

# HOW TO WRITE PHILOSOPHY PAPERS (THAT DON'T SUCK)

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**Summary:** This handout covers information that can prevent you from writing an especially bad philosophy paper. Yes, this handout is long, but that's because there is a lot to know. Section one of the handout covers the general principles for writing philosophy papers. In section two, it makes explicit the six elements needed for any paper you will submit in this course (this is a particularly important section, especially if you haven't written a philosophy paper before). The third section discusses issues of style and tone. The fourth and final section will help you understand how I grade—so keep this handout available until you have gotten your paper back.

## I. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

**Understand the nature of a philosophy paper.** This is a paper about arguments. It is **not** a biographical paper, exploring your feelings or personal experiences as you see them pertaining to the topic. It is not a record of your stream of consciousness, detailing whatever thought happened to float through your head the evening before the paper was due. It is not an exercise in poetic writing. It is definitely not an invitation to make declarations about your religious convictions or your favorite divinely inspired text. It is a paper about only one thing: **arguments**.

Your goal is to provide excellent arguments in favor of your view, to consider the strongest potential criticisms of your view, and to provide a thoughtful response to those criticisms. If you can do all that with clarity of language, your paper is unlikely to suck.

**What should you assume about your reader?** Assume your reader is someone who doesn't know much about philosophy but is pretty smart and a generally reasonable person. She hasn't read the articles you will be assigned for this class. However, she won't need to because you will explain to her in clear and concise sentences what she needs to know in order to understand the issue you are addressing. Here's the thing to keep in mind, though: because your target reader is pretty smart, she is likely to make good observations or criticisms to obvious weaknesses in the paper. So be precise, cautious, and thorough—because I endeavor to be these things, at least when grading your paper.

### Don't make rookie mistakes!

- In papers of the size you will be writing, the narrower the topic, the better. It is a red flag if you think that in a short paper you have to take on an all aspects of an argument that a professional philosopher spent 40 pages developing. You are probably not focusing narrowly enough on the topic.
- Make sure you have read the whole text of what you are writing about. Students sometimes think they can get away with reading only one section and then get confused when they get hammered because they never got to the part where the philosopher explains his or her more complicated views on the subject. Similarly, if we read several articles on the subject matter, make sure you have read all the relevant articles. You **will** read all the articles for the class anyway, right?
- Avoid coming up with interesting synonyms for philosophy terminology. Most concepts in philosophy have well-defined terminology. Thus, you are wasting time trying to introduce synonyms for what are effectively technical terms. You wouldn't try to think of coming up with a synonym for 'enzyme' or 'molecule' in a science class. Don't try to come up with a synonym for 'freedom of the will' or 'substance dualism' in this class.
- Never say something like "since the dawn of time, humans have wondered about . . ." It is trite and unhelpful. Plus, humans weren't at the dawn of time (if there was such a thing).

**. . . and ABSOLUTELY required: Any paper you turn in for this class will need an explicitly stated thesis claim somewhere in the first paragraph** (or the second, under limited circumstances). If you don't know what that means, you should come talk to me immediately. Regardless of its other virtues, without a clearly stated thesis, your paper cannot move out of the B range— and that is only if I am feeling generous and everything else well-nigh perfect.

These are all just general pieces of advice. The real work, the mechanics of non-sucky philosophy papers is next.

## II. THE SIX FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENTS

**1. Get the exegesis right:** When you are doing the part of your paper that involves exposition of what the philosopher allegedly says, make sure you get it right. Talk to other students. Talk to your TA (if you have one). Talk to your professor. Nothing is worse for your grader than getting an otherwise great paper that just misunderstands what the relevant philosopher(s) actually meant. One way of doing that is to be very clear on two things. First, make sure you understand what any particular article or chapter is intending to do. For instance, it is clear that Hume doesn't think induction is justified. But what is the relation of this idea to his criticism of causation or to the idea of uniformity in nature? Getting clear on what someone is claiming is absolutely essential.

