

Advice on Writing a Philosophy Paper

Philosophy papers aim to provide an argument for a clearly stated thesis. Your goal is not to "cover a topic" or "explore ideas." Your goal is to **defend a clear, specific, and contestable thesis** in a single, sustained argument. Every single paragraph should be in service of that argument.

A lot hangs on picking a question of the right size (which we have talked about already). The question should set you up to write a paper that contains some objection, insight, or evaluation of your own, but the aim is not to revolutionize our understanding of attention in general, list all the factors that affect our attention in the modern world, etc.

Given a question of the right size, you should make sure to fully address the question you have set for yourself, and to avoid empty blather. You should also make sure that you accurately and charitably interpret philosophers whose views you discuss, and that you justify your interpretation by providing quotes and explaining them in your own words. Finally, the arguments in your paper should be logically tight. You might find it helpful when working on the paper to write down arguments in numbered premise format so as to isolate assumptions and identify potential weaknesses, though you don't need to present arguments in such a format.

In sum: A good philosophy paper addresses a specific question in a reasoned way. This means you must:

- a) **Answer the question, the whole question, and nothing but the question.** Don't digress, no matter how interesting your digression seems. I don't care about whether you have an encyclopedic knowledge of various related topics. I just want you to answer the question you set for yourself in a critical and careful manner. Relatedly, don't answer a related question that you are interested in instead of the one you set out to answer. And don't leave parts of the prompt unaddressed.
- b) **Provide justification for your claims in the form of a clear, well-structured argument.** This may rely on offering examples or counterexamples (and explaining why they count as such), arguing from common sense principles, or arguing from other philosophical views that you take to be true. See your paper as an attempt to persuade someone who doesn't already agree with you, and to persuade them through giving reasons (and not through flowery suggestive prose).

Those are the two most important points when writing philosophy; if you do both of these, you are well on your way to a good paper. Here are other additional crucial guidelines:

- c) Write assuming an **audience** that has not read the papers we have read, does not have the same political and philosophical stance as you, and, despite having philosophical training, is ignorant of this subfield. You must explain technical terms and reconstruct arguments clearly.
- d) Write from an **outline**. Use sections and sub-sections. Include a roadmap in the introduction and a conclusion that restates your view. (Remind yourself of what we saw when we discussed outlines for more details on structure.)
- e) **Be clear. Use short sentences. Avoid complicated vocabulary.** Structure your paper clearly, and signpost what you are doing at each stage (e.g. which part of the prompt you are addressing). Explicitly state your thesis early in the paper. Make only one point per paragraph. Use explicit transitions, such as "I've just shown that A is committed to p. I will now offer arguments that p is false." Be explicit about which claims you are asserting, which you are considering, which you are attributing to some other philosopher, and which you are attributing to your hypothetical philosophical opponent.

- f) **Support your position with evidence.** When you attribute a view to an author, provide textual citations that show that the author holds that view, and explain why they show that. Always explain *in your own words* what the quote means and why it's relevant to your argument. A good formula: "As X puts it, '[quote]'. What X means here is that... This supports my point about Y because..." Give examples to make views more plausible and explain why they do so.
- g) **Critically evaluate all arguments.** Articulate hidden premises, consider whether the argument is valid, consider whether the premises are true, and consider what the conclusion's consequences are, and whether they are acceptable.
- h) **Avoid buzzwords.** Instead of relying on terms like "capitalism", "patriarchy", "neoliberalism", etc. to drive home your point of view, try to replace them with a detailed analysis of the attitude or actions to which you think they refer. This avoids readers either shutting down if they have a different perspective/political alignment, or being seduced by what you are saying regardless of content. Resorting to buzzwords is lazy: it avoids the hard work of thinking through an issue yourself.

Stages of writing a good philosophy paper

- 1) brainstorming ideas;
- 2) devising and refining a question and central thesis
- 3) identifying and carefully examining relevant material from the course;
- 4) formulating views and arguments, and then reconsidering them on the light of objections you come up with or objections arising in conversation;
- 5) writing a detailed outline, and modifying it in the light of criticism;
- 6) writing a first draft, and adding quotations and additional supporting considerations;
- 7) re-reading your draft and making edits to improve structure and ensure clarity.

Note: these are iterative. You are likely to keep circling back: clarifying what your central question actually was, changing your view or thesis, restructuring the paper... And they benefit immensely from conversation, free writing, and giving yourself time. Start early!

Here are some other resources on how to write a good philosophy paper:

- <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>
- <http://www.mit.edu/~yablo/writing.html>
- https://philosophy.fas.harvard.edu/files/phildept/files/brief_guide_to_writing_philosophy_paper.pdf
- <http://www.adrianpiper.com/docs/10CommsPhilWriting.pdf>