

TIPS ON WRITING A PHILOSOPHY PAPER

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THE PURPOSE OF THE ASSIGNMENT

The point of having you write a philosophy paper is for you to develop and practice certain important fundamental skills. They include the following: (1) the ability to comprehend, reconstruct, and analyze complex philosophical arguments; (2) the ability to critically evaluate such arguments; (3) the ability to argue persuasively for your own views; and (4) the ability to articulate your thoughts in a clear, concise, and well-organized manner.

ADOPTING A POSITION

Many students believe that there are no right or wrong answers in philosophy. I would disagree, but nevertheless students should not think that they have to adopt the position argued for in one of the lectures or readings in order to get a good grade. In actuality, the position a student takes in his/her paper is irrelevant to my assessment of it. Your paper will be evaluated, not on the basis of the position taken, but on the basis of the strength of the arguments presented. Therefore, I suggest that you adopt whatever position you believe is correct. This should make the task more interesting for you and will thereby increase your chances of writing a good paper.

DEVELOPING A THESIS

A thesis is a statement of one's position on a given issue. So the first step in developing a thesis (once you have decided upon a topic) is to decide what your position is. In order to do this, you will need to thoroughly review all the course materials relevant to your topic. In most cases, you will have been presented with a number of arguments on both sides of the issue. Carefully analyze and evaluate all these arguments. In the process, you should develop your own take on the issue.

It is vital that you clearly define your thesis before you begin writing. For it is your thesis that will guide you throughout the entire writing process. Everything you write should somehow contribute to the defense of your thesis. So unless you define your thesis at the onset, you won't know what to write since you won't know what you are arguing for.

Your thesis should narrow the focus of your paper. For instance, you may be asked to write about euthanasia. But, of course, it isn't possible to consider every important philosophical issue concerning euthanasia in a term paper. So your thesis should narrow your focus to something more manageable.

Lastly, your thesis should be neither trivial nor absurd. For instance, if your thesis is that it is morally wrong for a woman who is eight and half months pregnant to have an abortion just so she can fly to Hawaii for a vacation, the response to your paper is likely to be: "So what?" Almost no one would disagree. This is not to say that you have to take an absolutist position. That is, you needn't choose between the claim that abortion is always wrong and the claim that abortion is always permissible. Instead, you could argue for something like the claim that abortion is permissible in the case of rape, and you wouldn't even have to take stand on any other cases of abortion. Also note that your thesis doesn't have to make any positive assertion. Your thesis could be that X's argument against abortion is unsound (where X is one of the authors you read). Although this thesis doesn't establish anything about the morality of abortion, it is still perfectly good thesis. For showing that the argument of an important philosopher is unsound is far from trivial. On the other hand, you also don't thesis to absurd; you don't want your thesis to be so controversial that you have no chance of persuading anyone.

ARGUING FOR YOUR POSITION

Writing a philosophy paper involves more than simply stating your opinions. You must support your views by presenting arguments in favor of them. Also you should try to defend your views against potential criticisms. That is, try to anticipate what objections might be raised against your views and then, in your paper, demonstrate both that you are aware of these possible objections and that you can respond to them.

A philosophy paper should be rationally persuasive. For one, this means that you should appeal to your reader's intellect as opposed to his/her emotions. Thus you should avoid the use of inflammatory language and name-calling. For instance, avoid statements such as, "Any doctor who would give a patient a lethal injection is a Nazi." Second, if your

arguments are to be persuasive, they must not rest upon unsupported, contentious claims. Instead they should ultimately rest upon assumptions that even a reasonable person of the opposing view would accept. So if, for instance, you want to argue that abortion is morally wrong, you shouldn't begin by assuming that the fetus has a right to life. Realize that such an argument would unlikely persuade anyone who is "pro-choice." After all, the view that the fetus has a right to life from the moment of conception is precisely what most pro-choice advocates would contest. Of course, you can argue that the fetus has a right to life; you just shouldn't assume it.

The point is to avoid making any assumptions which someone of the opposing view is sure to reject. For you should think of your paper as an attempt to persuade someone of the opposing view, and if you are to have any chance of persuading such a person, you must first find some common ground from which to build your arguments.

