will be elaborated in the main body (75% of essay) through several sub-points, each supported by some evidence or examples. Each sub-point should be clearly relevant to the main point so as to produce an easy to follow, cohesive argument. Your conclusion should summarize the essay and not introduce new topics, irrelevant information or other surprises.

9. PLAN OF ESSAY: After introducing and briefly explaining your thesis in the first paragraph, you should also explain the basic approach that you will be using in the second paragraph. This may involve defining terms briefly, breaking your topic down into components, or explaining what you will assume or what you will be challenging. Make an outline, revise it carefully, and use it well.

The Thesis Statement (the central organizing claim of your paper, and how to create it)

10. You must articulate your thesis statement near the beginning, after first capturing the reader's interest. The thesis statement is the precise conclusion that you want the reader to believe after having read your essay. It represents a position taken on a certain topic, a perspective defended throughout the essay. The purpose of using a thesis statement is so that your argument is easier to follow. You set yourself a plan and then you execute it. The reader can then judge whether you have set yourself a manageable task, and compare what you say you are going to do with what you actually do. A philosophical essay without a clear and cogent thesis statement is not acceptable and may receive a failing grade merely for that reason.

11. One useful definition of a thesis: "A thesis is not a statement that can be immediately proven by recourse to recorded information; it is, instead, a hypothesis worth discussing.

Your thesis sentence should reveal to your reader not only the argument you have chosen but also your orientation toward it, the conclusion that your paper will attempt to prove, and how you will go about establishing it." (Graybosch/Scott/Garrison)

12. Standard problems with thesis statements which ought to be avoided include:

- a) it is a platitude, uninteresting, or too self-evident to be worth arguing;
- b) it is more than one sentence or too complex;
- c) it is imprecise, has no definite focus, too general;
- d) it forecasts only part of your paper or topic;
- e) it is simply false or misleading;
- f) it is only remotely related to the assigned topic;
- g) not manageable in the essay length allowed (too hard);
- h) it is not supported or proved throughout the essay;
- i) not a precise assertion that can be shown to be right or wrong;
- j) it is not identified, or placed conspicuously at the start of the essay;
- k) not a position taken on a given topic or a perspective defended throughout the essay;
- l) does not make your argument easier to follow;
- m) not cogent or to the point, not compelling;
- n) too provisional or rough, not refined into a clear statement of your position to follow; o) not used properly as an editing tool.

(Note that some of these problems regard the thesis statement itself, and others regard how it is used in the essay as a whole.)

13. You should start with a provisional thesis statement, a rough idea that you play around with, expand and change as you improve your knowledge of the subject. The thesis statement is primarily an EDITING TOOL: it helps you to determine what is relevant or not. It keeps you from straying off topic. For if you say something in your essay, you should always also make it clear how it connects up with your thesis. If it can't be connected without stretching it, then it is likely not relevant and should be edited out. If your thesis doesn't help you focus your editing, it needs to be re-written so as to provide a core idea which will guide you.

Key writing virtues (forms of excellence to strive for)

14. Intellectual order is what enables a reader to follow your argument properly. It is best kept relatively simple, and the use of parallels and related examples also helps. If there are transition problems between thoughts or paragraphs, then your argument is weak. Learn to monitor yourself every time that you change subjects in your writing. If you can't explain why and it is not obvious how your first thought is connected to the next, then improve the connection, or start a new paragraph. Too much order can result in mechanical, tedious writing. Try to aim for thought that is easy to follow yet also spontaneous, personable, and pleasant to read.

15. Conciseness involves the ability to recognize places in your writing where you have used ten words but you could have used three words to say something. Without sacrificing clarity, always go for the shorter way of expressing yourself. Focus on the argument itself:

if you can remove phrases that add nothing to your argument, cut them out, and replace them with something that does add to your argument. Concise writing never contains wasted words, verbal acrobatics, or any form of nonsense, useless jargon, and fancy wordplay for the sake of wordplay.

16. Being selective: In addition to practicing economy in the quantity of words used, you must practice focussing on the particularly philosophical issues associated with a topic. Being selective requires enough knowledge about a subject to stick to problems and points that philosophers tend to dwell upon. These include conceptual clarification, rehearsing the usual arguments for and against, definitions, questions about values, and questions about justification and interpretation. Being selective means not using long quotes in place of your own work. Select the key words, or the most important words only, and put everything else into your own words where you can.

