

Paper Writing Tips

A. Purpose of a paper: A philosophy paper is an opportunity to engage in a dialogue with ideas rather than just reading about them. Writing a paper is one of the best ways to think through a basic but carefully delineated topic or problem. You are not expected to give final answers or even new answers; your answers have been given already by some thinker (though you may not know it). It is, nevertheless, invaluable to struggle with a problem on your own. By so doing you may see why the problem is important, why thinkers have found it difficult, and you should appreciate more fully the force of the various answers that have been given.

B. Different types of philosophy papers: There are many types of philosophy papers that could be written. Your instructor will inform you as to which types are permitted. Some of the main types are: the careful influences of philosophers' ideas, the detailed analysis of an argument, the comparison of two or more philosophers on a particular issue, the comprehensive study of an important philosophical idea.

C. Thesis: your paper should have a thesis--that is, a specific main idea in terms of which your paper is organized. Moreover, your thesis should be supported or defended through the giving of reasons or arguments. In other words, you should not simply write down a hodgepodge of ideas, but should organize your ideas in terms of a thesis, and defend them through cogent reasoning. Ordinarily a paper should begin with a paragraph stating the thesis and summarizing the reasoning in support of it. The opening paragraph should be such that the reader will know exactly what your thesis is and how you propose to establish it.

It is hardly possible to overemphasize the importance of a thesis in the writing of a satisfactory paper. One of the commonest deficiencies in student papers is the failure to formulate an adequate thesis; another common deficiency is the failure to develop the thesis in a careful and orderly way throughout the body of the paper. Accordingly, one of the five subdivisions of the essay evaluation form--Organization--is designed to evaluate this aspect of your paper.

D. Use of primary and secondary sources: Reading other thinkers' views on the problem and collecting relevant information are important avenues into thinking out the problem for yourself. But do not allow your reading to take you away from thinking the problem through for yourself.

E. Footnotes: Avoid plagiarism, which "The Student's Guide for Undergraduate Students" defines as "any deliberate borrowing of the ideas, terms, statements or knowledge of others without clear and specific acknowledgment of the source." When you have borrowed ideas or phrases or quoted an author, speaker, friend, etc., give credit in a footnote. Use a standard footnote form, remembering that consistency in form is more important than the kind of form you use. The test of a footnote is that it should give enough information so that the reader could, with ease, go directly to your source.

F. Proofreading: Always proofread your final copy; this will eliminate a lot of silly mistakes. If your spelling is poor, use a dictionary.

G. Level of writing: Write so that intelligent students who are not taking this course can understand you. It is easy to assume too much in the way of unexplained technical terms and theories, and glibly toss around such words as "absolute", "relative", "objective", and "subjective". The problem is that these terms (and related theories) may mean different things to different people, and hence they must be explained in the context of your paper.

What Makes for a Good Paper

Following is a list of the qualities in terms of which your paper will be judged.

I. Topic

1. The topic should be appropriate for the course: If you are in doubt about the appropriateness of your proposed topic, ask your instructor.
2. The topic should be worthwhile: Not only should the topic be of intrinsic philosophical importance, it should also be worthwhile in the sense that it will promote understanding of the subjects studied in the course.
3. The topic should be sufficiently focused: You do better to go into some depth on a few issues, than to survey thinly many issues. Write more on less rather than less on more.

II. Ideas

1. Ideas should be expressed with clarity: Clarity refers to those qualities necessary if the reader is to understand what you mean. These range from the correctness of your grammar to the clarity of your thought in general. Use expressions which are not awkward or confused but which read smoothly and say directly what you mean to say. (Remember that the reader must evaluate what you say and not what you mean to say). Know the exact meaning of the words you use and use them thoughtfully. It is an excellent practice to read a paper out loud before writing the final draft.
2. Ideas should be rational or logical: It is not sufficient merely to state many ideas. You must give reasons in support of them. Your work will be judged not on your conclusions but on the quality of the reasoning you use to support your conclusions.
3. Ideas should be thoughtful: You should strive to communicate the depth of understanding you have achieved on the subject. That is, try to convince your reader that you really understand what you are talking about.
4. Ideas should show creativity or originality: As was noted above, you are not expected to provide new or final answers; but you should strive to provide some creativity or originality, for example, in respect of interpretations or criticisms -- see numbers 4 and 5 under Scholarship below.

III. Organization

1. You must have a thesis.
2. Your thesis should be developed adequately.
3. Every paragraph should be relevant to the thesis.
4. Each paragraph should have a controlling idea.

5. Each paragraph should be developed with relevant and well ordered details. Too many papers wander all over the map, making no point in particular, and lacking any coherent structure. A good paper must clearly state a specific main idea -- that is, a thesis -- near the beginning, systematically develop it in unified, coherent paragraphs, and come to a conclusion. The test of a properly organized paper is that the reader will at all times know where you are going and where you have come from. This is true even at the level of the paragraph, and it requires that each paragraph deal with only one idea. A longer paper is usually divided into several distinct sections with each section numbered.

IV. Scholarship (when relevant)

1. Texts used must be included in the bibliography: A paper should include a bibliography even if only one book is used. Full identification of the editions must be given. (See reference works cited below.)
2. Footnotes must be given for borrowed ideas or phrases: When you have borrowed ideas or phrases or quoted an author, speaker, friend, etc., give credit in a footnote. When a passage in a book or journal is quoted or paraphrased, page references must be given. (See reference works cited below.)
3. Summaries of ideas taken from texts should be accurate: Write your summary of an author's views in such a way that the author himself or herself could agree with you that it really does express correctly what he or she has written. Read what you are summarizing several times to make certain that you understand it properly. Do not just paraphrase, but explain as much as you can in your own words. If you are in doubt consult a suitable secondary source. (But then acknowledge your indebtedness in a footnote.)
4. Interpretations of such ideas should be cogent: When you interpret ideas you are not merely summarizing them but explaining their real meaning or significance or importance. The sort of interpretation you will offer will depend on the thesis you are defending. Your thesis should be one that requires you to provide interpretation and not just a summary.
5. Criticisms of such ideas should be well organized: Criticisms are attempts to determine whether the view in question is right or wrong, true or false. Criticisms need not be negative or destructive. An essay need not contain criticisms if development of the thesis does not call for them. If development of the thesis does call for criticisms, your criticisms should never be the mere expression of preference, but should be a reasoned defense or attack on the view under scrutiny.

V. Mechanics

1. Words should not be misspelled.
2. There should not be punctuation errors.
3. There should not be grammatical errors.
4. There should not be serious deficiencies in style: Your instructor will evaluate your essay in terms of mechanics for your own personal benefit. His or her evaluation of the mechanics of your paper will not as such enter into your grade on the essay. However, if your essay is too deficient in this respect it may hamper your ability to express your ideas clearly and accurately, and, hence, indirectly lower your grade.

VI. Bibliography

The following books (most of which are available in the Philosophy Department Library, 1420 HW) are useful reference works.

1. Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (The University of Chicago Press). A widely used manual, available in an inexpensive paperback edition.
2. William Strunk, Jr., and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style* (New York: The Macmillan Co.). A brief and very readable book on style, also available in an inexpensive paperback edition, containing many helpful suggestions.
3. Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, *The Modern Researcher* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World). Although written by historians, this work contains many ideas that are relevant to the writing of papers in philosophy. Available in paperback.
4. H.W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (Oxford University Press). A useful reference work for rectifying common errors in usage.
5. *A Manual of Style* (The University of Chicago Press). The authoritative reference work on matters of style in the writing of scholarly books and articles.