

A BRIEF – ALTHOUGH NOT AS BRIEF AS I'D HOPED – GUIDE TO WRITING PHILOSOPHY PAPERS

Introduction:

Philosophical writing is a different sort of beast than that required in other disciplines. The style is on the one hand less formal, but on the other hand more spare and precise. There is a much greater emphasis on argumentation – the development and evaluation of arguments is the centerpiece of good philosophical writing. And unlike writing in other disciplines, it is evaluated on the basis of philosophical insight – or as I would have it, demonstrated understanding – into the topic at issue. As a result, when you are asked to write your first philosophy paper, you are probably being asked to do something you have never done before. A little guidance, perhaps, is in order.

Philosophy:

A natural place to start in giving an account of how to write a philosophy paper would be by giving an account of the nature of philosophy. Unfortunately this is itself a philosophical question (and the philosophy of philosophy is a difficult and tedious business). In order to discover what philosophy is, you have to do philosophy, and catch on. And one of the best ways to do philosophy is to engage in the practice of philosophical writing. So it seems that you have to write philosophically to learn what philosophy is rather than using the nature of philosophy to learn how to write philosophically.

Actually there are a couple of more or less uncontroversial things we can say about philosophical methodology that might instruct us with respect to philosophical writing. First, philosophy is guided by the search for truth, where truth should be understood as follows: a statement is true if how it claims things (in the world) are lines up with, or corresponds to, how things in fact are. As a result, when writing philosophy, you should aim to make true claims, and assess whether or not the claims made by the authors you write about are true. Second, at the core of philosophical methodology is the idea that truth can be discerned by means of the proper use of reason. As a result, when writing philosophy, you should focus on giving good arguments for the claims you wish to defend, and pay close attention to the argumentation utilized by the authors you are writing about.

Practical Skills:

Philosophical writing is practical skill. Like other practical skills, such as riding a bicycle or juggling, the only way you can get good at it is by *practicing*. You cannot learn to ride a bike simply by reading a manual; and you cannot learn to write philosophy papers simply by reading this or any similar guide. Moreover, as with other practical skills, the very first time you try to write a philosophy paper, you're likely not to be very good at it – recall the first time you tried to ride a bike. As a result, if you want to do well on your first philosophy assignment, you

would be well-advised to practice writing philosophy *before* writing the final draft you will be turning into me. There are two ways you might go about this. First, if you have extra time on your hands, you can do independent writing articulating your reactions to the theories and ideas we have been covering in class and in the readings. Second, if you have less time available, you can practice by writing multiple drafts of your paper before turning a version in to me. Either way, you should have your classmates, family members, friends, or even me, critique your work and you should attempt to revise it in light of the comments you receive. Note: I am willing to give you feedback on drafts of your paper assignments as long as you turn them in to me at least one week before they are due.

Demonstrated Understanding:

Philosophy papers are evaluated on the basis of demonstrated understanding of the material on which you are writing. Before you can *demonstrate* your understanding of a body of material you have to come to understand it. This requires that you do the relevant readings and attend (at least) those classes in which they discussed. If you have trouble understanding the material, talk it through, with your classmates, family members, friends, or even me.

Once you understand the material, your next task is to demonstrate to me, by means of your written work, that you understand it. Think of me as a cynical jerk who doesn't think you know what you are talking about. Your task is to prove me wrong, to put me in my place. In order to do so, there are three minimal conditions you will have to meet: accuracy, precision, and clarity.

Accuracy:

When explaining the positions and/or arguments of the authors you are writing about, get them right. Nothing makes me more inclined to think you don't understand something than an exposition of it that is just wrong.

Precision:

Don't just get things roughly right; get them exactly right. If you explain someone's view in only a rough way, I'll be inclined to think you only roughly understand it.

Clarity:

Make the presentation of your ideas sufficiently clear that a reasonably intelligent person can understand what you are saying. My inclination is think that if you can express your ideas only opaquely, you understand what you are saying only opaquely.