**2. Make arguments:** It isn't enough to say that someone doesn't take into consideration something that occurred to you—you have to explain why that consideration is important. For example, it isn't enough to say that Frankfurt misunderstands the concept of freedom. That may be true. Even so, you need to give **reasons for** why I should think you are right, and why it matters. Simply saying it is so, even if you turn out to be right, is unacceptable in a philosophy paper.

**3. Think about counterexamples, counterexamples, and counterexamples:** This is one of the most important tools in your bag of philosophy tricks. When criticizing a paper, it can allow you to quickly show the implausibility of some claim. Of course, this cannot always be done so don't be disappointed if you can't come up with a devastating counterexample in every paper you write in this class. But it is an ideal to strive for.

Counterexamples are also important when you are defending your position, because one of the most important things to do is to consider possible counterexamples to your claim. For instance, if you think free will should be understood as any instance of reasoning about what to do, what do you say about potential counterexamples like addicts, people who are being manipulated without their knowledge or consent, and so on?

**4. Do self-critical work:** Something that you should really try to do when you have finished making your main argument is to consider how someone would reply. This is really just a broadening of the point made above about considering counterexamples and it is repeated a couple of paragraphs below in the comments about “the basic format of any philosophy paper.” Work on trying to figure out how someone might object to what you have said and whether your position can overcome the response. As suggested above, one way of doing this is considering possible counterexamples. Doing this can make the difference between a good paper and a great paper. Of course, in papers of the size you are writing, this can be extremely difficult to do. Nevertheless, this is worth trying to work in, in any part of a paper topic where you are given an opportunity to get critical.

**5. Follow the basic format of any philosophy paper you will write as an undergraduate:**

- a. **Introduction:** short, to the point, and **containing a clearly presented thesis** (e.g., “In this paper I will argue that van Inwagen's Consequence Argument is not successful because it makes an unwarranted assumption about the definition of ‘can’.” Alternately: “I will argue that van Inwagen's Consequence Argument can be successful defended against objections to a supposedly unwarranted assumption about the definition of ‘can’.”).
- b. **Presentation of the argument** or claim you are going to analyze (e.g., “Van Inwagen claims that if determinism is true, that we cannot do otherwise . . . .”)
- c. **Analysis of the argument** (e.g., “The key claim is #4. Here, van Inwagen interprets ‘can’ in the following controversial way”). This is the part where you give reasons for thinking that the claim or argument you are analyzing is problematic. This section is typically the first place where you display your ingenuity.
- d. **Consider a response** to your analysis (e.g., “Van Inwagen could respond to the objection just raised in the following way . . .”). This is your second opportunity to display your creativity, knowledge, and philosophical power. In this part you try to defend the argument as best as you can, in a way that is consistent with the account or the overall spirit of the original paper, argument, or philosopher.
- e. **Repeat.** You will need to repeat doing (C) and (D) as necessary, based on how far you can push the argument, the amount of detail you are including, and the requirements of the paper. The more detailed

you can make (C) and (D), the more original it is, and the more of it you do, the better your paper is likely to be. Of course, one or two really well done criticisms are always better than 50 minor criticisms, even if the fifty are pursued through many levels. **In fact, in your typical undergraduate paper, you really ought to look at discussing only one or two arguments in any detail.** If you are pursuing more arguments than that, you are either biting off more than you can chew or else you are being too superficial.

- f. **Conclude.** Tell the reader how it all pans out and ultimately supports your thesis claim. Note: if at the end of your paper, you realize that the argument got someplace you didn't expect, go back and change your thesis claim to reflect that. This kind of thing happens all the time, if you are doing philosophy properly.

**6. Follow the formatting checklist:** The key here is to remember that your professor or grader is going to have to do a ton of grading, so anything you can do to make his or her life easier is going to be well-received. Here are some things you should verify about your paper before it is submitted.

