

How to Write a Philosophy Paper

(for Christopher Hitchcock)

1. Purpose

The purpose of this document is to provide advice on how to write a paper for a philosophy class, and to give students some idea in advance what I will be looking for in a philosophy paper. Some of the advice pertains to writing in general, some applies more specifically to philosophical writing, and some lays out my own pet peeves and idiosyncrasies.

2. General Strategy

Anticipating Paper Topics: I often choose paper topics on the basis of discussions that take place during class. If one particular issue attracts a lot of attention during class, or if I seem to get particularly excited by a comment made by a student in class, a little voice in the back of your head should be saying 'paper topic coming'. Pay attention to these discussions. Take notes. Keep track of who is saying what. If one particular comment seems to spark my interest, make sure you understand the point that was made. Speak up if you don't.

Paper Assignments: Typically, paper assignments in my courses comprise a set of detailed questions and instructions. In some ways, these assignments resemble take-home exams as much as they do essay assignments. In particular, students will be evaluated according to how well they respond to the questions and instructions that make up the paper topic they have chosen to write upon.

The Jeopardy Test: Want to know how to do poorly on a philosophy paper? One sure-fire technique is to not answer the question that is given to you. Of course, one can also do poorly by giving a *bad* answer to the question, but what I have in mind here is a paper that does not even have the *form* of an answer to the question that was asked. To avoid this danger, I recommend that you submit your paper to the Jeopardy test. On the game show *Jeopardy*, contestants are given answers, and must say what the question is. A well-written paper should function like an answer on Jeopardy: by reading it, one ought to be able to reconstruct the question that you are attempting to answer. Certainly, the instructor (who knows what questions were given out to the students) ought to be able to tell which question you are answering by reading the paper. But even one who does not have a list of the questions in front of her ought to be able to determine what the question was from your answer.

Length Limits: Your paper assignment will specify an appropriate length for your paper. You will be penalized if you grossly exceed the length limit. I particularly frown upon overly long papers that take up space discussing issues that are irrelevant or peripheral to the chosen topic. Of course, one could write a paragraph or a book on almost any topic in philosophy; there is no one length that is 'just right' for any given topic. In order to write a paper within the prescribed length you will have to make decisions about what to include and what to exclude. I find that a student's ability to prioritize in this fashion is a good indication of her understanding of the topic. One source of overly long papers is failure to adhere to 'the Q principle'.

The Q Principle: In any philosophical paper, you will need to present the views of one or more of the philosophers that you have read in class. Note, however, that no paper topic will ever give an instruction like: ‘summarize Descartes’ *Meditations*.’ Whenever you describe the views of a particular philosopher, you will have to make a decision about which aspects of the philosopher’s work are relevant to the particular issue you are addressing. Think of your paper as a James Bond movie. Near the beginning of every James Bond movie, Bond meets with a chap called ‘Q’, who gives him a variety of gadgets (an invisible car, an exploding watch, a pen that squirts acid — that kind of thing). By the end of every movie, Bond has used every one of the gadgets Q gave him: you never see him saying ‘pity I never got to use this acid-squirting pen’. If you begin your paper by explaining various aspects of a philosopher’s work, you should draw upon or comment upon each aspect in the remainder of your paper. Failure to adhere to the Q principle often results from beginning a paper without knowing how it will end (and failing to revise the beginning in light of the end that was reached).

Know Your Audience: Students writing papers are put in a very odd situation: they are being asked to explain ideas to someone who already has a deep understanding of them. It is a standard piece of advice in writing that you should know your audience, but in this case, your audience is precisely the person who doesn’t need to know the information that is contained in the paper. It is often helpful to think of the paper as being written for someone *other than the professor*. Imagine, for example, someone who has taken this class many years ago, and forgets many of the details; or perhaps imagine someone who has not taken this class at all. When you write your paper, be consistent about who your imaginary audience is and what they already know. For example, you should not write a paper in which you explain the basic ideas of Plato or Leibniz, yet use the words ‘form’ or ‘monad’ without explanation. A person in need of an explanation of the basic ideas of Plato or Leibniz will not know what these words mean. The topic you choose to write on will, in part, determine the appropriate audience for your paper to be directed at.