Note: the papers I ask you to write are normally quite short – on the order of four to seven pages. As a result, there is a temptation to think of your project as rather an easy one – just write four pages. I suggest you resist this temptation. These short papers are normally worth a rather large percentage of your final grade, sometimes as much as 33%. As a result, I recommend you think of your project as

writing a paper worth 33% of your grade rather than just writing four pages. In addition, when you start writing philosophy papers your initial reaction may be to wonder how you could possibly write as much as four pages (without adding fluff or bull hooey) on such a tiny little topic. With practice, however, this reaction will pass. You'll know you've got the hang of things when you begin to wonder instead how you could write as little as seven pages on such a huge topic.

Preparation:

- Before you start writing you must do the readings on which paper assignment and ensure that you understand them. As above, you may need to talk them through with people in order to come to a sufficient understanding of them.
- You must start writing early! Writing philosophy is hard; sometimes you get stuck. More often than not, you are best served by writing a draft and letting it sit for a few days before coming back to it. Philosophical ideas need time to germinate.

Philosophical Exposition:

Philosophical writing consists of two distinct but equally important components: exposition and criticism. Philosophical exposition involves carefully explaining the questions, positions, arguments, etc. that are the subject matter. Moreover, it underpins philosophical criticism – you are not in a position to engage in criticism until you have adequately explicated whatever it is you are criticizing.

Don'ts:

- **Summary:** summarizing the text/ class notes falls short of explaining it. Summarizing consists in merely providing a list various things that the author you are discussing has written. One indication that you are summarizing are constructions of the following sort: “the author said ... and then the author said ... and then the author said” What is required by exposition over and above a list of claims an author has made is (i) an account of what the various claims mean and (ii) how they hang together, i.e., how they are related to one another.
- **Your own words?:** It is often said that what you should do by way of explaining someone's views is to put them into your own words. There is, of course, something right about this – using the author's words rather than your own is plagiarism. There is, however, something wrong about it as well. It suggests that if you simply change the author's words or sentence structure a little bit, you have thereby explained the author's view. This is false. Replacing the odd word here and there of an author's sentences with synonyms does nothing by way of explaining the author's views.

Do's:

- Authors make claims about the world – claims they believe to be objectively true of the world. The first thing you need to do, therefore, is to think about what the world would be like if these claims were objectively true.
- The second thing you need to do is to tell me what you think the world would be like if the author's claims were true. One of the best ways of doing this is by walking me through an example. Note: merely *saying* that something illustrates an author's theory does not count as walking me through it. You need to provide a detailed account of how it illustrates the theory.

Philosophical Criticism:

Every philosophy paper includes a critical section. This is the section in which you incorporate your thoughts on the issue at hand. But simply stating what you think is not sufficient. You need to additionally provide reasons and argumentation in support of your position. In the early stages of your career as a philosophical writer, your critical section will normally consist of a *critical evaluation* of the views of an author you are considering.

Critical Evaluation:

1. Decide whether or not you think the theory/argument succeeds
2. If you think it fails, explain why you think this.
3. If you think it succeeds, present the strongest objection/response you can think of to it and explain why this objection/response fails.

Criticizing Arguments:

- Recall: an argument is a good one if (i) the conclusion follows from the premises and (ii) all of the premises are true.
- One way of criticizing an argument is to show that the conclusion does not follow from the premises. One way of doing this is by showing that the same pattern of reasoning can lead from true premises to a false conclusion when deployed in an argument concerning some other subject matter.
- Another way of criticizing an argument is to show that one of the premises is false. Note: an argument is unsound if just *one* of the premises is false – there is no need to try to show that all of the premises in an argument are false in order to undermine it.

Method of Counter-Examples:

- One good way of criticizing a theory or showing that a premise of an argument is false is by finding a counterexample to it.

- In order to do this you have to determine (i) what the facts are in some case, (ii) what a theory implies about the case, and show that (iii) what the theory implies about the case contradicts the facts.
- E.g., (i) Thermostats lack mental states; (ii) Dan Dennett's theory implies that thermostats have beliefs and desires; (iii) Dennett's theory contradicts the facts regarding thermostats; hence, (iv) it must be false.
- If you can, after providing a counter-example, try to diagnose why it arose. That is, try to explain why the claim/ theory you are critiquing is prone to counter-examples of that kind.

