How to Write a Philosophy Paper

1. Every paper you write for me will be based on the same basic assignment: state a thesis and defend it, employing textual citations and inferences to support that thesis. That is, you must stake out a position that you take to be the most plausible then offer text-based and illustrative, reasoned arguments for that view.

Two kinds of papers you do not want to write: first, the "book report." Although an explanatory synopsis of the author's position is a critical and essential aspect of a philosophy paper, this exposition should not be mere restatement of the text itself. "Book report" essays simple regurgitate the language and claims of the author without attempting to explain the reasons for or presuppositions of those claims. They therefore demonstrate no attempt to comprehend the ideas expressed by the readings. While you will **always** need to provide a synopsis of the argument your essay addresses, note that a synopsis, rather than restating the text, offers a concise presentation of the relevant arguments of the text, one that explicates/illustrates their presuppositions and significance. A book report reiterates; philosophical synopsis contextualizes and illuminates. Often a thesis is nothing more than an argument about how a particularly knotty philosophical passage should best be understood.

The other paper you do not want to write is "thoughts on topic X," or "meditations on X," or "remarks on X." It will not do to simply string together various reflections you may have on a given topic, even if in the course of doing this you embrace various claims and offer some reasons for your views before moving to the next reflection. If the paper is responding to a given topic, it **must** address that topic squarely and directly. Paper topics are not suggestions or launching points for your own theory; they are crafted specifically to foster engagement with a particular philosophical problem. Do not try to "go around" the problem by subordinating it to what you take to be a more relevant problem (it rarely is). Whether you respond to a prompt or are asked to create your own thesis, the contents of the paper should be selected and organized so as best to defend that central claim. No matter how seemingly brilliant, mere reflections do not constitute a persuasive philosophical argument.

2. So the paper should state a central thesis and defend it. In doing so, it should adhere to the following clarifications:

A) It should start with a clear statement of the thesis. This need not be the very first sentence, but it should almost always come in the first paragraph. Many papers never give a precise statement of the thesis at all. They leave the reader guessing the author's position. It may seem obvious to you what your position is; it won't be obvious to the reader. Other papers give a clear statement of the thesis, but not until the last paragraph of the paper. ("Oh! Is that what the author was driving at?!") This may be a dramatic way to structure a mystery novel but it is a poor way to structure an argumentative paper. The reader's job is not to figure out what your view is but to evaluate how good a job you do of defending it.

Chances are, if you cannot state the central thesis of the paper in a clear, crisp sentence then you don't really know yet what you are trying to say. Try stating your

thesis out loud. If you find yourself rambling, this is a sign that you should think harder about what exactly your point is. As part of your thesis statement, it is good to abbreviate the primary reasons you will make on behalf of that thesis. Thus, rather than say simply "In this paper I argue X," your thesis should look more like this: "As this essay will argue, to understand X as meaning Y would contradict the author's central project; thus I propose interpreting X as Z."

Generally, introductions for shorter papers (4-6 pages) should run no longer than a half-page, just enough to present the broad issue, its general relevance, the particular question at issue, and your paper's position on it (i.e., the thesis). For longer papers (10+ pages), an introduction might run a page or page and a half.

B) Every paper I assign is a response to the course material. This means the essay's first objective after presenting an introductory paragraph with a thesis is to provide a thorough synopsis of the argument and/or textual passages at issue. In this expositional section the essay needs to provide a clear and contextualized presentation of the main argument the author you are engaging makes: what are its explicit assertions and implicit presuppositions? What evidence (and kind of evidence) does the author present on behalf of their claim? What inferences can be drawn from related passages that might illuminate the author's meaning? What examples might be used to illustrate and clarify the author's point? What remains potentially unclear or ambiguous in the author's argument? (Careful, this is not where you criticize an argument but merely point out possible problems.) In order to do this successfully you will likely need to bring together various passages from different places in the text. Also, because philosophers rarely stipulate all features of their argument, much of this exposition will require reasoned and textually supported inferences from you to fill out that claim *as faithfully as possible*. It will not help your thesis—especially if you are arguing against the author's claim—to misrepresent that claim. Doing so will only undermine the credibility of your own position.

A strong exposition is in its own way an argument, and thus requires substantive textual support and interpretation. In explaining the argument of the author, cite the textual passages that justify your assertions of what is being said and *interpret* the passages to establish the inferential connection between that citation and your claim about what it means. In this respect, *you are defending your interpretation of what the author's position is at the same time you are presenting it*.

Lastly, only provide exposition for what is necessary and relevant for the subsequent support of your exact thesis. It is never the case that you need to summarize the entire project of a philosopher. After giving a sentence or two stating the broad theme of the author's work, move directly to the exposition of the relevant argument at issue. In a short paper you do not have the time to do more than this. Keep your exposition direct and concise; omit tangential commentary. Unless the entirety of the topic prompt is for you to provide a clear exposition of the author's argument on "X," the expository section of a (4-6 page) paper should be approximately one to one and a half pages (the latter especially if the paper requires exposition of the works of two authors, as in a compare-and-contrast essay).

