

# Writing a Philosophical Essay: A Brief Tutorial\*

## Summary:

- I. Resources
- II. What is a philosophy paper?
- III. How is a philosophy paper graded?
- IV. How to write a philosophy paper.
- V. Mistakes to avoid.
- VI. Plagiarism
- VII. Citation Guide, MLA style.

## **I. Resources**

1. This handout
2. Web pages
  - <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>
  - <http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/philosophy.html>
  - <http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/critical/>
  - <http://www.liu.edu/cwis/CWP/library/workshop/citmla.htm> (MLA citation guide)
  - <http://www.tvu.ac.uk/lrs/guides/harvard.html> (Harvard citation guide)
  - <http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/douglass/sal/plagiarism/intro.html> (Plagiarism tutorial)
3. Books
  - Martinich, A.P. (1996) *Philosophical Writing*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
  - Holowchak, M. Andrew. (2004) *Critical Reasoning & Philosophy*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.
  - Strunk, William and White, E.B. (2000) *The Elements of Style*. Prentice Hall.
4. Your lecturers and professors

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## **II. What is a philosophy paper?**

Philosophical essays prove some point through the use of rational argument. A philosophical essay is not about flowery language, story-telling techniques, or surprising the reader. The beauty of a philosophical essay is found in your ideas; the language that you use is only a tool for conveying these ideas to the reader. The art is in proving one's point clearly.

The philosophical essay generally follows a very simple structure:

1. State the proposition to be proved.
2. Give the argument for that proposition.
3. Show that the argument is valid.
4. Show that the premises are true.
5. Consider an objection to your argument and respond to that objection.
6. State the upshot of what has been proven. (Martinich, A.P. (1996) *Philosophical Writing*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. p. 53.)

The **historical philosophical** essay has a different emphasis. Although one should follow the steps above, one's argument will hinge, in part, on exegetical issues. For example, one may be arguing against a particular interpretation of a text and for a different one. In such cases, the first step (1 above) of one's argument would require explaining a common (or one philosopher's) interpretation of a particular part of a text, and then saying that you intend to show that a different interpretation is correct. Although your argument must be sound (3, 4 above), it will depend on interpretative issues, such as correct translation, the philosopher's historical, the philosopher's other views etc. It is still important to either directly assess the merits of the philosophical positions that you attribute to the philosopher, or at least, to show sensitivity to their philosophical merit – is the position that you believe a particular philosopher defends true, or well defended etc? How much emphasis is placed on this latter dimension of your paper depends on the question you are trying to answer.

## **III. How is a philosophy paper graded?**

**Mastery** is the condition of knowing some particular topic backwards, forwards, inside out and sideways. If you haven't mastered a topic, you can't write well about it. You can't master a whole field in a few weeks, but you can master some tiny part of it. This is the reason that most philosophy papers are written about very narrowly defined topics.

**Original Contribution.** There's the difference between merely understanding a topic and mastering it. If you understand, you can explain what particular philosophers say about a topic, what their arguments are, and what the relevant facts are. When you've mastered the topic you can talk about other possible arguments, what might be wrong with these arguments, why those particular facts are relevant and what would happen if the facts were different. Mastery means understanding a topic well enough to go beyond what's already been said to work out for yourself which arguments work and which don't and even to work out

effective and relevant arguments of your own. (Again, this is why philosophy papers tend to have such narrowly defined topics.)

**Critical Analysis:** “Being critical involves making judgements and evaluations. Making judgements can involve distinguishing between fact and opinion or evaluating the validity of information sources or the validity of particular theories and/ or their application to particular situations. These judgements need to be well grounded in research, wide reading, and include consideration of all possible viewpoints. Critical thinking in this sense is based on a synthesis of a number of factors, and is not just uninformed personal opinion.”