- Cover page.** You should have a **separate, tree-killing title page** with your name, paper title, word count, class name—and any other info useful for identifying you—listed on that page, and only that page. This is important: your name and other identifying information should not be anywhere else on the paper. This way, the person grading it can flip over the title page and grade your paper fully anonymously, thereby minimizing the possibility of bias in grading.
- Give me **page numbers**, dagnabbit! Absence of page numbers **really** chaps my hide. Seriously. If I want to refer to a particular page in written comments, I don't want to have to count up all the pages every time.
- Word count goes on the cover page. If you are having trouble meeting the word requirement, you should either cut the weak arguments from your paper or work harder on generating more arguments against your view so that you can defend your view from criticism.
- 1" margins, all the way around. Don't cheat—these things stand out when you grade a lot of papers.
- Use a printer with sufficient ink. Be kind to your grader and s/he will be kind to you.
- No folders or plastic covers. It just makes transporting the papers a bigger pain. Plus, I hate looking like I'm grading elementary school projects.
- Footnotes are fine. Just make sure they are at the bottom of the page and not the end (i.e., footnotes and not endnotes), so I don't have to flip back and forth all the time.
- Citations: Do them properly, i.e., according to some standard format. Let me know where you are getting the quotes you use and on what page the person is making the strange claim that you are attributing to them. You shouldn't have to do too much quoting, but when you do, do it right.
- Article titles go in quotes; book titles are underlined, or better, italicized.
- Unless explicitly asked to, avoid quoting unpublished things, especially handouts by your instructor. Instead, go for the chunks of text that gave rise to the contents of these handouts.

### III. BEAUTY TIPS FOR THAT SPECIAL PAPER IN YOUR LIFE

- **MV's House of Style:** Anybody that tells you style doesn't ever matter in academia is either lying or clueless. Style matters in a lot of different things, and philosophy papers are no exception. The house style for the discipline of philosophy is writing that is BORING. That means no extravagant use of adjectives. That means "bare bones" sentences where you focus less on beauty and more on simplicity and clarity. If philosophy papers are going to be exciting, they should be exciting in virtue of the arguments and not in virtue of the way you write. The beauty of your writing will be in its simplicity and clarity. Related to this point is the elimination of anything that does not directly have something to do with the argument of your paper. Just tell me that you are writing about a quirky argument or claim made by José the Philosopher about moral realism, or whatever. Give me an idea of whether or not you think José's argument works or is plausible and whether or not it can be rescued if it fails to do what José claims. Then plunge right into the meat of the paper: exegesis and evaluation. Basically, write something like

nearly any philosophy article written after 1960.

- **The secret to saying true things in philosophy papers:** Besides getting lucky or being right, the best way to say true things involves what may seem like a stylistic point: be cautious how you phrase things. Don't go for a claim like "The locked room example totally devastates the principle of alternate possibilities" or "Armstrong's position is bastardizes the concept into absurdity" (actual quotes from undergrad papers submitted to me). Both claims sound arrogant and less plausible than "The locked room example presents a compelling reason to reject the principle of alternate possibilities" or "If my objection works, Armstrong's position appears to face serious difficulty." A subtler conclusion is going to be far more convincing to a thoughtful reader and less likely to make you sound like someone who understands very little about what he or she is talking about. It also has the benefit of being more likely true. Bear in mind that these are smart people writing these articles and that they have thought longer and harder about them than most of us will ever get a chance to do. That means that they have probably heard all of our objections before and may well have some equally "devastating" responses to them. That doesn't mean that we can't generate new, compelling, or true objections or consideration in favor or against their views. But it does mean that we aren't easily entitled to any sweeping claims about how they can't be right or how they absolutely must be right.
- **Charity begins at home:** In contemporary philosophy, there is a lot of (at least stated) interest in reading other philosophers in a way that puts their claims in the best possible light. Unlike many other majors (not intended as an insult, just an observation), we don't think it is very interesting to just attack what other people said. There are bad arguments everywhere, and it isn't very interesting to just go after someone for making a bad argument. The really interesting thing is whether or not you could beat the position if it were as well defended as possible. This isn't an exact science, of course. Sometimes, it means that you try to figure out the way the philosopher could have said the truest things and then you go after that. Other times, it means that you should be willing to entertain making a minor repair to a philosopher's position, in order to accommodate your criticism. Reading charitably is part of the spirit of cooperative problem solving that contemporary analytic philosophy purports to do. So, inasmuch as you want to succeed in this class, you should try to do it as well.

