

## WRITING PHILOSOPHY PAPERS

Writing about Philosophy. Because thinking cannot be divorced from its articulation in language, learning to write a clear, well-organized, and grammatically correct paper is an essential and not an incidental part of a course in philosophy. Papers in this course should be about the readings, and not just reports of your views; but they should involve your own thinking and not be mere recountings of what you have read. A successful paper will normally challenge the philosophers we have read, or defend their views against interesting challenges. A paper may limit itself to exposition and interpretation of a philosopher's ideas, but the paper will succeed only if the interpretation raises significant philosophical issues.

Choosing a Topic. A good paper always begins with an idea or thesis, something you want to show and can successfully defend by argument. The course instructor will have passed out writing assignments or term paper topics. You need not cover everything mentioned in a suggested topic, and you may have to alter slightly questions asked in a writing assignment in order to devise a topic that suits you. (If you delimit or enlarge on an assigned topic, you should state clearly at the outset exactly what it is you will be attempting to do in the paper. You should also get the approval of your instructor or teaching assistant for any revision of the assigned topic that you propose before you begin work on it.) Your paper will be judged partly on how well you have thought out a topic which can be successfully treated in a well-organized and self-contained paper of the assigned length.

Preparation. The most important work you do on your paper may come before you begin writing a continuous draft. This work consists in reading and digesting what the author has said, and formulating the arguments you will use in your paper. It is unlikely that you will get clear on a philosophical issue without taking some time over it. If you are serious and thoughtful, you will probably find yourself changing your mind about some things in the course of reading and thinking about a topic. This makes it a bad idea to leave writing a paper to the last minute. Often the best thing to do is to write some notes well ahead of time, and then return to them later. Before you begin writing, you ought to have thought critically about your main arguments, so that you can be sure that they will not dissolve when you try to state them clearly in your paper.

Organizing your paper. A good expository paper always has a structure, and the structure should be readily perceivable by the reader from things you say explicitly in the paper. You should begin by stating the problem you intend to address, and usually you should tell the reader beforehand what you intend to accomplish in the paper. You should accomplish your purpose in the paper directly and economically, by a series of steps which follow each other in an orderly way. As I read your paper, I should always know precisely where I am in your itinerary, either from your explicit statements or from easily perceived clues. In order to achieve these goals, some people find it useful to write an outline of the paper beforehand. But it may be even more useful to write an outline later on in the process, after you have completed a draft of the paper. At this point, the

structure of your paper ought to be plainly visible to you. Digressions, repetition and unnecessary remarks should be ruthlessly deleted. Where the organization of the paper is not readily apparent to the reader, clues or explicit statements indicating it should be inserted. At or near the end of the paper you will nearly always want to summarize your conclusions or state precisely what you have accomplished, so that there is no room for guesswork on the reader's part about this.

**Exposition.** Before you expound a philosopher's views, make sure you understand them. If you cannot make sense of what an author says, read and think further about it. No philosopher is infallible, but the writings of great philosophers nearly always repay careful study and sympathetic reading. Works by modern authors written in a contemporary idiom may seem easier to follow than the writings of long dead philosophers, but contemporary philosophy may be trickier than it looks at first, so arriving at a plausible interpretation is usually no mean feat. If you do not understand even after much reflection and the philosopher's unclear statements are important for your topic, explain clearly to the reader what the difficulty is. As you expound a philosopher's views, keep constantly in mind what texts you would use to support what you are saying. Frequent citations (references to volume and page number) are a good idea, and they are absolutely required when your interpretation of a philosopher's views is controversial or not obvious. Direct quotations, however, especially long ones, ought to be avoided. Such quotations are permissible only in two cases: (1) when they are required to prove an important exegetical point or (2) when you mean to discuss what they say in some detail. Never quote at length from a philosopher when you could present the philosopher's ideas in your own words with no loss of clarity or brevity.

**Argument.** The most important (and most genuinely philosophical) aspect of your paper is the way you argue for your views. Avoid personal references and apologies ("I feel. . .," "In my opinion. . .," etc.). Never content yourself with merely stating your opinion on the main issues raised by your paper without arguing for it. If you cannot support your opinion on some controversial matter, then do not write a paper in which that opinion plays a focal role. An argument usually has identifiable premises, inferences and conclusions. In any argument you present make sure the reader knows which is which. Make explicit how your argument is relevant to the issues, and how it supports your position on them. Constructing good arguments for your views is not easy; it is something people seldom do, and it requires time, effort, thought, and practice.

**Revisions.** Most people need to write at least two drafts of a paper. It is a good idea to complete your first draft and then leave some time before you return to the task of revising it. If you can, get the instructor or a long-suffering friend to read the paper before writing a final draft. Another helpful practice is to read your paper out loud either to yourself or to a willing victim. (This usually reveals quite mercilessly some of the things which are in need of revision.)

Style. Write simply. Keep your sentences short. Do not try to sound eloquent or use big words. Do not employ technical jargon when it is not absolutely necessary. Writing which exhibits an effort to be stylish, erudite, or sophisticated displays pomposity and affectation, which are always repulsive. Work instead at making your writing lucid and technically flawless. Write in complete sentences. Be sure you are using words correctly. Avoid split infinitives (e.g., "to really understand," "to fully comprehend,") and ungrammatical constructions (such as "to expound upon"--a grotesque confusion of "to expound" and "to expand upon"). Avoid spelling errors. Be sensitive to correct spelling. If you are not sure how to spell a word, look it up in the dictionary. (Above all, in a philosophy paper never misspell words such as "argument," "perceive," "dependence," "existence," or the name of the philosophers about whom you are writing.) The best ways to develop a good writing style are (1) write a lot, with constant attention to improving your writing, and (2) read a lot of good prose.

#### CHECKLIST FOR PHILOSOPHY PAPERS

1. Does the paper have a determinate theme or topic? Is this topic plain to the reader? Is the topic of the paper stated clearly in the paper's introduction?
2. Does the paper raise a significant philosophical issue? Does it take a definite position on the issue? Does it present arguments in support of the position it takes? Does its conclusion state clearly what has been shown?
3. Does the paper have an organization? Is the organization apparent to the reader?
4. Is the paper within the limits of the suggested length?
5. Whenever the paper makes a claim about an author's views, does it cite the author's text (by page number or in terms of some other appropriate system of reference) in support of the claim?
6. Does the paper avoid quoting too often or at too great length?
7. Is the writing awkward, unclear, or hard to follow? Have you given yourself time to go over the paper carefully to make sure it says clearly what you mean?
8. Is the paper technically flawless? Does it contain spelling errors, ungrammatical constructions, split infinitives, or mistakes in the use of punctuation, apostrophes or quotation marks?
9. When you were in doubt, did you consult a dictionary or style manual? Did you make sure all writing errors were corrected?
10. Did you proofread your paper carefully and correct all typographical errors?