Style:

- Philosophical writing can be relatively informal. You can if you like write in the first person – “I think ...” or “In my view, ...”
- In other disciplines, good style involves varying the way you put things from time to time. In philosophical writing, in contrast, precision is a virtue. As a result, if you find a turn of phrase that gets things just right, you should use that phrasing over and over again. If you don't, you risk conveying the impression that your original precise formulation was just a fluke, and not a reflection of good understanding of the material.
- Avoid padding/ fluff and bull hooey. Philosophical training yields bull hooey detection skills, and a page of fluff no more helps your grade than does an empty page.
- I do not grade on the basis of grammar and spelling, but poor grammar and spelling can be detrimental to your grade. As you have probably noted, philosophy is a game of subtleties. As a result, grammatical differences can correspond to differences in philosophical positions, and grammatical ambiguity can leave it unclear what position you are discussing. In addition, in this era of spelling (and grammar) checkers, spelling mistakes (and to a lesser extent, grammatical errors) are *prima facie* inexcusable. Finally, students at the university level who do not know how to write grammatical English sentences should be embarrassed, and should immediately go about rectifying this deficit.¹ Note: the odd grammatical or spelling mistake is almost inevitable, so don't be too stressed about trying to avoid every last possible error. But do edit the final version of your paper before turning it in, or, even better, have someone else edit it for you.

¹ Note: students who have learning disabilities or for whom English is a second language need not be embarrassed about their difficulties with English grammar. They should, however, take advantage of university resources geared towards improving their writing.

- You may include in your papers quotes from the readings and secondary sources. But if you do use quotes, put them in parentheses and properly cite them. Otherwise you are guilty of plagiarism. Moreover, quotes don't speak for themselves. If you include quoted material, you need to go on to explain that material. Note: even if you do not use quoted material, you need to cite ideas you get from the readings and secondary sources. If you portray someone else's ideas as your own, you are again guilty of plagiarism. For more on academic offences, see the relevant sections of the University of Lethbridge Calendar.
- You can use any style of citation you choose, although you should use the same style throughout your paper. Your style of citation does, however, need to provide me with enough information to be able to track down the passage you are citing.
- You may rely on my on-line class notes in your papers, and you don't need to cite them – I know where they come from. But if you do use them, you need to explain them. Simply copying them into your paper does not demonstrate any understanding of the material at issue.
- In reconstructing arguments, you may use lists of numbered premises and conclusions:
 1. ...
 2. ...
 3. ...
 - C. ...

But as always, you need to go on to explain the premises and conclusions.
- Honesty is the best policy in philosophical writing. If you're not sure whether an argument you've given is decisive, or a position you're defending is free of difficulties, say so and say why. Do not try to pull the wool over my eyes and pretend you've won the day. I've been doing this for a long time, and I'll notice. Moreover, recognizing a problem in your own view demonstrates better understanding of the difficulties of the issues at hand than does naively assuming that your position, and only yours, is problem free.
- Do not declare things like "who's to say?" or "it's all a matter of opinion." The philosophical ideal of objective truth may warrant criticism, but an undergraduate philosophy paper (and your first one at that) is not the place for it. And it's just irritating.
- Do not begin your introduction with a sweeping generalization – "Since the dawn of time ..." or "For thousands of years ..." The reason is that people who do so tend to say some very silly things: "For thousands of years, philosophers have argued over whether computers can think" and "People have been having children for many generations." (Guess which one was the

first sentence in a paper I actually received at the University of Lethbridge.) And when you do so, we faculty do get together and have a good laugh over it – and we're not laughing with you. In your introduction simply state what the topic of the paper is, what your thesis is, and how you're going to go about defending this thesis in your paper. Roughly, your paper should have the following structure:

Introduction: say what you're going to do

Body of Paper: do it

Conclusion: say what you've done