GUIDELINES FOR WRITING PHILOSOPHY PAPERS
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These guidelines are designed especially for students in my introductory classes who are trying to write a philosophy paper for the first time. They should also be helpful to students in other philosophy courses, as well as in any courses that emphasize expository writing.

I. WHAT IS AN ARGUMENTATIVE PAPER?

Writing a philosophy paper, especially for the first time, can be quite a challenge. Philosophy papers are almost invariably argumentative papers. An argumentative paper is one in which the author offers some thesis and then offers arguments in favor of that thesis. Argumentative papers are similar to what English teachers sometimes call persuasive papers. Philosophers prefer to refer to these papers as argumentative, because there are many ways to persuade people (e.g., by appealing to their emotions) which have nothing to do with sound argumentation.

The key to writing a successful argumentative paper is to have a clear thesis for which you are arguing. Although typically it is best to state your thesis early in the paper, you should think of your paper as providing a sound argument for which your thesis is the conclusion. After you have established your thesis, you should make sure that each part of your paper is concerned either with clarifying your thesis, offering arguments in support of your thesis, or addressing possible objections to your thesis or the arguments you offer in support of that thesis.

You will often discover that as you sit down to write you really don’t know what your thesis is. You may start writing defending one claim and, after considering the arguments, recognize you don’t have a case. If this happens to you, you have to revise your thesis and the rest of the paper with it. The writing process can help you discover what you think—this is called “writing to learn”. The product of this process is not a formal paper, but it helps you formulate the thesis and arguments you will discuss in your formal paper. As a reader of an argumentative essay, I am not interested in the path you took to arrive at your position; I am interested in what your thesis is and why I should believe it to be true.

Write at least three drafts of the paper. Critique the first draft for content. Make sure you have a clear thesis and that the thesis is well defended. You may have to make substantial revisions to get it right. When you have your almost-final draft, print it out and read it through for grammar and spelling. Read it aloud, and you will catch more errors. Most of the mistakes in writing are things that can be easily seen by any competent speaker of English, including yourself. If you give yourself time to read through your completed text, you will find mistakes which you can easily correct. Better yet, have your roommate read it. If he or she can't follow it, I won't be able to either.

II. SOME COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. Should I include my own opinions? The short answer to this is yes, but only to the extent which your opinions are supported by argument. The goal of a philosophy paper is to argue that certain propositions are true. It must therefore supply reasons for accepting the propositions it defends. Since you are not an expert in the field, the fact that you believe some proposition is not by itself any reason for the reader to accept that proposition as true. You must work hard to try to figure out the reasons you have the opinions you do, scrutinize these reasons to see if they in fact support your opinions and, if they do, state these reasons clearly in your paper.
2. *What can I suppose the reader knows?* This is a difficult question. In general, you should take your reader to be someone roughly like you. You may assume that the reader has basic knowledge of the philosophical concepts and issues which you discuss in your paper. You should not assume that the reader has read everything you have read within the last week. You will often find yourself in a position where you have to decide whether to discuss the meaning of some term. In general you need to do so only where the exact meaning of the term has consequences for the issues discussed in your paper. For instance, if you are writing a paper about Descartes' proof of the existence of God, you may remark that this is an *a priori* proof without saying what *a priori* means. If, on the other hand, you are writing a paper on Kant's theory of *a priori* knowledge, you had better clearly state exactly what Kant takes *a priori* knowledge to be.

It is a common mistake to allude in a single sentence to some particular example or passage from something you have read. For instance, someone might write, 'Hume believed all ideas are derived from impressions except for his missing shade of blue.' If you haven't read Hume lately, you'll have no idea what this means. If the missing shade of blue is important enough to mention in your paper, spend a paragraph explaining what you are talking about, otherwise drop it.

3. *What should be in the introduction?* Avoid drawn out introductions in which you try to fix the historical context or suggest the grand significance of your topic. For instance, do not start papers with sentences like "Throughout the centuries philosophers have struggled to understand what knowledge is" or "John Locke is a great English philosopher". Get right to the point. If, for instance, you are writing about Locke's theory of primary and secondary qualities, you might start with the following: "In Ch. XIX of an *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke argues that physical objects have two distinct kinds of properties, which he calls primary and secondary qualities." Long papers of ten or more pages may deserve a more expansive introduction.

4. *What should my thesis be if I don't know which of two or more alternative positions are correct?* It is certainly acceptable to have a thesis which does not end up advocating one solution to a philosophical problem. However, as always, you must have reasons for your position. For instance, you might have a thesis in which you argue that none of a series of positions about something are adequate. To defend this thesis you must show faults in each position. You might also defend a thesis which says that aspects of several positions are correct, but they must somehow be combined. To defend this thesis you would have to show the strengths of each position, and discuss how they could be integrated. What if you really don't know what position is best? Perhaps there is a reason. For instance you might argue that we can't know which view is correct until we have more empirical knowledge. (For instance, you might argue that you can't know which of two theories about mental states is correct until you have a lot more scientific knowledge about the structure of the brain.)

5. *Can I use the first person?* In philosophical writing, limited use of the first person is permitted, and generally first person is preferable to passive voice. Use of the first person is best limited to those parts of a paper where you are describing things you plan to do, or summarizing arguments that you have made. Overuse of the first-person too often leads you to offer unsubstantiated opinions.

### III. SOME MISTAKES TO AVOID

Don’t write your paper before you know what your thesis is.
1. Don't plagiarize. It is plagiarism to quote or paraphrase passages from texts without citing them. Changing a few words or paraphrasing in a way that exactly follows an author's argument is still plagiarism. If you are not sure, try writing without looking at the book you are discussing. If you cannot, you are probably plagiarizing.

