

How to Write a Philosophy Paper

Soazig Le Bihan

Fall 2009

1 Grading Policies: Reminder

Six criteria for evaluating a paper:

- Substance,
- Thesis and argument structure, including introduction and conclusion,
- Use of supporting material and evidence,
- Quality of analysis, including the crucial distinction between unsupported assumptions, value judgments vs. analysis and argumentation,
- Use of quality sources,
- Quality of writing including grammatical correction, clarity, concision and persuasiveness.

Objectives for a good paper: rigorous inquiry, critical thinking, effective written argumentation.

Never forget that your reader is ignorant, stupid, and mean.

- A range: This paper is outstanding in form and content.
 - The materials covered in class is understood in depth: the student shows that he or she has a command on the materials, including a critical understanding.
 - The thesis is clear and insightful; it is original, or it expands in a new way on ideas presented in the course.

- The argument is unified and coherent.
- The evidence presented in support of the argument is carefully chosen and deftly handled.
- The analysis is complex and nuanced.
- The sources are original texts or quality scholars' literature.
- No grammatical mistakes, clear, precise and concise style.
- B range: The argument, while coherent, does not have the complexity, the insight, or the integrated structure of an A range paper.
 - The material covered in class is well understood: the student does not make any mistake on the materials but does not show great depth in critical understanding.
 - The paper's thesis is clear.
 - The argument is coherent.
 - The paper presents evidence in support of its points.
 - The paper is reasonably well written and proofread.
- C range: This paper has some but not all of the basic components of an argumentative essay (i.e., thesis, evidence, coherent structure).

For example:

- a clear misunderstanding of some of the material covered in class, or
- no clear or incoherent thesis, or
- incoherent structure of argument, for example simply repeats points made in class without an overall argument, or
- presents no evidence in support the thesis
- no use of original texts, but only secondary or popular literature (encyclopedia...)
- poorly written and proofread.

A paper will fall below a "C" if it lacks more than one of the basic components of an argumentative essay.

2 Advice on How to Write a Philosophy Paper

Substance :

BASICS: 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.
- Make arguments from authority: just because "Philosopher X" had said something, it does not follow that it is true.

DO:

- Use the distinctions that the authors covered in class make in order to clarify your thoughts. Distinctions are one of the best ways to clarify your thought and make your claims stronger.
- Use for your own, and in your own manner, the authors' argument.

Argument Structure :

BASICS: This is an essential aspect of your paper. Your argument should be supporting a *simple, clear thesis*, which you state in your introduction. You need to start writing your paper only after you designed a clear outline for an overall argument which supports your thesis. The entirety of your paper should be directed to the explicit defense of your thesis.

Thesis :

BASICS: Your thesis, that is, the claim that you intend to defend, should be explicit, simple and clear, right from the beginning of your paper. Everything in your paper should be clearly related to the thesis.

DON'T:

- Make very general remarks on very broad topic
- Write a mystery novel, where your thesis is “revealed” at the end and the structure of your reasoning is hidden

DO:

- Be explicit about your thesis and about how each steps of your reasoning contributes to support your thesis

Introduction :

BASICS: Your introduction should give a map of your paper to your reader. At the end of the introduction, your reader should know exactly what thesis you are going to defend and have an idea of how you are going to do it.

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.

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

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; (5) rehearse the point of the paragraph

DON'T:

- Try to make it pretty or elegant. **MAKE IT SIMPLE, CLEAR AND STRAIGHTFORWARD.** It is actually much harder than one would think
- Be afraid of repeating yourself when it comes to making the structure of the argument explicit

- Provide any 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.*
- Consider that "I believe/ think / believe that" is enough of an argument – mere assertion is no argument at all
- Take anything for granted – if you write "it is obvious that", chances are that (1) what you claim is not obvious and (2) it need argumentative support
- Make arguments from authority. Just because X or Y said so, it does not imply that it is true
- Let the authors lead the discussion for you: speak in your own voice, and use the authors studied in support of your argument (or as raising objections for which you provide answers)

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
- Consider objections and provide answers
- 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 :

BASICS: Your conclusion should close the discussion (for now). You should show that you have settled (at least part of) the issue at hand.

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.

- 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.

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

Analysis :

BASICS: This is another crucial component of your paper. It is better to make a small point, but to analyze it in depth. Philosophy is a kind of hunting: narrow down the topic, lead it into a corner, watch it under all aspect, dissect, consume. The broader you go, the harder it will be. Oftentimes, you’ll find yourself writing a paper on a much narrower subject than you intended to at the beginning. That’s normal, and perfectly fine.

DON’T

- Answer another question than the one asked. Answer the question asked in the topic and ONLY the question asked in the topic.
- Avoid difficulties in remaining vague on an issue

DO:

- Address the question directly and fully.
- Struggle with the question. If you find a difficulty, don’t try to get rid of it. *Difficulties are an occasion to think.* There are useful.
- Make conceptual distinctions in order to solve difficulties, or at least give a list of the possible options, with their advantages and drawbacks.

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 :

BASICS: Another crucial aspect. It is essential that you 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
- Try to support your views on the basis of your feelings, or an author's authority. Feelings or authority do not constitute an acceptable basis for your claims
- make value judgment
- 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

DO:

- support and illustrate all of your claims

Writing Style :

BASICS: You should aim at being simple, clear, explicit and concise.

Obscurity in philosophy is never a sign of depth

DON'T:

- Write any sentence that you do not fully understand.
- Use any word that you don't fully understand. Chances are, you'll make a mistake in using it.
- WRITE ANY SENTENCE LONGER THAN TWO LINES: if you find one, break it up.

DO:

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

Guide to Comments :

“M” : Misunderstanding – you misrepresent the views/claim/argument of the author you are writing about

“Rel”: Relevance: How is what you say relevant to 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. You must *explicitly* relate anything you write to the issue at hand.

“Ref” : Reference – you need to support your claim by a reference, that is a passage where the author is defending the claim you attribute to him/ her.

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

“Arg?” : Argument – 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, or both. Mere assertion won't do the job.

“Structure?” – The structure of your paper is not clear. That is to say, you did not tell how the paragraph relates to the previous one and to your thesis.

“Logic” : Logic: your argument contains a logical flaw, or one of its assumption is false.

“Rep” : Repetition – You have made this point already

? : Intelligibility – The sentence is grammatically correct, but it is hard to understand, or it is not clear what it is supposed to mean.

“**WW**” : wrong word – the word you used does not mean what you wanted to say

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

- blue is a cat

- a law is an observation

- gravity is a theory

- the claim wants to prove