

A.1 Writing a paper

What I am looking for and what I want you to avoid :

Substance –

In a paper, one of the things that I evaluate is your understanding of the material covered in class. Most simply put, if you were to give a paper that you could have written before taking the class, then something went wrong. Whatever the question asked, the material covered in class should help you deepen or revise your initial views on the topic.

DON'T:

- Attack Strawmen: that is, attribute to an author a view that he or she does not hold
- Conflate notions that have been explicitly distinguished in class. Distinctions are one of the best ways to clarify your thought and make your claims stronger.

Argument Structure :

-BASICS: This is an essential aspect of your paper. You need to start writing your paper only after you designed a clear outline for your overall argument. Plus, your argument should be supporting a *simple, clear thesis*, which you state in your introduction.

Philosophy, contrary to what many non-philosophers think, is NOT about pseudo-metaphysical delirium on very broad topics, quite the contrary.

You should aim at making a small point, but to make it convincingly.

Philosophy is a kind of hunting: narrow down the topic, lead it into a corner, watch it under all aspects, dissect, consume. The broader you go, the harder it will be.

Introduction –

- DO: In your introduction, *all you need to do is to state your thesis and summarize your argument.* Give a clear outline of the paper
- DON'T: begin with an introductory statement explaining how the topic has been the most important one since the

beginning of humanity. You know very well, and as well as I do, that it is not true. No need to justify why you are writing on this topic: the truth is, you do it because I asked you to do so.

Body –

- BASICS:

- All paragraphs together form an overall argument. One idea per paragraph, and one paragraph per idea.

- In each paragraph: (1) announce what you are going to do and why (how it relates to the preceding paragraph and to the main thesis); (2) deploy your argument; (3) provide textual evidence if you are making claim about an author; (4) provide an example if you are making a general point; (4) rehearse the point of the paragraph

- DO: Make the *structure* of your reasoning explicit: use link words as “because”, “Hence”, “Therefore”, “Given that” etc. Be explicit in any step you take in your argumentation. Your reader needs to be constantly reminded of where you are, where you come from, and where you go within your argument

- DON'T try to make it pretty or elegant. MAKE IT SIMPLE. You are not writing a novel, even less a mystery novel: ornamentation and suspense are forbidden!

- DON'T BE AFRAID TO REPEAT YOURSELF

- DON'T provide information without relating it to the topic (your grade is not proportional to the weight of your paper) - Any information you give should be explicitly related to the question at hand. A good rule of thumb: *You should not have more than 3 sentences with no mention of the topic.*

→ *When you proof-read your paper, ask yourself (1) for each paragraph: what is the point I am trying to make? How is it relevant to my main thesis? (2) for each sentence of a paragraph, how is this relevant to the point I am trying to make? Do I explicitly explain how it is relevant to the topic?*

Conclusion :

- DO: *All you need to do is to restate your thesis and summarize your argument.* No need to say anything else.

- DON'T open new questions. If it was the question asked,

then you should be able to rehearse your answer. If it was not the question of the topic, don't speak about it.

- DON'T write a last sentence meant to "broaden the topic to more general interests". The conclusion is meant to conclude (!), i.e. to close the discussion for now.

Analysis –

- DO: Address the question directly and fully. Struggle with it.
- DON'T answer another question than the one asked. Answer the question asked in the topic and ONLY the question asked in the topic.
- Special note on a typical mistake: If you are ask to compare two things. it is not sufficient to put the description of both these things side by side. YOU NEED TO COMPARE THEM.

Example: Nature and Culture

A *very bad* outline would be :

- I. What is it that we call Nature
- II. What is it that we call Culture

Instead, what you are asked to do is *to study the relationships between the two*.

- PUSH YOURSELF: Always consider the possible objections to your claims
- IF YOU ENCOUNTER A DIFFICULTY, DON'T ESCAPE: FACE IT. A difficulty is most often an opportunity to think, and hence to make your paper better.
 1. State the problem
 2. Propose solutions
 3. If you don't have any satisfactory solution, SAY IT: explain what solutions could be considered and why you find them unsatisfactory. This is great intellectual progress already!

Support – It is essential that you support your claims:

- DO: support your claims
 - a. with relevant material (quoting appropriately)
 - b. with examples – GOOD EXAMPLES ARE ALWAYS VERY EFFICIENT

- DON'T: make up stuff about authors. Most often, you won't get it right if you don't get yourself properly informed
- DON'T: Feelings or authority do not constitute an acceptable basis for your claims
- DON'T: judge instead of argue

Writing Style :

-DO:

- a. Keep it clear and simple – Strictly avoid any decoration in style: clear, concise and precise should be your only aim
- b. Use plain English is great. Technical words are most often not necessary.

- DON'T:

- a. Write any sentence that you do not fully understand.
 - b. Use any word that you don't fully understand. Chances are, you'll make a mistake in using it.
- Use terms like “evident”, “obvious” and the like: either it will speak for itself, or it is merely a way to hide a lack of argument
 - WRITE ANY SENTENCE LONGER THAN TWO LINES: if you find one, break it up.

Most Common Comments :

“Category mistake” : the subject and the predicate do not belong to the same category (kind of stuff).

- a law is an observation
- blue is a cat
- gravity is a theory
- the claim wants to prove

“So what?”: relevance of information for the issue under study?

It is never sufficient to give me some information. You have to show how it is relevant to the issue at hand.

“Not clear” : either the sentence itself, or the way in which it relates with the sentences around, is not clear.

“Mere assertion” : you make a claim without supporting it. That is to say, you did not tell how you know this claim is true. You have to demonstrate the claims you make, either by documenting, or by illustrating them.

“Does not follow” : your argument contains a logical flaw, or one of its assumption is false.