17. Clarity of thought is essential to any successful communication. If the reader can't understand whether you mean X or Y (ambiguity), a thought is half-baked (incompleteness), or there is no effort to share a thought (obscurity), then there is a problem. You must aim for the mean between being too obvious and being too unpredictable. The main means for producing clear thinking include plainness, simplicity, unpretentiousness, brevity, fluidity and readability. Above all, be direct in choosing what you want to say.

18. Degree of difficulty: "The student whose thesis is...easy to prove has not shown much originality, and deserves very little credit. The harder the task, the greater is the ingenuity required, and the credit to be gained." (J. Feinberg) Although originality and creativity are hard to measure exactly, be aware of the need to think for yourself and go beyond what has been said in class, or the readings. Do not try to do too much, too fast, however.

Editing yourself

19. Good writing must be done in stages. Do not expect to produce an essay of high quality if you write it straight through in one draft. Neglect of the various stages of writing is the single worst failing of student composition. Too often students fail to prepare adequately before they begin their first draft and then fail to revise. Signs of haste and incompleteness lead to a bad mark.

20. There are three main stages in writing: 1) Selecting a topic, researching and outlining your strategy very roughly. 2) First draft: free writing (uncensored writing, putting your mind on paper where you can see it, objectifying your philosophical stream of consciousness, this provides you with raw materials to be organized later. Sometimes it helps to put individual points on small cards or note paper and then switching them about until you find a more logical order for them).

3) Editing yourself (polishing, check that your sentences are full sentences, that your paragraphs are not too short or too long, avoid hodge-podge paragraphs, be concise, make the antecedents of pronouns clear, use a dictionary to check your usage or spelling, eliminate any obscure thoughts).

21. The best way to learn to edit yourself is by first separating the many tasks and performing them single-mindedly. As you develop, you will become able to do all these tasks at once in one sweep through your text.

22. You should proofread your paper because it appears much less professional with minor, easily corrected errors. Minor errors can cause a major bad impression.

Quotations and References

23. When a quotation is less than 4 lines long, it should be placed in quotation marks (“ ”) and left in double space with the rest of the text. Any quotation that is longer than 4 lines should be placed in a single-spaced indented paragraph blocked off from the text, and the quotation marks are omitted. In this longer quotation, the quotation marks are not needed because of the way the block of text is separated from the rest of the essay. Avoid quoting passages over two paragraphs or of any substantial length, learn to paraphrase and be more concise than your sources themselves. After quoting, be sure to integrate that quotation into your ongoing argument carefully by re-stating its importance, showing its relevance to your thesis, or noting how it advances your argument one step further. Regarding references, the practical question to ask is: Can the reader find this quote on the basis of the information I have supplied? Give the author, the publisher, the page number, year, place, and the edition. (Some professors are more particular than this, follow instructions if needed.)

24. It is very important to keep the line between your own original writing (everything not in quotation marks or indented and single-spaced) and the original writing of others which you are quoting (always marked off by quotation marks or indented single-spacing). "Plagiarism is the use of someone else's words as your own without crediting the original writer for those words." (The St. Martin's Handbook for Canadians, by Lunsford, Connors, and Segal, Scarborough: Nelson, 1991, p. 207). You do not have to give credit to things that are common knowledge, or facts available in a wide variety of sources. You do have to give credit whenever you use other person's words exactly, when paraphrasing the judgments or claims of others, or when using statistics. The principle is that you do not want to deceive the professor into believing that you have done work that you have not really done.

25. Plagiarism includes borrowing someone's paper and submitting it as your own, quoting someone's exact words without mentioning the source, paraphrasing someone else's ideas or argument without mentioning that you are doing that, or putting only one reference at the very end of a paragraph in which every sentence was borrowed from the source (and so every sentence ought to be acknowledged as derived from the source, not merely the last one). Self-plagiarism is the practice of using an essay that you wrote for one course as your essay for another course without the permission of the professor. It is sophistry and cheats you out of exercise and proper education.

26. Plagiarism is legally wrong because it violates an author's property right, or the right to decide whether some words ought to be published or presented to others. Plagiarism is morally wrong because it involves theft, cheating, lying, or misrepresentation. It is

particularly dishonourable in an educational context because it undermines the whole project of improving yourself and learning. Professors have the right to question any student regarding the composition of an assignment and the duty to make sure that students do their own work. Suitable acknowledgement of authorship involves maintaining a clear line between your own work and the work of others which is established by use of names, notes, or punctuation.