A good example of what I have in mind here is Judith Jarvis Thomson's arguments in "A Defence of Abortion."¹ In this paper, Thomson argues that abortion is morally permissible where the woman is pregnant as the result of being raped. Now what makes Thomson's arguments so compelling is that they are based on assumptions that even the most extreme anti-abortionist (i.e., one who holds that abortion is always wrong) would likely accept.

Thomson asks you to imagine waking up some morning to find yourself connected to an unconscious violinist suffering from a potentially fatal kidney disease. Suppose that last night the Society of Music Lovers kidnapped you and, without your consent, surgically connected the violinist to your circulatory system in a desperate attempt to save his life. So you now face the following choice. You can remain connected to the violinist for nine months by which time the violinist will be able to survive on his own, or you can unplug yourself from the violinist in which case the violinist will immediately die as a result.

Thomson assumes that in this situation you are under no obligation to remain connected to the violinist for the nine months. And thus you may unplug yourself from the violinist even if this entails killing him. Now this assumption seems relatively uncontroversial. But from this rather benign assumption Thomson is able to argue that abortion is sometimes permissible even if the fetus has a right to life. For the violinist surely has a right to life and yet it is permissible to kill him. And aborting a fetus whose existence is due to rape is, in all morally relevant respects, analogous to unplugging yourself from the violinist (or so Thomson argues). Thus Thomson concludes that it is permissible to have an abortion in certain circumstances (i.e., the case of rape) even if the fetus has a right to life from the moment of conception.

ARGUING AGAINST A CLAIM

The following are two of the most common strategies for arguing against a claim (You may find it useful to employ these strategies in your own paper.):

Reductio ad Absurdum: This strategy involves arguing against a claim by showing that it implies some absurdity. To illustrate, consider that some people claim that the reason human suffering is more important (morally speaking) than animal suffering is that humans have a kind and degree of intelligence that other animals lack. Here one could argue that we should reject such a claim given that it implies that the suffering of severely retarded infants (who also lack the kind and degree of intelligence that normal adults human beings possess) is less important than the suffering of normal adult human beings, which just seems patently absurd.²

Presenting a Counter-example: Consider the adage "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." We can prove this adage false with the following counter-example. Iraq is the enemy of the United States, and Iran is the enemy of Iraq. But Iran is not a friend of the United States as the adage would imply.³

CRITICIZING AN ARGUMENT

Even if you are subsequently going to criticize an argument, state it first in a fair and sympathetic way, making clear why a reasonable person might be led to think in such a way. In some cases, it may even be necessary to make charitable revisions to an argument. That is, sometimes an argument is flawed in a way that can be easily fixed. In this case, you should explain how the argument can be revised and then focus your criticisms on this stronger, revised version of the argument. For instance, consider the following objection against Thomson's violinist example. Some people argue that Thomson's violinist example isn't analogous to pregnancy because being hooked up to the violinist for nine months is a greater burden for the person kidnapped than pregnancy is for the expectant mother -- at least, a pregnant woman can walk around and go places, whereas the person hooked up to the violinist is confined to a hospital bed. But it seems that Thomson could easily revise her analogy and still use it for the same effect. After all, even if we suppose that the violinist is a midwife who could be carried on one's back for the nine months, it still seems permissible to disconnect yourself from him.

The point is you don't want to take the weakest argument for an opposing view as an attack that. Rather you want to think of the strongest possible argument for an opposing view and show that even that argument fails. Only then will you have convinced others that the opposing view is indefensible.

Also, be sure that your criticisms focus on the relevant philosophical issues as opposed to any related empirical issues. In other words, I am not interested in papers that contest the empirical assertions made in the lectures and readings. The point of the assignment is to demonstrate your philosophical abilities, not your knowledge of any empirical facts. So if, for instance, your paper is about abortion, don't get too involved in empirical issues such as whether or not the fetus is sentient or self-aware. You should instead focus on the related philosophical issues such as how sentience and self-awareness can affect the moral status of an entity?

