

## Writing Advice

To a large extent, you can learn how to write philosophy (and pretty much anything else) by reading. If you want to write better, read more. Read enough, and you'll eventually "catch on" to what's being done and how to do it. But if you need to write a paper for class, you might not have enough time to learn by immersion in this way; you might want some instruction about how to write papers *right now*.

Because writing is such complex and individual process, it's difficult to give one-size-fits all writing advice. Nonetheless, a few pointers can be given and this advice can go a long way toward eliminating much of the frustration and anxiety. We'll start by looking at some characteristics of a good philosophy paper. This will help us to understand how we can produce one.

### Ten Characteristics of a Good Paper

1) The paper should be in the author's own words.

This is probably the most basic requirement. Plagiarism is intentionally or unintentionally representing somebody else's ideas as one's own, and should be avoided at all costs. You may, of course, appeal to the ideas of others, if you acknowledge doing so and site your sources appropriately.

2) The paper should have a clear purpose.

Your readers should always have a clear understanding of what you're going to do in your paper. I find it helpful to think about papers as attempts to answer specific questions, and to think of papers as falling to four general kinds, according to the types of questions they attempt to address.

1. Expository writing tries to answer questions of the form "What did A say or think about P?" "What did A mean in the following passage?" "How did A argue for position P?" and so on.

Generally speaking, expository writing consists of summarizing or setting out the ideas or arguments of a given philosopher in order to help your reader to understand material that is otherwise obscure or hard to follow. It often involves arguing for or against a certain interpretation of that philosopher's ideas by showing that this interpretation is more or less consistent with other writings by the same philosopher, entails consequences that the philosopher would or would not be willing to accept, etc.

2. Comparative writing takes up questions like "How are positions X and Y similar, and how do they differ?" "What is the relationship between the arguments for X and Y?" and "How do philosophers A and B compare with respect to their thinking on P?"

As with expository writing, comparative writing will usually require you to summarize or set out two or more arguments or positions. It will also require you to defend your claims of commonality and difference.

3. Evaluative writing considers such questions as “Is position P plausible?” “Is P more or less plausible than Q?” “Is the argument for P strong?” “Is the argument for P stronger or weaker than the argument for Q?” It assesses the merit, or relative merit, of one or more positions or arguments.

If a position seems to contradict what we know, or if we can find a case that seems to contradict the position, that’s a mark against the position. If an argument assumes things we have reason to doubt, or which can’t be believed without accepting the conclusion, or if those ideas don’t seem to support the conclusion the argument wants to us draw, that’s a mark against the argument.

4. Constructive writing is unlike expository, comparative, or evaluative writing in that the questions it considers are less directly concerned with pre-existing positions or arguments. Instead of asking, “What did A think about P?” for example, constructive writing asks “What should we think about P?” or “What’s the truth about P?”

Defending a position of our own usually involves an analysis and evaluation of particularly relevant and influential work in order to elucidate or advance our own position, carefully supporting our position with argument, and responding to actual or potential objections.

You and your reader should always know what question your paper is attempting to answer, and how your paper is going about answering it.

- 3) The paper should be well organized.

Your paper as a whole, and each part of your paper, should work to fulfill the purpose of the paper (that is to say, it should help you to answer the question that your paper poses). It should take up each task in the order most helpful to meeting that objective and it should finish one thing before starting another.

- 4) The paper should be focused.

Don’t include irrelevant or inessential material, unrelated to the attainment of the paper’s purpose. If you aren’t going to discuss an argument, for example, don’t spend time setting it out.

- 5) The paper should be complete.

Make sure that you include enough material to attain your paper’s purpose. Flesh out all ideas and arguments in sufficient detail and ensure that you adequately defend claims that need defending. Use specific examples to elucidate and

support general claims. Respond to anticipated objections to your position or argument, even if your response is simply the acknowledgment of an objection and a recognition of the fact that the objection will need to be addressed at some future time.

6) The paper should be clear.

Make sure that you really understand what you're saying and that an average member of your audience could be expected to understand it, too. When in doubt about your audience, the positions and arguments should be stated in such a way that they would be understood by a reasonably intelligent reader who is unfamiliar with the material.

It really helps to read your work out loud and ask yourself, "If I were someone else, would I understand this?" It also helps to provide your reader with guiding questions, definitions of specialized terminology, descriptions of positions, and important distinctions.

If you're going to set out an argument (either your own or another person's) make certain to include all of the important ideas and ensure that the connections between the ideas are as clear as possible.

And don't strive for linguistic variety by using a thesaurus. For one thing, philosophy often requires us to use the same terminology repeatedly because some terms have very precise meanings. If you want to invoke a particular meaning, you might have to use a specific expression, even if you've used that expression recently. Also there's a danger, when using a thesaurus, that you'll choose a word that doesn't *quite* mean what you want simply because it's a more sophisticated-sounding term. Always sacrifice sophistication to clarity.