([Unilearning@uow.edu.au/critical](mailto:Unilearning@uow.edu.au/critical))

### **Your paper will be graded on three basic criteria:**

1. **Content:** How well do you understand the issues you're writing about?
2. **Clarity:** Is your writing clear and well organized?
3. **Argument:** How good are the arguments you offer? How good is your critical analysis? It is worth bearing in mind that some of what makes an argument a good one will take you beyond issues of logical structure and even the truth of the premises. Arguments may be sound, clearly expressed, show good understanding of the relevant issues, and yet, fall short in some respects. For example, the argument may concern an issue that has little philosophical significance, or it may be a “straw-man” argument, that is, if you are arguing against a claim, C, C may have little merit to begin with, and so, not be worth arguing against.

Your paper will NOT be graded by whether or not the lecturer agrees with your conclusion. Professional academic philosophers do not even agree amongst themselves about what the correct conclusion is to most issues. But they generally have no trouble agreeing about whether or not someone has done a good job arguing for a conclusion.

*Here are two tips to achieve clarity:*

1. Assume the reader (the lecturer) is **STUPID** (I need things explained simply), **LAZY** (I won't read things twice if they're not clear, I won't try to figure out your argument if it's not obvious) and **MEAN** (if you're ambiguous or confusing, I'll assume you're wrong or you don't understand).
2. Try reading the paper out loud (seriously). If you find yourself reading something you wouldn't say, DON'T WRITE IT. If you find yourself having to use nods and winks, you haven't expressed it clearly enough.
3. You might consider confining yourself to making just one point per paragraph. This may result in short paragraphs, but imposing this kind of discipline on yourself may (i) help you to fully develop each and every point that you want to make, (ii) allow you to better see and assess the argumentative structure of your paper as a whole, and (iii) prevent you from wandering off point.

### **Comments that lecturers make most often:**

“Really?” “Why?” These comments appear when people do not acknowledge that a position that they're advocating is contentious, or when they assume that people should accept that something is debatable

“Awkward” or “Unclear”

“More detail needed.” “Give an example.”

“Not relevant” “What does this show?”

“Not answering the question.” One of the most frequent ways in which people lose marks is by not answering the question.

“Incorrect grammar.”

#### **IV. How to write a philosophy paper.**

##### **Writing a first draft.**

Some people find it useful to write an entire first draft, warts and all, before beginning to revise it (don't worry if it's too long, confused etc. It might be just a good idea to get everything out, and use the draft as a basis for further revisions). Here are some tips.

Introduction with Thesis: state in clear language at the beginning -- don't worry about spoiling the surprise. Begin **BOLDLY**, not **BLANDLY**. Leap into your essay in a purposeful way, and say what you're going to say.

*(Tip: Many people find it helpful to write a longish intro paragraph which later gets cut to help you get started. Do edit it out: don't submit a paper that only begins in the second or third paragraph).*

Roadmaps: Every paragraph should be a link in the chain of the argument. It is enormously helpful to add lots of signposts to help guide the reader through the argument (it also helps to show how you're answering the question). You can say what you've done so far, what you're going to do next and so on.

All this hand-holding might seem a little patronizing, but it's what you're aiming for: sometimes it should feel like you're trying to explain things to a third-grader. This comes across in two ways:

- 1) Third graders have short attention spans. You should keep reminding me where you're at, and where we've been so far to keep me focused on what you're up to.
- 2) Third graders need simple plain prose. The virtues of keeping things simple, avoiding jargon and long clumsy rambling sentences and being **PRECISE** cannot be understated. Many professional philosophers get bad marks for this, but they are famous despite writing obscurely, not because of it.

Make your Argument.

