

# Writing a Philosophical Paper (2)

## I. Argument Reconstruction

In order to reconstruct an argument, you need to present it in a way that someone unfamiliar with the material will understand. This may require that you say more than the philosopher you are writing about did!

There are two main ways to reconstruct an argument: (1) as a formal series of numbered steps, or (2) in regular prose.

In either case, keep these points in mind:

**Keep your ideas separate from the author's.** Your purpose is to make the author's argument clear, not to say what you think of it (yet!).

**Be charitable.** Give the best version of the argument you can, even if you don't agree with the conclusion.

**Define** important terms.

**Organize** your ideas so that the reader can proceed logically from premises to conclusion, step by step.

**Explain** each premise.

**Step 1: Identify the conclusion.** *Caution:* It isn't necessarily the first or the last sentence; it may not be explicitly stated.

**Step 2: Identify the premises.** Consider the conclusion and ask yourself what the author needs to do to prove it.

**Step 3: Identify the evidence.** Hume considers an example, murder, and he points out that when we consider why we say that murder is vicious, two things happen: *What are the two things Hume says happen?*

**Step 4: Identify unspoken assumptions.** Hume assumes that murder is a representative case of "viciousness". He also assumes that if there were "viciousness" in the "object" (the murder), we would be able to "see" it — i.e., it isn't somehow hidden from us. Depending on how important you think these assumptions are, you may want to make them explicit in your reconstruction of the argument.

**Step 5: Sketch out a formal reconstruction** of the argument as a series of numbered steps.

**Step 6: Summarize the argument**, explaining the premises and how they work together.

## II. Objections and Replies

After you reconstruct an argument, you should assess whether it is a good argument and whether you agree or disagree with it.

Thinking of objections and examining their consequences is a way in which philosophers check to see if an argument is a good one. When you consider an objection, you test the argument to see if it can overcome the objection. To object to an argument, you must give reasons why it is flawed. For example:

- The premises don't support the conclusion.
- One or more of the premises is false.
- The argument articulates a principle that makes sense in this case but would have undesirable consequences in other cases.

Here are some questions you can ask to make sure your objections are strong:

- Have I made clear *which part of the argument* I object to?
- Have I said *why* I object to that part of the argument?
- Have I assessed the *severity of my objection*? (For example, does the author simply need to do more work, or is my objection more devastating, i.e., something that s/he can't answer?)
- Have I thought about and discussed *how the philosopher might respond* to my objection?
- Have I focused on *the argument itself* rather than just talking about the general issues the conclusion raises?
- Have I discussed *one objection thoroughly* rather than many objections superficially?

You should also consider how a philosopher might reply to objections you raise against his/her view. After all, not every objection is a good objection; the author might be able to come up with a very convincing reply. Use what you know about the author's general position to construct a reply that is consistent with other things the author has said, as well as with the author's original argument.

*[Adapted from Oisin Deery and The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill]*