3. Writing Style

This document is not intended to be a comprehensive style manual; for that a volume such as Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style* is indispensable. Nonetheless, there are important respects in which philosophical writing differs from writing in other disciplines; and there are mistakes that are particularly common in student philosophy papers. These are the subject of the present section.

The Highest Good: The ultimate goal of philosophical writing is to achieve expositional clarity. Philosophical ideas are difficult enough to understand without exacerbating the problem with obfuscating prose. Many of the standard rules of writing style — avoid run-on sentences, write in the active voice, avoid nominalizations, etc. — usually do promote clarity in writing. Remember, however, that they are only means to the end of clarity, and not ends in themselves. Correct grammar, by contrast, *always* promotes clarity. Students are often surprised when I am unable to understand an ungrammatical sentence; I assure you it is not merely an affectation.

Avoid Needless Generality: Students are often advised to begin an essay by moving from the general to the specific, and conclude by moving from the specific back to the general. (This is sometimes referred to as the 'hourglass model' of writing.) There is definitely something to this old saw: if you jump right into things, your audience will not know what you are talking about. On the other hand, this principle can be taken to extremes. Do not start a philosophy essay with: 'Throughout the ages, mankind has pondered many great questions, such as...' When you have a very limited number of words with which to address a very difficult issue, do not waste words on such generalities. Cut to the chase. A similar point applies to conclusions. Journalistic essays on controversial subjects sometimes end by posing the central question and then asserting: 'only time will tell' or 'ultimately, each person must choose for herself'. Such endings are particularly abhorrent in philosophy essays in which one articulates and defends a particular philosophical claim — indeed, such endings undermine the very point of writing such an essay.

Subtlety and Ambiguity: There are many forms of creative expression in which subtlety and ambiguity can be virtues. A story that has a moral will often be more effective if the reader is not hit over the head with it. In John Collier's short story "The Chaser", two men engage in a conversation. The story ends with the first man saying 'good-bye' and the second replying '*au revoir*'. Why the French? '*Au revoir*' carries the meaning 'until we meet again' (unlike the more permanent '*adieu*'), suggesting that the second man expects the first to come back. This is the key to understanding the moral of the story, and the reader more readily accepts that moral as a result of having played a part in discovering it. Unfortunately, in philosophical writing, this sort of delicacy is usually a luxury that we cannot afford. If you have a philosophical claim to make, or a concept to explain, it is usually best to hit the reader over the head with it. This is not to say that your writing cannot be used to raise new questions, or to provoke thought on the part of the reader, but the reader should have to do as little work as possible to grasp your main points.

First Person: Some academic disciplines decry the use of the first person in writing. (Some cheat by using phrases like 'the present author' or the authorial 'we'. But merely avoiding the word 'I' does not suffice to avoid writing in the first person.) In philosophical writing, the use of the first person is common. One sees sentences like: 'In this paper, I will argue that...'; 'In the last three paragraphs, I presented an argument for the conclusion that...I will now address a potential objection to this argument'; 'In this paper, I have argued that...' This kind of writing is not pretty — it would be a *terrible* way to write a short story — but it is often very effective in making clear the overall structure of your paper.

Faulty Predication: One common sort of mistake is to attribute the wrong sort of predicate to the wrong sort of subject, for example: 'Hume's theory believes that all of our ideas are derived from impressions'. Hume may have believed this, but his theory is not the sort of thing that can believe anything at all. This sort of mistake often results from haste, carelessness, and lack of proofreading. Avoid it.

Colorful Re-phrasing: On one episode of TV's "Love Boat", Isaac the bartender was writing a novel. The novel started out something like this: "Dirk sat high upon his horse, looking out upon the great Mississippi river. Another long day before him, he turned his horse and started his ride through the plains of Alabama." When it was pointed out that the Mississippi does not run through Alabama, he replied that he could not use the word "Mississippi" twice in the same

sentence – "bad writing!" We are often told not to keep re-using the same word while writing. The device of using different words interchangeably to avoid repetition is called 'colorful re-phrasing'. As Isaac's ill-fated novel shows, however, the solution is often worse than the problem. In philosophy, especially, it is important to be precise with the use of one's words. Words, with superficially similar meanings such as 'theory', 'hypothesis', 'proposition', 'concept', and 'idea', are often used in importantly different ways. Hence, it is important to avoid using such words interchangeably.

Happy Writing!