Precision. Arguments are combinations of expositions and criticism. To criticise a view, you have to state it in enough detail to get the right amount of precision. You have to get it EXACTLY right, so be careful when paraphrasing the views of others. Also, philosophers may use terms in very specific ways, thereby departing from everyday usage of those terms. For example, in everyday contexts we may treat the term “idea” as interchangeable with terms, such as, “notion”, “thought”, and “concept”. However, for most philosophers “idea” will NOT be interchangeable with any of those other terms. (i) In general, be very careful about substituting one term for another – in written assignments for other disciplines you may be criticized for using the same term repetitively throughout your document. You will NOT be criticized for this in philosophy. We encourage it for the sake of clarity. (ii) It is a great idea to define your terms, to avoid ambiguity.

Charity. A lot of philosophers say things that sound CRAZY (pretty much every conceivable position has been held by some philosopher at some point (Thales: Magnets have souls)). But they're not stupid (if they were, we wouldn't be studying them). If a view looks silly, maybe that's because you're relatively new to philosophy. Directing your arguments against the most reasonable position the philosopher had in mind (and not a straw man) makes your arguments more powerful.

*(Note: Sometimes, being undecided is a good enough view in itself. You don't have to have a solution -- many a good published philosophy paper is valuable simply because it throws a problem/ambiguity into sharp relief. It's OK if you end up with a situation in which you are unable to decide -- as long as you have well argued reasons for doing so.)*

Always check yourself against common sense. If you end up with a premise or conclusion that is very silly (or runs contrary to common sense), then you've probably gone wrong somewhere. Example: It is impossible to violate the Law of Nature. Stealing violates the Law of Nature. Therefore it is impossible to steal.

Conclusion. End well. Don't babble about what lies outside the scope of this paper or what still needs to be done. End with a sharp, punchy restatement of what you showed. Did you demonstrate what you set out to (and if not, why not, for that too is a conclusion). Don't make feeble rambling pseudo-profound generalizations.

#### Rewrite!

Jacques Barzun: “Writing is rewriting”. Nobody writes a good essay in the first go. Even if they do, they could make it better by revising it. Revision is the key to good writing. It's the process of revision in which everything comes together.

That's why a day or two is helpful. Often things settle out overnight. When you re-read over the essay you'll think “why did I write that?” If you can't remember, cut it.

Don't be afraid to edit things out. Don't become too attached to a nice turn of phrase or colourful metaphor. If it doesn't contribute to communicating your point, bin it: every sentence must do some work (focus).

Revision is NOT the same as checking for spelling errors. It will involve BIG changes. You might, in your first draft, have ordered the paragraphs so as to say A, B, A&B implies C,

therefore C". On revising, you realise that the structure would be clearer if you wrote B&A implies C, B, A, therefore C" or something like that.

## **V. Mistakes to avoid.**

- DON'T **appeal to authority** .
- DON'T use complicated or arcane language when you can think of simple ways to say the same thing.
- DON'T write important and/or interesting sounding material without also saying how it supports your thesis. If it doesn't support your thesis, cut it out.
- DON'T have things in your paper that are not needed.
- DON'T make sweeping claims unless you can support them with evidence and argument.
- DON'T leave crucial words or concepts undefined.
- DON'T worry about being wrong.
- DON'T wait until the last minute to start writing.
- DON'T ever be afraid to ask for help. Getting help is a mark of a good student.

## **VI. Plagiarism**

**Plagiarism is viewed as a serious offence in academia. In simple terms, plagiarism is using other people's ideas and words without clearly acknowledging the source of that information.**

**All the written work submitted by students as part of their assessment must be their own. Thus students may not copy material from any source, including sources available on the internet, and then submit it as if they had written it themselves.**

**If you borrow a sentence or even a long phrase from some other author, you are obliged to put the words in quotation marks and to acknowledge the original author by giving a reference. This is even more necessary if one wishes to borrow a paragraph from someone else. Of course it may be appropriate, for purposes of discussing someone's argument, to quote their argument in full. There is no objection to this once the text is appropriately identified and the original author is acknowledged.**