## IV. GRADING AND EVALUATION

### 1. Overview

I am sometimes told that I am a hard grader. Maybe this is why. I start with the presumption that your paper is a 'C', and that you work up or down from there. What I mean by 'C' is what it is supposed to mean: it signifies that you have a satisfactory command of the material. Roughly, a C range paper gets most things right, only minor things wrong, and demonstrates an adequate grasp of the issues. The conventional "repeat the stuff in class or the text or what the professor says" is a reliable way to get a 'C' grade. I'm okay with that if you are. If you want something in the B range, you have to do some that takes your paper beyond the material we read and discussed in class. After reading your paper I should have a clear idea about what your unique and good contribution to the issue is. For an A range paper, I have to have a clear idea about what your unique and excellent contribution to the issue is.

My goal is for you to improve, and to become a better writer and thinker than you were when you started the class.

### 2. Comments on the papers

If there is only one paper assigned in this course, and you want to receive comments on your paper, then indicate this at the top of the first page of the paper. I'm happy to put comments on your paper if you plan on reading them, so if that is you, don't hesitate to ask. Just don't waste my time asking for questions you don't intend to ever look at.

If there are 2 or more paper writing assignments in this class, I will automatically put comments on your first paper. **READ THE COMMENTS CAREFULLY; THINK ABOUT THEM, AND PAY ATTENTION TO THEM!!!!** Here's why: if you don't, I am less likely to be generous on your next draft, paper, or piece of work. That is, I'm going to be alarmed if I evidently put more work into thinking about your paper than you put in to thinking about how to learn from my comments. The whole point of the comments, besides trying to, you know, teach you something is get any difficulties or problems addressed right away, before they have a chance to do real damage to your GPA. For any final paper, I will not put comments on it unless you indicate an interest in receiving comments on the first page of the paper.

Here are some things for which you can be penalized:

- Being off-topic or failing to fully complete the assignment
- Not defending the claims you are making.

- Ignoring stylistic and formatting requirements.

Frequently, I will use a grading rubric and scrawl comments there. Sometimes, there will be brief comments written on your paper. Longer comments will be numbered, and you will find them on the attached sheet of comments with your grade. Other times you will find more extended comments at the end of your paper, scribbled in my impossible to read handwriting.

### **3. So you don't like the grade you got . . .**

If this is your first paper in a class with multiple assignments, then hey, this is just the grade on the very first paper of this class. This is not that large a portion of your final grade, and it usually takes people a while before they learn to write respectable papers of the sort required by this course. By the end of the course, I expect that most people will be pretty successful at writing excellent humanities papers, so don't freak out if you got a lower grade than you are used to getting. You are undoubtedly very bright and will learn how to do this very quickly.

If this is the only paper grade for the class, it ain't the end of the world. A paper grade is merely a reflection of what you did on this particular paper at this particular time. Think of it as an important learning opportunity. You now know to talk to your professor or grader before you write your paper, to swap paper drafts with classmates to get help improving your paper, and to do multiple drafts of a paper if you want it to show your best work.

### **4. You are still unhappy.**

If you do have serious problems, think my comments don't make sense, or still don't understand what you can do to improve, by all means come talk to me/the person grading. I can't help you solve anything unless I know you need and want help.