



Writing Philosophy Papers

Most philosophy papers present an argument for a thesis. Sometimes the thesis is normative (e.g., animals should have rights; we can establish clear conditions for when patients should have access to lethal doses of medicine). Sometimes they are technical (e.g., the mind is nothing but the brain; to be is to be perceived). And sometimes, if not usually, they focus on interpreting philosophers (e.g., Anslem's ontological argument is sound proof for God's existence; Hume's sentimental theory of taste better accounts for the value of art in our lives than Plato's claim that there is a Form of Beauty).

When you write philosophy papers, consider these elements:

Clear definitions and consistent use of terms. You will be well-served to give definitions of key terms, often the terms in the prompt or thesis statement. Also, what seem like easy synonyms in regular language often have significantly different meanings in philosophy (e.g. ethics or morality; person or human being). Consistency and accuracy are much more important than creativity or variety.

Roadmap and signposts. Philosophers often use the first person, especially when announcing their argument. The structure of the paper is often methodical as well, so numbering new claims and correctly using words that distinguish premises (e.g. because, for, given that, etc.) and conclusions (e.g. therefore, accordingly, it follows, etc.) is common. Beware of the use of the first person that avoids giving reasons (e.g. in my opinion).

Examples, test cases, or thought experiments. As abstract as much philosophy is, giving clear examples and applications of an argument (or doing so to prove someone else is wrong) is worthwhile and efficient when done carefully.

Effective quotes, paraphrases, and summaries. The prompt should help establish how much quoting is expected and whether you can summarize the arguments and positions of others. When it is a question of interpretation, the text is the evidence and your argument is the entirety of the essay. But even when prompted to evaluate a position, first you should spend serious time explaining the position carefully, showing that you have read and comprehended complex texts. In those cases, your own evaluation regularly does not appear until the last paragraph or two. But be aware of overuse of quotations that give the impression that you have little to say or do not understand enough to paraphrase. For more tips, see the "Effective Quotes, Paraphrases, and Summaries" handout.

Response to objections. No philosophy paper is complete without it; although, objections can be entertained in subtle ways throughout the argument rather than saving a whole section to do so. One can defend a thesis by showing that arguments against it are unconvincing rather than, or in addition to, offering plausible reasons to support it. Don't hesitate to be explicit here. See also the "They Say/I Say" handout.

When you write philosophy papers, consider avoiding:

Mere summary. Don't only explain another position without critical engagement. The exception here occurs if the prompt specifically states otherwise (e.g. an argument reconstruction or entirely exegetical essay).

Dictionary definitions. Dictionaries merely record how words are, and have been, used; they do not make good philosophical authorities. You should supply your own definitions for key words or use meanings from course readings. One exception occurs when one consciously uses the dictionary definition for contrast or context.

Overstatement. Supporting "all" or "none", "always" or "never", statements is rather difficult. Philosophy papers thrive on effectively defending modest and narrow claims, qualifying claims, and even admitting the limits of one's own position. This holds for introductions too – who cares about the dawn of time?

Common fallacies. See "Identifying Illogical Arguments" handout.