**The obligation to acknowledge the work of others is not avoided simply by changing a few words in what is otherwise someone else's sentence or paragraph. There may be some subtle and difficult reasoning involved in trying to estimate how many consecutive words by another author may be borrowed without being guilty of plagiarism; all this can be avoided by learning how to write your own sentences from the beginning.**

**Breaches of the rule against plagiarism are equivalent to cheating in your examination. There is a range of serious penalties for cheating. These are listed in the *Guide to Examinations*.**

**Please view <http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/douglass/sal/plagiarism/intro.html>. This website walks you through several academic integrity dilemmas; it may help you to understand what is ethically expected of you while writing your papers.**

## **VII. Citation Guides**

### **MLA Citation Guide**<sup>†</sup>

#### **In-Text Citations: The Basics**

##### **Basic In-Text Citation Rules**

In MLA style, referring to the works of others in your text is done by using what's known as parenthetical citation. Immediately following a quotation from a source or a paraphrase of a source's ideas, you place the authors name followed by a space and the relevant page number(s).

Human beings have been described as "symbol-using animals" (Burke 3).

When a source has no known author, use a shortened title of the work instead of an author name. Place the title in quotation marks if it's a short work, or italicize or underline it if it's a longer work.

Your in-text citation will correspond with an entry in your Works Cited page, which, for the Burke citation above, will look something like this:

Burke, Kenneth. *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1966.

We'll learn how to make a Works Cited page in a bit, but right now it's important to know that parenthetical citations and Works Cited pages allow readers to know which sources you consulted in writing your essay, so that they can either verify your interpretation of the sources or use them in their own scholarly work.

##### **Multiple Citations**

To cite multiple sources in the same parenthetical reference, separate the citations by a semi-colon:

...as has been discussed elsewhere (Burke 3; Dewey 21).

##### **When Citation is not Needed**

Common sense and ethics should determine your need for documenting sources. You do not need to give sources for familiar proverbs, well-known quotations or common knowledge. Remember, this is a rhetorical choice, based on audience. If you're writing for an expert audience of a scholarly journal, they'll have different expectations of what constitutes common knowledge.

##### **Citing Multiple Works by the Same Author**

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<sup>†</sup> Taken from *The Purdue OWL Family of Sites*. 26 Aug. 2005. The Writing Lab and OWL at Purdue and Purdue University. 31 October 2006 <<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>>.



If you cite more than one work by a particular author, include a shortened title for the particular work from which you are quoting to distinguish it from the others.

Lightenor has argued that computers are not useful tools for small children ("Too Soon" 38), though he has acknowledged elsewhere that early exposure to computer games does lead to better small motor skill development in a child's second and third year ("Hand-Eye Development" 17).

Additionally, if the author's name is not mentioned in the sentence, you would format your citation with the author's name followed by a comma, followed by a shortened title of the work, followed, when appropriate, by page numbers:

Visual studies, because it is such a new discipline, may be "too easy" (Elkins, "Visual Studies" 63).

### **Citing Indirect Sources**

Sometimes you may have to use an indirect source. An indirect source is a source cited in another source. For such indirect quotations, use "qtd. in" to indicate the source you actually consulted. For example:

Ravitch argues that high schools are pressured to act as "social service centers, and they don't do that well" (qtd. in Weisman 259).

### **Numbering Endnotes and Footnotes**

Footnotes in MLA format are indicated by consecutively-numbered superscript arabic numbers in the main text **after** the punctuation of the phrase or clause the note refers to:

Some have argued that such an investigation would be fruitless.<sup>6</sup>  
Scholars have argued for years that this claim has no basis,<sup>7</sup> so we would do well to ignore it.

However, note references appear **before** dashes:

For years, scholars have failed to address this point<sup>8</sup>—a fact that suggests their cowardice more than their carelessness.

Do not use asterisks, daggers, or other symbols for note references. The list of endnotes and footnotes (either of which, for papers submitted for publication, should be listed on a separate page, as indicated below) should correspond to the note references in the text.