Avoiding some common errors often made by university students writing essays:

27. Use apostrophes correctly. Generally, do not use contractions such as I'd, can't, don't, you're, in essays. The correct possessive form for an object ("the tree waved its branches") is its, not it's (the contraction for "it is"). Check your punctuation carefully when proofreading. Know when to use "then" or "than." You are responsible for your own good grammar, and should have a handy reference book to guide you while learning to write. Always use complete sentences.

28. Philosophy allows room for the expression of reasoned opinions, and this is unlike many other disciplines that insist that you stick to the facts only. However, this is not a license for pure subjectivity, but a permission to engage in some free-wheeling or exploration of what you think about your topic. You should avoid merely stating your opinion baldly, as if the reader must just accept the fact of your belief and leave you alone.

29. Adopt a professional tone of voice in your essay writing (formal). Do not act too laid back, or engage in posturing. Avoid colloquialisms (conversational forms used inappropriately in a formal essay setting). Essay writing is a serious business and it is unprofessional to joke too much or distract the reader with slang (guys, kids, jerks, nerds, etc).

30. Do not submit your essay by e-mail unless the professor specifies that this is allowed. Always contact the professor after submitting your essay indirectly (put under office door, mailbox or dropped off by someone else). Always keep a copy of your essay in case it is lost by you or your friend who was supposed to drop it off or the professor. An essay can be misplaced, or forgotten, or otherwise not received.

[Sources: Philosophical Writing: An Introduction, by Aloysius Martinich, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1989. "Preparing For and Writing Research Papers," author unknown, University of Windsor. "Standard practices for University Papers" and "How to Write an Essay Test" by Dr. T. Spira, History Department, UPEI. The Philosophy Student Writer's Manual, by A. Graybosch, G. Scott, and S. Garrison, Upper Saddle River" Prentice-Hall, 1998. Doing Philosophy, by Joel Feinberg, Belmont: Wadsworth, 1997; Thinking and Writing about Philosophy, by Hugo Bedau, Boston: Bedford Books, 1996]

CRITERIA FOR MARKING ESSAYS (2005 marking sheet) Prof. Tony Couture

The following criteria are listed in order of priority. Try to use this checklist on your own essay before submitting it. Pay attention to items circled by me in any future essay writing.

1. ARGUING SKILLS AND ORGANIZATION (40%)

- you understand the assignment, and follow directions appropriately, meet deadline
- plan of essay is explicitly stated, strategy is clear, structure of essay is sound
- appropriate quantity and use of quotations, properly integrated into argument
- proper use of examples to ground argument, awareness of counter-examples
- no transition problems between thoughts, proper attention to consistency
- knowledge of all sides of the argument, anticipation of common objections
- coherence and plausibility of the essay as a whole, shows knowledge of subject

2. INTRODUCTION AND THESIS STATEMENT (25%)

- thesis is clearly identified for the reader (italics, underlined, or "My thesis is...")
- thesis is one proposition, concise and shows position of writer plainly
- thesis has right degree of difficulty for the assignment, not too easy or too hard
- thesis is concerned with philosophical issues, introduction sets context properly
- reader knows what to expect and what task you have set for yourself

3. RESEARCH AND CREATIVITY (20%)

- you have consulted other sources, evidence that you have educated yourself on topic
- you have fulfilled the research requirement, proper bibliography, references
- essay as a whole is well-informed, engaging and instructive
- you develop an independent argument, essay is not too expository
- you have created fresh ideas, explored the material thoroughly, raised questions

4. ABILITY TO EDIT YOURSELF AND WRITING MECHANICS (15%)

- proper conciseness, no unnecessary repetition, plain and lucid writing style
- paragraphs are not too long (over 1 page) or too short (1 sentence)
- each paragraph develops one step in your overall argument, no hodge podge paragraphs
- sentences are all complete sentences, proper sentence structure and grammar is correct
- communication of ideas is clear and precise, no obscure expressions or odd usage
- gender neutral language is used, plurals are used instead of sexist singular constructions
- singular/plural agreement in a sentence, punctuation, spelling, proofreading
- titles are underlined or italicized, proper margins (1 inch), proper font (size 12)
- title page with topic number, name, course, professor, date submitted, word-count
- print is not too light to be read comfortably, no plastic folders or coloured paper