

# How to Write Philosophy Papers

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## **Purpose: What is the aim of philosophical writing?**

- Rational Inquiry – Philosophy aims to question our understanding and common conceptions through the negotiation of reasons.
- Reasons – What you *believe* is largely irrelevant – your writing should be focused on the *reasons* that you have for that belief.

## **Substance: What should a philosophy paper accomplish?**

- Thesis – Your paper must put forward a *modest, meaningful, contestable thesis* that addresses some philosophical issue.
- Argument – The thesis should be supported by an explicit, logical, and clear argument.
  - ⇒ Your argument must exhibit independent thinking.
  - ⇒ Your argument should actively engage with the subjects you are discussing. Make sure your paper *goes* somewhere.
- Evidence – The best way to illustrate a claim is often to use examples, which need not be empirical. Thought experiments can be a good way to do this.
- Understanding – Your paper should demonstrate that you understand the material you've been discussing in class.
  - ⇒ This need not involve direct citations – it may be enough to simply portray the issues correctly, perhaps using your own examples.
- Citations – You should consider using citations to help frame the philosophical question you are addressing, as well as to show other ways of answering it.
  - ⇒ Try to paraphrase whenever possible, since this demonstrates your understanding better than simply quoting.
  - ⇒ If you quote a passage, make sure to explicitly explain how it relates to your argument.

## **Structure: How should a philosophy paper be organized?**

- Thesis Paragraph – Your paper should open with a *brief* paragraph that states the philosophical question you are addressing along with your answer.
  - ⇒ It is sometimes a good idea to sketch out the main steps of your argument in an explicit 'roadmap' at the end of this paragraph.
- Stage Setting – After the thesis paragraph it is generally a good idea to introduce the philosophical issue and relevant positions more fully.
  - ⇒ This often involves citing other philosophers and their positions.
  - ⇒ It is good to consider whether you need to define and spell out important terms of art or assumptions of your argument. Only do this if *not* doing so would make your argument unclear.

- Argument – There is no standard formula for how to structure the body of your argument. Here is a good general approach:
  - ⇒ Figure out the main points of your thesis that you have to establish.
  - ⇒ Order these steps to make the logical progression as clear as possible.
  - ⇒ Consider objections. These may be lumped at the end or interspersed throughout, depending on which approach makes the logical progression more clear.
- Conclusion – This need not be very detailed – a simply summary is fine.
- In general, *words should be spent on the argument*. Attempt to streamline the other sections as much as possible.

**Style: How should a philosophy paper be written?**

- Clarity – This is by far the most important aspect of writing style. The best way to write is whatever style will make your arguments most clear.
  - ⇒ Make sure your statements aren't ambiguous – don't give readers the opportunity to misinterpret you.
  - ⇒ Don't be afraid to use 'I'.
  - ⇒ Try to use words and sentences that are as simple as possible. The simpler your writing sounds, the better.
- Concision – Explain yourself fully, but only explain what is directly relevant to your thesis.

**General Advice**

- Keep it simple – Make a single, small point.
  - ⇒ Stay close to the material: don't try and develop your own theory when you're just starting out.
- Start Early – It takes time to develop your ideas into clear, well crafted, and well-organized arguments. That is the measure of success.
  - ⇒ You can test this! Give your draft to a friend who's not in the course; see if they can explain your main claims and arguments back to you.
- Always write an outline first: make sure *you* understand the structure of your argument before you try to explain it to others.