WRITING CLEARLY

Refrain from using fancy words and long-winded sentences. Being clear is far more important than appearing to have a sophisticated writing style. Avoid using vocabulary that you are unaccustomed to using in ordinary conversation. Too many students think that being philosophical involves being complex and obscure. Quite the opposite, simplicity and clarity are the ideals of philosophy.

You should choose your words very carefully. Ask yourself: Does what I've written precisely express the thoughts that I mean to convey? Do not leave something unclear and just assume that your reader will be able to figure out what you mean. For instance, don't write something like "Abortion is the same thing as murder."⁴ Abortion and murder are not the same thing. If abortion and murder were the same thing, then one could say that Jack the Ripper aborted many women. But, of course, this is absurd. Jack the Ripper murdered many women but aborted none. Of course, most people would understand that what you meant was that abortion is a form of murder. But whether or not your reader is able to figure out what you mean is irrelevant, because either way it is bad writing.

You will find that philosophers write with a degree of precision that is well beyond that which is customary in ordinary conversation, and I will expect the same degree of precision in your essay. The best way to ensure that you write clearly is to keep your prose simple and direct. Don't try to make your writing "colorful." For instance, don't use metaphors -- just plainly say what it is you have to say. Also, avoid overstating what you have to say. Overstatement is common in everyday conversation but unacceptable in a philosophy paper. For instance, in conversation someone might say, "Everyone in the tropics is so relaxed." But, of course, not everyone living in the tropics is relaxed. So be careful when using words like "every" and "all."

And avoid the following pitfalls:

Bad Diction: This is where a word is used inappropriately.

Example: "Rachels's argument is false." (Statements, claims, beliefs, etc. can all be true or false, but not arguments. Arguments are valid or invalid, sound or unsound.)

Example: "'All human lives are valuable' infers that the lives of permanently unconscious humans are valuable." (To infer is to draw some conclusion from a set of statements or facts. But to draw a conclusion is a mental activity that only rational beings are capable of. The statement "All human lives are valuable" has no mind and so cannot perform any mental activity, let alone that of inferring. In this example, proper diction demands that the word "infers" be replaced with the word "implies."

Vagueness: This is where one fails to express what s/he means precisely.

Example: "Abortion is not the best solution to an unwanted pregnancy." (Does this mean that although you think that abortion is morally permissible, you believe that it would be preferable for women with unwanted pregnancies to carry them to term and then put their

unwanted children up for adoption? Or, does this mean that you simply think that abortion is morally wrong?)

Ambiguity: This is where one uses a word that can have more than one meaning but fails to specify which meaning is intended.

Example: "A fetus is an innocent human being." (By claiming that a fetus is human, are you merely claiming that it is a member of the species *Homo sapiens*? Or, are you claiming that it is human in the morally relevant sense of that term, the sense in which we think you and I are human but someone in a persistent vegetative state is not?)

DEFINING YOUR TERMS

A word must be defined if any of following apply: (1) it is a technical term that a layperson is not likely to know the meaning of; (2) it is an ordinary word whose meaning is not sufficiently clear or precise; or (3) it is an ordinary word that is going to be used to mean something other than what it ordinarily means.⁵ So define technical terms like "intrinsic value," "*prima facie* wrong," and "hedonism." And define words like "euthanasia" and "abortion." Although these are fairly ordinary words, they have no clear definition. For instance, in regards to abortion, it is not clear whether abortion necessarily involves killing the fetus. Can there be "live-birth" abortions? If a fetus is forcibly extracted by a physician and lives, was it an abortion? Our ordinary notion of abortion isn't precise enough to settle the issue.

Lastly, if you are going to use an ordinary word to mean something other than what it ordinarily means, you must make this clear to your reader. For instance, Peter Singer uses the word "person" to mean any rational, self-conscious being. Thus, as Singer defines "person," non-humans can be persons. Of course, it may seem odd to call anything but a human being a person. But this is only because Singer doesn't use "person" to mean what it ordinarily means. Yet there is nothing wrong with using an ordinary word in such a non-ordinary sense so long as you make it clear that you are doing so -- and Singer does.⁶

EXCLUDING THE IRRELEVANT

The rule regarding what is relevant is as follows. Unless it provides necessary background or supports your thesis it is irrelevant. And if it is irrelevant, it does not belong in your paper! Even if some point is interesting and pertains to your general topic, it still doesn't belong in your paper unless it is part of the defense of your thesis.