2. Don't use thesauruses. One of the most common mistakes newcomers to philosophical writing make is to try to vary their word choice to make their papers less repetitive. For instance, a person might try to substitute "true" for "valid". While these words may mean more or less the same thing in colloquial English, it would be a BIG MISTAKE to use them as if they were synonymous. To switch words in the middle of such a discussion would invite confusion.

3. Don't use ordinary dictionaries. Very often we will be concerned with the nature of certain concepts, and it may seem natural to look up the words in a dictionary. Unfortunately, dictionaries do not offer philosophical analyses of concepts. They can be very misleading. If you need a reference work, use a philosophical dictionary or encyclopedia. A good choice is the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy. (If you are a philosophy major, you probably ought to buy this book. It’s less than $30.)

4. Don't cite the Bible or other sacred texts as evidence. Because many of the topics in a philosophy course touch on issues of a religious nature, it may seem natural to appeal to religious authority. Don't do it. The reason people cite sacred texts as authorities is because they believe, as a matter of faith, that they are divinely inspired. Such authority is only legitimate within a community of individuals who share this faith. In philosophy, on the other hand, we are concerned with arguments whose legitimacy can be evaluated by anyone, regardless of their religious belief.

5. Avoid "it is my opinion" and similar phrases. This kind of construction invites you to make claims without substantiating them. Your opinion is not interesting, *per se*, but only insofar as it is supported by arguments.

6. Minimize use the Internet. There are a number of useful philosophy resources on the web, but you should be cautious in using the web for philosophical research. Quite apart from the fact that it is easy to plagiarize, the quality of sources on the Internet can be quite poor. If you do use the web, please rely on sites maintained by professional organizations or by faculty at reputable universities. And please remember to cite anything you use.

7. Check spelling. I shouldn't need to say this, but poor spelling contributes to poor grades. Use a spell checker. Also, don’t always trust spell checkers. They don’t check for correct use of homonyms (‘to’ and ‘too’, ‘their’ and ”there”, etc.) Read the paper.

8. Watch especially for the following common grammatical errors: tense shifts (generally stick to present tense in philosophy papers), pronouns without clear referents, sentence fragments, and comma splices. See any writing handbook for an explanation and examples of these problems.

IV. **STYLE AND FORM**

A. **Where to look for issues of style and form**

For matters of style and form, it is best that you consult a style guide. There are several standard styles for writing essays and research papers, the most popular of which are the Modern Language Association (MLA), University of Chicago, and the American Psychological
Association (APA). I prefer that you use either MLA or Chicago’s author-date style, but you can use any style so long as you follow it consistently.

You should have been required to purchase a style guide when you took freshman writing. If you do not have one, get one. One book that is widely used at Butler is Diana Hacker’s *A Pocket Style Manual*. This book also provides a straightforward guide to grammar and writing issues.

You may also look online. There are many resources on the web. Two handy sites are:

http://webster.commnet.edu/mla.htm – On line MLA style guide


**B. Layout of papers**

Papers should be typed, double spaced with 1-1.25 inch margins on all sides. Pages should be numbered. Long quotes (more than a couple of lines) should be blocked, single spaced and indented.

Titles and title pages are optional, but your name and the class should be either on the title page or at the top of the first page if there is no title page.

**C. Citations**

If the paper refers to other works (and essentially all expository papers will), it must include a “Works cited” or “References” page. Consult on of the style guides mentioned above for format. You should always include citations, even if the citations are only to sources you have read in class.

One common error students make has to do with references to articles in anthologies. References should be to the individual articles rather than the anthology. For each article cited, there should be a separate citation on the works cited page. For instance, if you are writing an essay in which you refer to an essay by Descartes and an essay by Ryle from the anthology *Twenty Questions*, your citations page should (following MLA) include the following citations:


If you have several articles, you may wish to include a citation to the anthology and use a cross reference to the anthology for each article. Here are the same two works handled in this way:


V. Grading Criteria

A   The paper is well written and organized. It has a clear thesis and contains no significant misunderstandings of any texts discussed. It contains a persuasive argument in support of the thesis and considers relevant objections. The paper has few or no grammatical and spelling errors. Ideally, it should say something original.

B   The paper is generally well organized and possible to follow. It may contain some misunderstandings, but must understand the major point of the question discussed. It contains some argument and tries to anticipate objections. Grammatical and stylistic mistakes are minor.

C   The paper is poorly organized or difficult to follow. It contains significant errors, and it may be unclear what the major issues are. Still, it addresses some of the issues raised by the question. While there are some grammatical mistakes, it is still possible to follow the writer's thinking.

D   The paper has little of value, or if it does, the writing is too poor to even follow the argument.

F   A true disaster.

VI. Marks on Papers

Circled words with no other markings indicate misspellings.

SS  Sentence structure. You have grammatical problems with your sentence, e.g., inappropriate use of conjunctions or a run-on sentence

Tense  Wrong tense.

Dict  Diction. You have used a word unidiomatically, often by using it with an inappropriate preposition.

Awk  Awkward. Your sentence(s) are awkward and hard to follow.

WC  Word Choice. You have chosen the wrong word.

DM  Dangling Modifier. A modifying clause is far away from the object it is modifying.

Colloq  Colloquial. You have inappropriately used colloquial phrases or figures of speech.

Ref  Pronoun reference. You have a mistaken or ambiguous pronoun reference.
Unclear. This mark indicates that I cannot figure out what you are trying to say, or occasionally that what you are saying is strange enough that I expect you don’t mean to say it.