

The following can be found at <http://www.gsu.edu/~phltso/paperguide.html>

## Philosophy Paper Writing Guidelines

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### 1) BEGIN YOUR PAPER WITH A THESIS STATEMENT

Avoid general, historical, or flowery introductions. Don't use phrases like "Since the dawn of history, philosophers have been arguing about..." or "Webster's Dictionary defines free will as..." Rather, begin by stating your position, the position you will be arguing for. A good way to start is with the phrase: "In this paper, I will argue that..."

It's fine to use the first person. This is a paper in which you will be giving reasons in defense of your position.

### 2) ORGANIZATION

Make sure that your paper is organized and has a clear structure. Before you start to write a draft of your paper, think about what the main points are that you wish to make, how they relate to one another, and in what order you'll present them. It may help the organization of your paper to give the reader a "map" of the paper in your first or second paragraph. For example:

"In this paper I will argue that.... First, I will explain this. Next, I will set out that. Then I will show the weakness of this position. Finally, I will give my reasons for supporting the other position."

### 3) COHERENCE

Look to see that each point you make somehow helps to support your main thesis. If it does not, leave it out. Remember that this is a position or argumentative paper, not a research paper. Keep your use of secondary sources to a minimum.

### 4) QUOTATIONS AND PARAPHRASING

Use quotes only to support or back up points that you are making. Do not use quotations in order to make or set out main points in your paper. The same goes for paraphrasing. Avoid stringing together a series of quotes or paraphrased passages, especially when setting out the position of a philosopher. You should familiarize yourself enough with a position so that you can describe it in your own words.

However, put in textual references to primary sources, even when describing somebody's position in your own words, so that an interested reader would be able to look at the place where the philosopher in question states the position or argument you're explaining. I'd prefer that you use the MLA citation format (<http://www.mrs.umn.edu/academic/philosophy/MLAstyle.html>).

Also, do be careful not to plagiarize. If your ideas were influenced by a secondary source, cite that source. We'll be discussing plagiarism in class, but the Writing Place at Northwestern University has a good introduction to what plagiarism is and how to avoid it ([http://www.writing.nwu.edu/avoiding\\_plagiarism.html](http://www.writing.nwu.edu/avoiding_plagiarism.html)).

## 5) CLARITY

Make sure that your writing is clear enough that somebody not already familiar with the material and ideas you're talking about could understand what you're saying. By doing so, you show that you understand what you're talking about--unclear writing is often the product of unclear thinking.

## 6) CHARITY

If you're attacking somebody else's position or argument, make sure that you're attacking his or her actual position, not some straw man. Philosophers have said all sorts of things that initially seem bizarre or simply incomprehensible. Before dismissing somebody as holding a silly or incoherent position, ask yourself: do I really understand what this person is saying? If you do think you understand the position, but still think that it seems outrageous, be charitable and try to see if you can find good reasons why an intelligent person might hold such a position. You don't have to agree with the position. But by being charitable, you will help make your own argument stronger, if you do end up disagreeing with somebody else.

## 7) GIVE ARGUMENTS AND CONSIDER OBJECTIONS

This is a position paper. Don't just say what you believe, however; say why your belief is correct, or at least plausible. Make sure that you give reasons and arguments for the position that you hold. One good way to approach such a paper is to imagine that you're trying to convince a reasonable person who initially disagrees with your thesis. What arguments could you give such a person? What objections would such a person make against your arguments and your position? By imagining the strongest objections that you can, and then replying to them, you will make your argument stronger.

## 8) PROOFREAD

This should be obvious, but it's often neglected. A college-level paper should be free of typos and grammatical mistakes. Spell-check won't catch all of your errors. Sometimes it's easier to catch errors on the printed page than on a computer screen; this is particularly true of any bizarre formatting that won't show up on the screen. So print out a hard copy of your paper and look it over before printing out your final version.

If you'd like an on-line guide to writing and grammar, check out the Webster Guide to Grammar and Writing or the 1918 edition of William Strunk's Elements of Style. I've compiled a brief list of common grammar and usage mistakes.

## 9) MAKE BACKUP COPIES

Nothing feels worse than getting an "unrecoverable disk error" at 7 a.m. the morning a paper is due, if your only copy of the paper is on that disk. (Actually, that's not true--plenty of things feel worse. But it still feels pretty bad.) Save your work often, and occasionally save a copy of your work onto another disk.

## 10) WRITE MULTIPLE DRAFTS

It will be difficult, if not impossible, to implement many of the suggestions above if you write your paper in a single shot the night before it's due. The best way to spot unclear writing and thinking, to formulate and respond to good objections, and to organize your paper clearly so that all of your points help support your thesis is to write a draft of your paper, look it over with a critical eye, and then improve upon it. Repeat this process as needed.

If you have any questions about your paper, please feel free to come by my office to talk to me. I'll be happy to look at rough drafts of papers, to talk to you about possible topics, or to discuss arguments you're thinking of giving.

The above suggestions are a good place to start, but aren't exhaustive. Two excellent paper-writing guides that are more extensive than this one are Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper, by James Pryor, (<http://www.princeton.edu/~jimpryor/general/writing.html>) and How to Write a Philosophy Paper, by Peter Horban. (<http://www.sfu.ca/philosophy/writing.htm>) An accurate summary of some things not to do, which (unfortunately) students commonly do, can be found at Advice on How to Write a Bad Paper. (<http://www.philosophy.eku.edu/Williams/HON102Web/badpaper.htm>)

A parting thought:

A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect? And he will probably ask himself two more: Could I put it more shortly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly? But you are not obliged to go to all this trouble. You can shirk it by simply throwing your mind open and letting the ready-made phrases come crowding in. They will construct your sentences for you--even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent--and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself.

--George Orwell, from "Politics and the English Language"