C) At this point, having written the introduction and exposition, you are ready to move into the argument portion of your paper. This may mean shoring up the author's argument by providing additional clarity or stronger evidence at those points where the author's own assertion are limited or unelaborated. It may mean discussing and illustrating the meaning and implications of a particular concept. It could mean working through a dilemma that the text offers but does not resolve unambiguously. Whatever the objective, the purpose in this main body of the paper is to defend your thesis – to give arguments or reasons to believe it. It is, of course, difficult to say anything helpful at this level of generality about what a good argument would look like, or what sorts of arguments will be most forceful, most useful, and so forth. To a large extent this will depend on the specific thesis being defended. Nevertheless, learning how to develop and present plausible and convincing arguments is a skill that takes practice like any other skill. If you work at it, you *will* get better.

A common error: some students offer as many arguments as possible for a view, perhaps five or more in a five-page paper, each argument taking up a sentence or two, or at most a paragraph. This is not a good way to defend a thesis, for the inevitable result will be that no single argument is developed with enough care to be convincing. Instead, take what you think are the two best arguments for your view – the most important and convincing ones – and devote the paper to spelling them out and developing them. To be honest, a short paper is often barely enough space to present a single forceful argument with the care and attention it deserves. So you will do a much more persuasive job of arguing for your view if you use the available space to present methodically these arguments.

Every argument should be comprised of approximately five parts: 1) the stated argument; 2) textual evidence supporting that argument; 3) an interpretation of that evidence (it is *critical* that you provide at least one sentence that explains why the reader should take the textual citation(s) as relevant for the argument); 4) illustration/example that clarifies and reinforces those points (see next paragraph; also, this is the only part that is optional—you need not have an example for *every* argument); 5) summary statement explaining how the argument supports the paper's main thesis.

Finally, a few words about examples. Examples (hypothetical, fictional, or real-life) offer an excellent way to clarify the position of an author or to show the problems with an argument. That said, students often underestimate the difficulty of crafting a good example. A few tips: 1) Do not use the first example you think of; consider several and then select and refine the best of those. If while writing the paper you find the example doesn't quite work, eliminate or replace it. 2) The best examples do not use extreme situations like axe murderers, genocides or suffering babies. Such figures strain the credulity of the broader point you wish to make. A good example may be a highly fabricated situation (e.g., imagining a society without reflective surfaces) but is not one that hinges on extreme and deeply affect-laden, life-or-death situations. 3) Examples do not substitute for close textual analysis but enrich it; accordingly, discussion of examples should not comprise the majority of your argument. If you can't present your example in a short paragraph it is too convoluted.

D) Occasionally you may want to address an obvious and plausible objection to your thesis. It is difficult to say in a general way what the best objections will look like. Sometimes they will note potential flaws in the arguments you have given (thus giving

reason to think that the thesis has not been well defended). Other times they will directly attack the thesis itself (thus giving reason to think that the thesis must be false). Here, too, learning how to recognize and present the most significant objections is a skill that will get better with practice. But a helpful idea is this: imagine intelligent people who are not convinced by what you have to say. What, exactly, might concern them most?

As with presenting too many arguments on the paper's behalf, you should also avoid trying to state too many objections. Best to take the one or two objections that seem the most worrisome and interesting.

Having given the objection, it is of course crucial to offer a reply. Why doesn't the objection convince you to abandon your view? Is the objection based on some sort of mistake? Or does it force you to modify your view in some way? You should not pretend that the objections are completely idiotic (if they are, you shouldn't bother giving them). You should just give your best attempt at answering them.

E) There are very few "knock down" arguments in philosophy. It is almost always the case that there is more than one plausible view on a given subject, and thus good arguments for and against the particular position you are defending. Your goal, therefore, should not be to try to convince the reader to embrace your position beyond all doubt. One does not "prove" a philosophical thesis true or false but gives strong evidence for or against its logical plausibility, knowing that, even when all is said and done, others may still disagree. So a good place to end the paper is by briefly reviewing the primary evidence of behalf of your view (as compared to the leading alternative, perhaps) and explaining why, on balance, you think that your view remains the most plausible position.

3. In preparing to write the paper, the first thing you should do is <u>think</u>. You should do a *lot* of thinking before and during the process of writing. You need to think about the topic. You need to think about those textual passages relevant to the topic. You need to think about what position seems most persuasive based on those textual interpretations. You need to think about the weak points in your position. You need to think about possible replies. And you need to think about whether – in the light of all of this – you need to think again. So don't expect to sit down the night before the paper is due and dash something off. That will not leave you enough time for thinking (and changing your mind). The first thing you should do, then, is to give yourself ample time to think about things before and as you are writing, deciding how best to address the issue at hand.

