

Writing a Philosophy Paper: Hints and Guideline

A **philosophy paper** is somewhat different from papers in other disciplines in the way it treats the material. It does not require mere factual recall, nor is it meant to be a mere report of opinions – neither those of the philosophers discussed in class, nor of your own opinions. The main goal is to answer the questions by **making claims and arguing for them**. Do not simply *state* a position (“I think X”; “Descartes believes that Y”). For every claim you make, explain why this is the case, what are good reasons to believe so (“I think / Descartes claims X, because A, B and C support it, in the following way...”).

Remember that opinions in themselves are not very interesting. However, **why** anyone would have a particular view – what **the reasons** are for holding any opinion – that is far more interesting. Think of your main task as trying to **convince your reader of the position for which you are arguing**. This is done by providing reasons and explaining them.

Your reader: Imagine your reader is an intelligent friend who is not taking this class and never studied philosophy. Your task is to explain the topic to this friend, present the main position(s) clearly, and express yourself in such a way that someone who doesn’t know what you are thinking or what the philosopher(s) we read have said, would be able to understand your essay.

Clarity is the most important feature for which you should strive. If you are not entirely sure of what you are trying to say, your reader will be even more confused. This also works in the opposite direction: if what you write is unclear, your reader may assume that your thoughts were not entirely clear.

Introduction: for the kind of papers we will be writing in this class, the standard structure of an essay does not apply perfectly. For example, these papers will not normally require a general introductory paragraph. You do not need to explain that Plato was a great philosopher, or that questions about knowledge have always plagued humankind. Instead, your introductory paragraph, if you write one, should address the topic directly, and frame it in a way which directly sets up the discussion that follows.

Relevance: make sure you read the question and understand it, and that you actually answer it. Don't say too little, and don't say too much. Too little would be, e.g., just stating the 'headlines' without sufficient explications. Saying too much would be adding side-notes, all possible related points and issues, or showing that you have been paying attention in class by adding in all the introductory explanations of the philosopher's views. Keep your paper relevant and your reader engaged. If you are not sure how things connect, come talk to me, don't try to add in all the material you have.

Quotations: quotations from the text may be appropriate sometimes, but often they do more to show the reader that you know *where* the point is made, but not that you know *what* is meant by it. Quotations absolutely have to be explained. (Plato says "x-y-z" by which he means that...). Never let the quotation stand alone.

References: when you quote, or refer to a text you have used, give enough information for the reader to find it. Give a short reference in the text (for example: *Meno*, p.45), and if required, a full reference in a bibliographical section in the end. If you use any books or websites we have not used in class, they should be referenced.

Examples help illustrate a points you make, or demonstrate theoretical explanations. But they should not be made to carry the weight of your explanations: do not use an example instead of an argument or a statement of your position. Make sure to state your position, the general principle, or your explanation, and only then introduce the example. Or, if you introduce the example first, be sure to unpack it: how does this example demonstrate what you wanted it to show? Remember, an example is not an explanation, it is an instance of something; of what? That is what you are supposed to explain.

Grammar and style: A split infinitive or a preposition at the end of a sentence are allowed if this is the less awkward way to phrase that sentence. Feel free to use the first person. The verb 'to be' in all its conjugations may be used freely. However, remember that all this is with a view to maximize clarity.

Plagiarism: is the use of someone else's work while presenting it as your own. Most people never consider doing it. But some do it when they panic. Avoid it at all costs. If you use any work that is

not your own, just reference it. For this class, no outside sources are needed. Using materials found online, paraphrasing online resources, not crediting quoted sources, having parts of a paper written by anyone else, and passing these off as your own work – that’s plagiarism. When in doubt, cite the sources you used. Plagiarism is surprisingly easy to spot, and punished very harshly. If you are uncertain about something being a source you need to cite, or about your ability to finish a paper, come talk to me. You may also consult these resources:

<http://uss.tufts.edu/arc/writingresources/plagiarism.asp> ; <http://uss.tufts.edu/arc/writingresources/penalties.asp>

Grading will be based on three basic criteria: How well you understand the topic on which you wrote; how well you argued for the positions you stated; and how clear and well-organized your writing is overall. What your conclusion is and whether I agree with it have no bearing on your grade; I will, however, carefully assess the way in which you argue for it.

See also these other style guide sheets:

- General tips reference sheet
- Words to avoid
- How not to start a paper