

Philosophical Writing

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Philosophy has its own set of standards and expectations for written work. Here are some guidelines to help you meet them.

I. Main Goal and Audience

Your aim is to communicate one central idea to an intelligent but philosophically ignorant reader. You want your paper to communicate that idea as thoroughly and clearly as possible. This goal is entirely practical; it is not artistic or poetic. Stylistic decisions should serve this practical goal.

It is likely that the central idea that you intend to convey in your paper is a reason for evaluating an argument or a view in a particular way. For example, the central idea might be that a particular argument withstands a particular objection. Keep in mind that in order to effectively communicate an evaluative idea, you must make your audience understand the view or argument that you are evaluating.

Be modest about your aims. Present your paper as giving arguments or objections, not proofs or refutations. Decisive arguments or objections are rare in philosophy.

II. Organization

Overall Structure

Figure out a few key points that you must make in order to communicate your central idea. Your paper should be structured around these key points. For example, you might structure a paper around: (a) explaining a problem; (b) developing a solution; and (c) diffusing a possible objection to your solution.

Your paper should *make this structure transparent*. With very little effort, a reader should be able to identify what point you are making and its role in the paper as a whole. It often helps to start or finish sections of the paper by straightforwardly stating what you are trying to show and why it matters.

Part of making the structure of a philosophy paper transparent is being explicit about what you are doing. If raising an objection to an argument, for example, identify the particular premise or step of the argument at issue, and explain why the objection calls that particular premise into question. Be similarly explicit when evaluating objections.

Introductions and conclusions serve to clarify the organizational structure of your paper. They should be short and to the point; never, for example, begin a paper with a very broad claim (e.g. avoid saying, “For millennia, people have wondered about the existence of God”). These sections are unnecessary in short papers in which the organizational structure is already transparent.

Paragraphs

Use paragraphs to display the internal structure of the sections of your paper. Each paragraph should be unified on a single theme. If you’re making two different points, make it visual by using two different paragraphs.

Sentences

Your sentences should communicate philosophical ideas as effectively as possible. The way to do this is to make sentences *short*, clear, unambiguous, and to the point. Be precise, but don’t use unnecessary words; if you can say it in ten words, there’s no need to use twenty. Write in the active voice.

Avoid emphasis words like ‘very’ or ‘strongly’. Limit yourself to the adjectives and adverbs that you need to get the meaning across. Also, use the simplest word that gets the point across; avoid the dictionary and the thesaurus.

Keep your terminology consistent. If you switch between synonyms, you are likely to confuse your reader into thinking that you mean different things by them.

It is acceptable to use the first person ('I') in philosophical writing. It is also acceptable to end sentences with prepositions. Sometimes these tools contribute to sentence clarity, and clarity is paramount.

III. Tools in Philosophical Communication

Examples and Analogies

Theoretical ideas or descriptions can be hard to grasp. One way to make an idea more accessible and concrete is to illustrate it with an example. Another way to make an idea more accessible is to describe an analogous case or situation, and to explain the analogy.

Technical Terms

If a word is used in a non-standard way, or if it is a word that an ordinary educated person might not know, define it in a sentence. Also be precise about what you mean by more standard terms if you are placing a lot of significance on them.

Explaining Quotations

Use quotations sparsely, and when you use them, explain them. You might understand a quotation after reading it in context and thinking carefully about it. But your reader will be looking at the quotation for the first time, and out of context. Make it accessible.

Contrast

After initially presenting an idea, one way to clarify that idea is to contrast it with another that may seem similar to the one you've described. By identifying what you are NOT talking about, you help clarify what you ARE talking about. (e.g. "I do not mean to say that ... Rather, I mean that ...")

IV. Miscellaneous *Dos*

Proofread

It's a no-brainer, but it makes a big difference.

Be Academically Honest

Use your own words, and attribute ideas that you have received from others. (Exception: there is no need to cite course lectures or sections, unless you are directly addressing the portrayals of views in those contexts). Plagiarism is a serious offense.

Be Charitable

Give philosophers the benefit of the doubt by interpreting them in the most plausible way you can find that is consistent with what they say. Remember that these are very intelligent people, and presumably their ideas are not foolish.

Identify Who Holds What View

Be clear about whether you are introducing your own idea or whether the philosopher under discussion raises that idea.

V. Miscellaneous *Don'ts*

***Don't* Use Metaphorical Language**

Philosophers tend to read things literally. Non-philosophers will also have trouble making sense of abstruse philosophical ideas if they're presented in metaphorical terms.

***Don't* Surprise Your Reader**

Sure, unexpected twists can be fun. But they confuse. Be direct about your aims.

***Don't* Ask Rhetorical Questions**

Turn rhetorical questions into statement form. You should answer every question you ask in a paper.