In producing a reasonable first draft of the paper, don't worry about getting it perfect, just get it down. You should not think of it as the final product. That may only make you afraid to discover new ideas (new problems, new questions, new arguments, new objections) in the course of writing. Having written the draft, put it away. Sleep on it. Look at it again in the cold light of morning, or after a day spent thinking about something else. With fresh eyes you will be better able to see what makes sense and what is confusing, what is relevant and what tangential, what is convincing and what needs further development, what is clear and what is muddy, and what is persuasive and what is impotent. Then, with an eye to all of this (and after having thought about the new difficulties you've discovered) write the paper again. Maybe you will want to discard the original and write it all over from scratch. Or maybe you will want to use the original as a basis and revise, expand, correct, and cut as needed. Either way, <u>rewriting</u> is the sole path to making it better.

This last point is essential. Absolutely nothing will improve the quality of your writing as much as rewriting--nothing.

Ideally, you might then revise this revised version. And when you finally have a version that you are truly happy with, there is still something else you can do that would make it better still: show it to a friend. Find someone else in the class, or just some friend who seems reasonably intelligent, and ask them to take a few minutes to read your paper. Then ask them to tell you – in their own words -- what your basic thesis is, and how you go about arguing for it. If they can't do this, then it is likely that the paper is not as clear or as well-organized as it should be – and this will give you a reasonable idea of what still needs to be rewritten.

The Writing Center at your college offers excellent opportunities for just this kind of peer review (without you having to bother your classmates or friends). The Writing Center is not for people who do not write well but for those who want to write better—so whatever your current writing skill level, the Center offers something valuable for you. Take advantage of it.

I am under no illusion that every student has the time (or inclination) to do all of this: think, write, revise, revise again, share, and revise yet again. I realize that you have other classes and responsibilities. Think of this elaborate process, then, as a kind of ideal and do what you can to approximate it. Rewriting is the secret to good writing, and the more of this you do, the better your writing will be.

4. Some additional virtues of a good philosophy paper:

First, the paper should be well-organized; That is, its structure should reflect a logical progression of ideas.

Second, the paper should contain only material relevant to the direct objective of the paper. The idea of the paper is to state and defend a central thesis. Many ideas may be reasonably relevant to the general topic you are discussing but nonetheless irrelevant to your particular arguments. Cut out anything that isn't *directly* supporting your given thesis.

Third, use simple, direct prose to express your ideas. Legitimate points routinely become lost in long, convoluted sentences. Sometimes people think that dense prose is a sign of profound arguments. Wrong. The more profound the idea, the more reason to present it as clearly as possible while retaining its critical nuances. The difference between "technical terms" and "jargon" are not the words themselves but their use. "Jargon" refers to the sloppy, unjustified substitution of technical terms in place of an actual argument. Resist the temptation.

Fourth, and closely connected to the last point, it is absolutely crucial that you strive to be as utterly explicit as possible. Spell out your ideas as carefully as you can. Make it all explicit. Don't "hint" at things, or "point" in the direction of your thoughts. Don't assume that it will be "obvious" what you have in mind. (It won't be at all obvious, and chances are good that I will be confused, or at least uncertain. I haven't been living in your head all these years.) Lay out methodically all steps of the argument, even the ones that seem to you to be too obvious to need stating. Put in "signposts" for the reader, reviewing what the paper has shown so far and announcing where the paper still has to go to in order to arrive at its destination.

You may reach a point where you fear you are overdoing the clarity thing. That's fine; do it anyway. In all my years of teaching I have rarely seen a paper that goes too far in this direction but have seen thousands that don't go nearly far enough.

One further aspect of spelling things out clearly deserves repeated emphasis. When you use a quotation in your paper – which you should be doing frequently – follow it with your own explanation of what the quotation <u>means</u>. Quotations don't wear their meanings on their sleeves—their relevance and significance to your thesis are not self-evident. You should therefore not only interpret the quotations you include but also explain how they provide evidence for the point you are making.

5. One thing you do not need to do in writing a course paper (unless expressly requested) is "research" – at least, not in the sense of extra reading, looking at other works by the author, or examining secondary literature on the topic (this includes the importing of dictionary definitions into your paper—what Socrates and others have sought for over 2,500 years won't be found in *Merriam-Webster*). Obviously, there is an important place for such scholarly research, but this class does not require it; indeed, it may hamper your success at this stage. Also, *do not* use information from electronic or internet sources for your essay—under *no circumstance* should the pronoun "Wiki-" find its way into any portion of the essay. This is not because it is "cheating" but because it is almost always inaccurate; there is no short cut for achieving a deep contemplation of the material itself. To write an effective paper for this class you need only three things: the course materials, class notes and active reflection.