7) The paper should be substantively correct.

Attribute positions to the right person and represent those positions correctly.

Always try to avoid speculating about an author's motivations because motivations are difficult to establish and are usually irrelevant to the merits of an author's case.

Ensure that your own reasoning avoids serious errors of fact or logic. If you aren't sure that your interpretation is correct, or that your argument is sound, admit it.

Note actual or possible objections to your position, interpretation or argument. If you admit possible problems, and discuss them intelligently, they don't really count as mistakes.

8) The paper should be mechanically correct, adhering to the rules of style and usage.

9) The paper should flow.

Ensure that your paper flows nicely from one point to the next. Avoid sudden jerks. Use smooth transitions.

Organizational cues, including section headings, transitions, subject-changes, and summaries of what will be or has been done, can help your reader to follow your paper.

If there is more than one argument, ensure that your readers understand how the arguments are related to each other (e.g. one argument might be your own position, another argument might be a possible objection, a third argument might be a response to that objection, etc.)

- 10) Ideally, the paper should be creative, asking new questions, answering old questions in new ways, seeing new things, seeing old things in new ways, or making an original point.

### How to Write a Paper

Of course, it's one thing to know what makes a good paper; it's quite another thing to write one. So let's take a look at the writing process itself.

#### 1) Find Something to Write About: Formulating your Thesis

As we've seen, a good paper should have a clear purpose, so the first thing you should do is find a paper topic, something to write about. This can also be one the most challenging aspects of writing a paper. So how can you decide what position you want to defend and the way in which you want to defend it? How, on other words, can you formulate a *thesis*?

There is, as you might expect, no guaranteed process here, but there *are* some things that you can do and some questions you can ask yourself. In particular, it's useful to remember that paper topics seldom fall upon people from the sky, but instead arise from reading, conversing, or otherwise exposing oneself to the thinking of others.

The first thing you might do, therefore, is find a general question or topic that interests you. This can be as broad or narrow as you desire because its purpose is just to get you started and to point you in a general direction. In particular, it doesn't need to be (and probably won't be) the paper topic you'll eventually decide on.

After you've found a general question or topic of interest, locate material on this question or topic. Subject-specific research tools, like *The Philosopher's Index*, can be very useful here. You might want to keep track of relevant authors and readings, perhaps in a computer file.

Once you're aware of some of the relevant literature, you can decide which material looks most promising. Read the abstracts, if available, because they can give you a very good idea of what the article or book is about and whether or not it's interesting or relevant to you.

Having decided upon the most interesting and relevant literature, read the most promising material, following the reading advice we've already discussed and, if possible, taking reading notes. Pay special attention to observing and recording your own responses to what you read.

If an article or book strikes you as *especially* interesting or important, you might want to follow the literature trail in both directions. Specifically, you can read some of the articles and books referred to in the reading (following the trail "backward"), and you can use a citation index to locate and read other works that cite the reading you like (following the trail "forward"). Again, when you read, follow the reading advice we've seen and pay special attention to your own responses.

If you persist in reading and thinking about things you find interesting, you'll find that your responses to those readings will be fertile soil in which to dig for paper topics of your own.

By focusing on your feelings of *confusion*, for example, and by trying to clarify the positions or arguments that confused you, you might come up with an enlightening interpretation of the text and be able to write an *expositive paper*. Alternatively, you might discover that the positions or arguments that confused you are genuinely flawed, in which case you could write an *evaluative paper* discussing the problems with those positions or arguments. If contemplating the problems with the position or argument gives you an idea about how the position or argument could be improved, or helps you to frame a better position or argument to put in its stead, you might be able to defend your position in a *constructive paper*.

Your feelings of *recognition* can point you to related ideas, arguments, or readings, and by following up on this material you can write a *comparative paper* elucidating the similarities and differences that you find. If you prefer one of the positions to the others, you can write an *evaluative paper*, too.

Your feelings of *agreement* can be utilized, as well. If your points of agreement don't withstand a critical evaluation, and you end up changing your mind, you can write an *evaluative paper*. If your points of agreement do stand up, you can explore the implications of the positions you like, thereby writing a *constructive paper*.

Your feelings of *disagreement* hold out similar possibilities. If your objections withstand scrutiny, you can write an *evaluative paper*, and if your insights can improve the position or argument, you can write a *constructive paper*.

And, finally, your reactions of *curiosity* can lead you to explore the implications of what you've read, can help you to raise new questions, and can direct you toward other ideas to research, all of which can lead you to write a *constructive paper*.

After you've found something to write about, articulate your thesis, or the position you intend to defend, as simply and as clearly as possible.

Remember that a thesis is an answer to a question, something that can be true or false, and something that can be supported by an argument. It isn't a general topic or area of interest. "Life after death," for example, isn't a thesis. "Crisis apparitions serve as compelling evidence for life after death," on the other hand, is a thesis. It's an answer to the question "Do crisis apparitions have evidential value?", it's either true or false, and it can be supported by an argument.