To illustrate, let's suppose that you are writing a paper on euthanasia and your thesis is that active euthanasia is never morally permissible. Now one thing that would be relevant to such a paper is a definition of euthanasia. Although a definition of euthanasia does not itself support any thesis, it is, in this case, necessary background. However, you shouldn't discuss the public controversy over Dr. Kevorkian. For although such a discussion would probably be interesting, it is not relevant to your thesis -- Dr. Kevorkian assisted many people in committing suicide but never actively euthanized anyone.

THE INTRODUCTION

Get right down to business! Avoid inflated, rhetorical introductory remarks (commonly known as "fluff"). If, for instance, your paper is on abortion, you shouldn't waste limited space with some irrelevant and long-winded spiel about what an important and controversial issue abortion is.

An introduction is best thought of as a reader's guide to your paper. It should help make it easier for the reader to follow and understand your paper. So it should define for the reader any important terminology. And it should include an explicit statement of what it is that you will be arguing for (that is, your thesis). Also, it is sometimes useful if the introduction maps out for the reader the structure of your paper, explaining the order in which you will argue for various points and then explaining how all those points come together in support of your thesis.

The following is an example of the type of introduction I am looking for (It is Mary Anne Warren's introduction to her paper "On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion."²):

We will be concerned with both the moral status of abortion, which for our purposes we may define as the act which a woman performs in voluntarily terminating, or allowing another person to terminate, her pregnancy, and the legal status which is appropriate for this act. I will argue that, while it is not possible to produce a satisfactory defense of a woman's right to obtain an abortion without showing that a fetus is not a human being, in the morally relevant sense of that term, we ought not to conclude that the difficulties involved in determining whether or not a fetus is human make it impossible to produce any satisfactory solution to the problem of the moral status of abortion. For it is possible to show that, on the basis of intuitions which we may expect even the opponents of abortion to share, a fetus is not a person, and hence not the sort of entity to which it is proper to ascribe full moral rights.⁸

YOUR AUDIENCE

You should imagine that you are writing, not for your instructor or TA, but for an intelligent and knowledgeable layperson who knows almost nothing about philosophy. Pretend, for instance, that you are writing for a roommate who hasn't taken the course. Thus you should explain all technical terms, and you should use examples wherever this will help to illustrate your points. Of course, you are actually writing for your instructor or TA -- that's who is going to read and grade it. So you may ask yourself, "Why do I have to explain terms that my instructor/TA is already quite familiar with?" The answer is that it is your job to demonstrate that you understand the relevant material. And you can do this best by showing that you can explain what you've learned to even someone who knows nothing about philosophy.

QUOTING

Do not rely on quotations as a means of making your points. Rather you should explain things using your own words. The ability to explain someone else's position using your own words demonstrates to the reader that you have a clear understanding of that person's viewpoint.

Use quotations only in order to support a particular textual interpretation. So don't quote unless you intend to discuss the quoted passage and how it supports your interpretation of the author.

PLAGIARISM

"Plagiarism is the act of using another person's ideas or expressions in your writing without acknowledging the source...to plagiarize is to give the impression that you have written or thought something that you have in fact borrowed from someone else.... Other forms of plagiarism include repeating someone else's particularly apt phrase without appropriate acknowledgment, paraphrasing another person's argument as your own, and presenting another's line of thinking as though it were your own."⁹

If you are at all unclear about what counts as plagiarism, then you should see your instructor because plagiarism often carries severe penalties, ranging from an F on the assignment to expulsion from the university.

STYLE AND LAYOUT

Grammar, spelling, and punctuation do count. So be sure to proofread your paper for such mistakes. I recommend that you read your paper to yourself out loud. It is surprising how useful this technique is in discovering mistakes in your writing. For some reason the ear seems to be able to pick up mistakes that one fails to catch by simply proofreading silently. And be sure to spell authors' names correctly. For example, it's "Thomson" not "Thompson," and it's "Rachels" not "Rachel."

