



WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Writing about Philosophy

Writing about philosophy is an opportunity to engage in a dialogue with ideas rather than just reading about them. Either as an essay or documented research paper, writing 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 may have been thought of already by some famous thinker. It is, nevertheless, invaluable to struggle with a problem on your own. By doing so you may see why the problem is important, why thinkers have found it difficult, and what the force is of the various answers that have been given.

Some of the main types of philosophy papers are as follows:

- Analysis of a classic text
- Historic study of the origins or influences of a philosopher's ideas
- Detailed analysis of an argument
- Comparison of two or more philosophers on a particular issue
- Comprehensive study of an important philosophical idea

GUIDELINES FOR PHILOSOPHY PAPERS

Organizing Your Essay

Similar to other forms of academic writing, a philosophy paper requires organization and logical development in order to be effective. Your paper should have a thesis—a specific main idea that organizes your argument. Your thesis must be supported or defended by reasons or arguments. You should not simply write a hodgepodge of ideas.

Ordinarily a paper should begin with a paragraph stating the thesis and summarizing the reasoning which supports it. The opening paragraph should tell your reader exactly what your thesis is and how you propose to support it. It is hardly possible to overemphasize the importance of a thesis in the writing of a satisfactory paper. One of the most common 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.

Using Primary and Secondary Sources

Reading another thinker's views on a problem and collecting relevant information are important avenues into thinking out the problem for yourself. However, do not allow your reading to take you away from thinking the problem through yourself. Researching a specific topic usually requires incorporating information from primary and secondary sources.

- **Primary Sources**

Primary sources refer to original materials and the study of a subject through firsthand investigation: i.e., statistical data, historical documents, or works of literature.

- **Secondary Sources**

Secondary sources refer to materials that provide information from other researchers on a particular subject: i.e., books and articles on social and political issues, historical events, or scientific debates.

Documenting Your Sources

When you borrow ideas or phrases or quote an author, speaker, or friend, you must give credit in a citation. Use a standard documentation style, remembering that consistency in form is more important than the kind of form you use. The test of a citation is that it gives enough information so the reader can, with ease, locate your source. Do not plagiarize. The college defines plagiarism as “any deliberate borrowing of the ideas, terms, statements, or knowledge of others without clear and specific acknowledgement of the source.”

Proofreading

Always proofread your final copy. This will eliminate silly mistakes. If your spelling is poor, use a dictionary. Write so that intelligent students who are not taking the course will understand you. Do not assume that your reader will understand unexplained technical terms or theories. Avoid using terms that might cause confusion, such as “absolute,” “relative,” or “objective.” These terms and related theories may mean different things to different people, and thus they must be explained in the context of your paper.

CHECKLIST

Topic

The topic should be appropriate for the course. IF you are in doubt, about the appropriateness of your topic, ask your instructor.

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 your understanding of the subjects studied in the course.

The topic should be sufficiently focused. You do better to go into a few issues in depth than into many issues superficially. Write more on less rather than less on more.

Ideas

Ideas should be expressed with clarity. You must pay attention to several aspects of your writing 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 read smoothly and say precisely what you mean. Remember that a reader must evaluate what you say, 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 you write the final draft.

Ideas should be rational or logical. Your work will be judged not on your conclusions but on the quality of reasoning you use to support your conclusions(s). It is not sufficient to simply state many ideas. You must give reasons in support of them.

Ideas should show creativity or originality. As noted earlier, you are not expected to provide new or final answers, but you should strive to provide some creativity or originality, for example in sections of interpretation or criticism (discussed below).

Organization

- You must have a clear and precise thesis
- Your thesis should be developed adequately
- Every paragraph must be relevant to the thesis
- Each paragraph must have a controlling idea
- Each paragraph should be developed with relevant and well-ordered details.

Too many papers wander, make no specific point and lack any coherent structure. A good paper must clearly state a specific main idea or 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.

Scholarship

Texts you use must be included in the bibliography. A paper should include a bibliography even if only one text is used. Full identification of the sources must be given.

When you have borrowed ideas or phrases or quoted and author, speaker, friend, etc., give credit in a citation even if those ideas have been paraphrased.

Summaries taken from texts should be accurate. Read what you are summarizing several times to make certain that you understand it properly. Explain as much as you can in your own words. If you are in doubt about meaning, consult a secondary source and acknowledge your use of this source in a footnote.

Interpretations of ideas should be cogent. When you interpret ideas, you are not merely summarizing them but explaining their significance or importance. The kind of interpretation you make will depend on the thesis you are defending. Your thesis should be one that requires you to provide interpretation and not just a summary.

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 calls for criticism, your criticisms should never be the mere expression of preference, but should be a reasoned defense or attack on the view under scrutiny.

Mechanics

- Words should be spelled correctly.
- Sentences should be correctly punctuated.
- The essay should be relatively free of grammatical errors.

Your instructor will evaluate your essay in terms of mechanics for your personal benefit. His or her evaluation of the mechanics of the paper will not as such enter into your grade on the essay. However, if mechanical errors hamper your ability to express your ideas clearly and accurately, they may indirectly lower your grade.