

Philosophy Toolkit: Writing a Philosophy Paper

A philosophy paper is neither a research paper nor an editorial. A philosophy paper makes a clear point and defends that point with a supporting argument. You must do more than summarize another person's view. You must state and defend your own view.

Step 1: Overview

A philosophy paper has the following components:

1. Main point: a thesis, a goal, a position to be defended
2. Argument: support for the main point that is plausible and (in some way) original
3. Objection(s): consider and reply to possible counter argument(s)
*Considering and responding to potential objections forces you to better explain and defend your main point

Step 2: Writing Style

The paper should be simple and easy to understand. The target audience of an undergraduate philosophy paper is a smart high school student with little or no prior knowledge of the topic at hand.

A good philosophy paper is:

1. Direct: clearly and explicitly states the thesis/main point
-Always connect the dots for the reader; don't assume it's obvious
2. Concise: short and simple sentences/paragraphs
3. On point: everything in the paper clearly supports the main point
4. Organized: the paper should be thoughtfully structured
-Does it make sense why one paragraph/section follows the next?
-Are there obvious transitions?
5. Written in plain language: use simple words, explain any technical terminology

Step 3: Addressing the prompt

You can't write a good paper if you don't understand what the prompt is asking you to do. Are you being asked to evaluate an argument? Raise an objection? Defend your own position on a controversial issue?

When you get the paper prompt, list out every question/part of the prompt.

Ask yourself the following questions (and write down the answers!):

- Do I understand the main goal/task of the paper?
- Do I understand what each individual part/sub-question is asking?
- How does each part/sub-question relate to the overall goal of the paper?

Step 4: Pre-Writing

The hardest part of writing a philosophy paper happens before you start writing the paper. A detailed outline will make the actual paper writing much easier.

To write an outline, take the list of questions from the prompt and create a checklist. Under each question/part, brainstorm how you will address it.

For each section or part, make sure that you:

1. Have a handle on the material itself.
-Revisit the text and lecture notes.
-What is relevant to addressing the prompt?

- What questions do I have about the text itself?
- How would I explain the text/view to others?

2. Understand what *you* are being asked to contribute.
 - What's my position?
 - Do I agree with the author's view/argument?
 - What objections do I have?

You should now have the beginnings of an outline. Continue to flesh out the outline. You may decide to restructure your outline/paper in order to help the reader follow along better. Be sure that your outline fully addresses all parts of the prompt!

Step 5: Write!

You should expect to write multiple drafts (or to rewrite sections of your paper multiple times).

Get feedback:

- From classmates
- From non-philosophy students (can they understand?)
- From TA in office hours

Other helpful writing resources for philosophy students:

Jim Pryor's "Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper"

<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

Michael Huemer's "A Guide to Writing"

<http://spot.colorado.edu/~huemer/writing.htm>