The presentation of your paper should exhibit the pride you take in your work. In other words, don't turn in a bunch of half crumbled sheets of paper which you haven't even bothered to staple together. Your paper should be neatly typed, double-spaced, in twelve-point font with one inch margins all around. But note that almost all instructors dislike plastic binders -- a staple is quite sufficient. **Always make and retain a photocopy of your paper.**

If you quote or paraphrase the words of another, you must give that person credit. And unless you are using outside sources (which is usually not recommended), this can be done simply by including in parentheses: the author's last name; space; date of publication; comma; space; the page number of the passage from which you are borrowing -- for example, (Thomson 1986, 38). For more information on citing your sources please see *The Chicago Manual of Style* located at <http://library.usask.ca/ustudy/writing/chicago.html>

Contrary to what you may have been taught in high school, there is nothing wrong with using the first person in your paper. In fact, a phrase like "I will argue..." is preferable to the overly verbose "My argument will be...." But you should avoid phrases such as "I believe..." and "I feel..." because what you believe and feel is, in almost all cases, irrelevant. For instance, the fact that you believe that abortion is wrong is no reason for anyone else to believe that it is so. Thus there is no reason to talk about what you believe and feel in a thesis-defense paper. Simply stating that you believe your thesis to be true isn't likely to convince anyone that it is.

GETTING HELP

There are many sources of help available to students writing philosophy papers. Unfortunately, few students take advantage of these resources. This is a shame, because those who do seek help seem to get more out of the assignment while at the same time improving their grade.

Attending office hours and participating in class discussions are probably two of the best ways to prepare yourself to write a philosophy paper. For it is important to discuss your ideas with someone of philosophical training. Doing so will make you aware of the kinds of objections that can be raised against your views and gives you a chance to practice defending your position.

I strongly recommend submitting a rough draft of your paper to your instructor if s/he is willing comment on it. But please note that rough drafts should be neatly typed and proofread prior to submission. So, actually, they shouldn't be "rough" at all. The draft you turn in should be as good a paper as you are capable of writing. Otherwise you will be wasting both your time and your instructor's time.

I also recommend purchasing William Strunk's *The Elements of Style, 3rd Edition*. It sells for only a few dollars and is an excellent writing guide. However, you may want to save those few dollars and settle for the first edition which is located on WWW at <http://www.bartleby.com/141/index.html>.

HOW TO PROCEED

Step One (Choose a topic): Choose a topic that interests you. Writing a philosophy paper is hard work, but it can also be interesting and rewarding when you write on an issue that intrigues you. Also, be sure that you write on a topic about which you have something to say. Don't write on a topic where you have nothing to add to what has already been said in the lectures and readings.

Step Two (Review the relevant course materials): Once you've chosen a topic go back over all the relevant course materials (e.g., lecture notes and readings) and make careful notes on all of the arguments presented. Then go over these arguments and jot down your ideas about them.

Step Three (Develop a thesis): Hopefully, after reviewing the course materials, you will have developed your own take on the issue. If not, then consider two philosophers with opposing viewpoints and try to work out which one has the more plausible position and why. In the process, you should develop your own position on the issue. This will be your thesis. Now work on articulating it as clearly and precisely as you can. But don't be afraid to revise your thesis as your paper develops. Often times, you'll find that your first thoughts on the matter aren't as defensible as they first seemed. In this case, you'll need to change your thesis to something that you can defend. Of course, your thesis needn't be a defense of any positive claim. Instead you can choose to defend a negative claim. For instance, your thesis can be that philosopher X's argument is unsound. This is a perfectly good thesis.

Step Four (Make an outline): Before you start writing it is important to make an outline. Your outline should sketch out all your arguments and map out the structure of your paper. Making an outline will save you time in the long run. All too often, if you haven't thought out your paper carefully enough in advance, you'll end up writing paragraphs and perhaps even pages of useless prose. For often you'll make false starts. You'll start out with one line of argument that will prove to be logically flawed. Other times, your premises will turn out to be indefensible. Expect to encounter such setbacks when writing a philosophy paper. Don't be afraid to start over from scratch if your paper isn't developing as you would like.