## 2) Defend your Position to Yourself: Constructing an Argument for Your Thesis

Once you have something to write about – a thesis - it's very tempting to start writing the paper. But be patient!

Take some time to defend the position to yourself. Construct an argument to support your position. Consider how someone might object to your position or argument and think about how you might respond to those objections.

And - as horrible as this might be to contemplate - *remember that you might be unable to set out a good argument for your position and you might be unable to respond to an objection you envision*. If this happens, you'll need to seriously consider the possibility that your position is mistaken and, if you decide that it is, you'll need to change your position and write a different paper. That's okay. It's more important to be right than stubborn.

## 3) Organize your Paper

Once you've decided upon the position you want to defend, and decided upon how you want to defend it, determine what background information your readers will need. This will give you a basic list of things you want to say, and you can start to think about the order in which you want to say them.

Four basic rules here are:

- i) Plan to present your material in an order that will be easy for your readers to follow.
- ii) Plan to present one point at a time.
- iii) Plan to develop each point in sufficient detail, and
- iv) Plan to finish one thing before starting another.

It sounds simple, but most organization is really *is* just this simple. You can think about your paper like a dinner party to which you're inviting your readers. You don't want to greet them at the door with some ice-cream and asparagus, then serve them raw hamburger with moldy bread in the living room, give them more ice-cream in the dining room, and finish it all off with mashed potatoes and a salad as they're going out the door. No. You want to ensure that the food is well-prepared; you want to present it to your guests one course at a time, and you want to give your guests the opportunity to eat and enjoy each course before clearing away the dishes and

bringing the next course in. And you *certainly* don't want to suddenly and inexplicably introduce an armadillo. If something doesn't help your paper to establish your thesis – no matter how neat you think it is – leave it out.

#### 4) Write your Paper

By the time you start to write your paper, you should know what position you want to defend, how you want to defend it, and the order in which you want to do things. All of this should put you in a pretty good position to fill out your outline with narrative. I typically start at the beginning of the paper and write to the end at this point. And don't worry! You aren't expected to come up with finished product yet.

#### 5) Review your Paper

This is a very important step! When you have good first draft of your paper, compare it to the ten characteristics of a good position paper discussed above. In particular, ask yourself the following questions:

1. When I use other people's ideas, have I put them into my own words or included them in quotations, and have I given proper credit?
2. Is the purpose of my paper obvious to my readers? Do they know the question that I'm attempting to answer and what my answer is?
3. Is the paper well organized? Do my readers always know where they are, so to speak, in the broader scheme of my paper?
4. Have I avoided including irrelevant material?
5. Have I given enough attention to everything? Have I addressed actual or possible objections to my position?
6. Is the paper clear? Could an intelligent person unfamiliar with this material understand what I'm saying?
7. Have I correctly characterized the positions of others? Is my own reasoning sound? Again, have I noted actual or possible objections to my position?
8. Is my paper mechanically correct?
9. Is the paper smooth? Are all of my transitions easy?
10. Is my paper (at least a little) creative?

#### 6) Revise your Paper

After you've reviewed your paper in light of the characteristics of a good position paper, you can make the necessary changes. If you wish, you can then repeat the process, reviewing your paper again, making more revisions, reviewing your paper again, making still more revisions, and so on, until eventually you call yourself done.

And "calling yourself done" is probably what you'll do because you might never *feel* done. You might continue to think of ways to improve your paper and you might return to it weeks, or months, or even years later. But if you need to turn it in to a professor or submit it for publication, this would be the time.

### Summary of Writing Tips

We've seen that the a good position paper should have the following ten characteristics:

1. The paper should be in the author's own words.
2. The paper should have a clear purpose.  
There are four basic kinds of papers, each with its own objective:
  - i. Expository writing
  - ii. Comparative writing
  - iii. Evaluative writing
  - iv. Constructive writing.
3. The paper should be well organized.
4. The paper should be focused.
5. The paper should be complete.
6. The paper should be clear.
7. The paper should substantively correct.
8. The paper should be mechanically correct.
9. The paper should flow.
10. The paper should (ideally) be creative.

The process of writing a good paper can be considered to have six steps.

1. Find something to write about.
  - i. Find a general question or topic that interests you.
  - ii. Locate material on this question or topic.
  - iii. Decide which material looks most promising.
  - iv. Read the most promising material.
  - v. Follow the literature trail in both directions.
  - vi. Focus on your response to those readings.
  - vii. Articulate your thesis as simply and as clearly as possible.
2. Defend your position to yourself; construct an argument.
3. Organize your paper.
  - i. Plan to present your material in an order that will be easy for your readers to follow.
  - ii. Plan to present one point at a time.
  - iii. Plan to develop each point in sufficient detail, and
  - iv. Plan to finish one thing before starting another.
4. Write your paper.
5. Review your paper, comparing it to the characteristics of a good paper.
6. Revise your paper.