Step Five (Take a break): At this point, you should take a break (anywhere from a few days to a week) so that when you come back to paper you'll have a fresh perspective on it. This is an important step. You'll be surprised at how those arguments that seemed clear and well put a week ago now seem unclear and poorly stated.

Step Six (Go over your arguments with a critical eye): At this point you should come back to your paper refreshed. Now go over the arguments you outlined a week ago and look at them from the perspective of someone with the opposing viewpoint. Would they accept your premises? Would they accept your reasoning? How are they likely to respond to your arguments? What objections might they raise? Often it will be useful to seek out someone with a skeptical mind; it can be a friend, a parent, or the instructor. Ask them what they think of your arguments. Try to respond to whatever potential criticisms they come up with, and decide how to incorporate your responses into your paper. You might choose to address these objections as they surface. Alternatively, you can consider all potential objections at the end of your paper.

Step Seven (Write your paper): Write your paper following your outline. But save the introduction and conclusion for last. Write the introduction and conclusion together. They should mirror one another. The introduction should state your thesis and map out the structure of your paper. The conclusion should restate your thesis and rehearse the main line of argument.

Step Eight (Proofread your paper): After you finish writing, take a break again for a few days. Then go back to your paper and proofread it. Check that you phrased every

sentence as clearly and precisely as you can. Don't be afraid to rewrite sentences and restructure paragraphs for the sake of clarity. Also check your paper for errors in spelling and grammar. I advise reading your paper out loud. The ear will often detect grammatical errors that you didn't pick up while proofreading silently.

OTHER GUIDES TO WRITING PHILOSOPHY

In print...

- Stephen M. Garrison, Anthony J. Graybosch, and Gregory M. Scott, *The Philosophy Student Writer's Manual* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998).
- A. P. Martinich, *Philosophical Writing, 2nd ed.* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996).
- Jay F. Rosenberg, *The Practice of Philosophy: A Handbook for Beginners, 3rd ed.* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995).
- Zachery Seech, *Writing Philosophy Papers, 2nd ed.* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1997).

On the Web...

- Colin Allen, "A Guide to Writing Philosophy Essays."
<http://snaefell.tamu.edu/~colin/Phil416/writing.html>.
- Istvan Berkeley, "How to Write a Philosophy Paper."
<http://www.cariboo.bc.ca/ae/php/phil/mclaughl/courses/howrit.htm>.
- Barry Brown, "How to Write an Essay in Bioethics."
<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca:8080/philosophy/phlwrite/brown1.html>.
- R. L. Franklin, "On Writing Philosophy Assignments."
<http://www.uq.oz.au/~pdgdunn/rlfessay.htm>.
- R. W. Hepburn, "Good and bad in philosophy essays."
<http://www.cogsci.ed.ac.uk/~ddb/vade-mecum/sections/section4/4-1.htm>.
- Geoffrey Payzant, "What does he want?"
<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca:8080/philosophy/phlwrite/payzant.html>.
- Ellen Watson, "A Guide for Writing Papers in Philosophy."
<http://www.uq.oz.au/~pdgdunn/watessay.htm>.
- Martin Young, "How to Get Better Grades for Your Philosophy Papers."
<http://eee.uci.edu/programs/philoswr/>.

NOTES:

1. Judith J. Thomson, "A Defence of Abortion," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (Fall 1971). Reprinted in Peter Singer, ed., *Applied Ethics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1986), 37-56.

2. This example is from Jonathan Glover, *Causing Death and Saving Lives* (Hardmonsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1977), 25.
3. This example is from A. P. Martinich, *Philosophical Writing*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 129.
4. This example is from Zachary Seech, *Writing Philosophy Papers*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1997), 41.
5. A. P. Martinich, *Philosophical Writing*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 98.
6. See Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 110.
7. From *The Monist* 57 (January 1973). Reprinted in Tom L. Beauchamp and LeRoy Walters, eds., *Contemporary Issues in Bioethics*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1989), 211-220.
8. Ibid., 211.
9. Joseph Gibaldi and Walter S. Achert, *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: The Modern Language Association, 1988), 21-25.

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