

Writing a Philosophical Paper (1)

I. What is a philosophy paper?

Philosophical essays prove some point through the use of rational argument. A philosophical essay is not about flowery language, story-telling techniques, or surprising the reader. The beauty of a philosophical essay is found in your ideas; the language that you use is only a tool for conveying these ideas to the reader. The art is in proving one's point clearly. The philosophical essay generally follows a very simple structure:

1. State the proposition to be proved.
2. Give the argument for that proposition.
3. Show that the argument is valid.
4. Show that the premises are true.
5. State the upshot of what has been proven.

II. How is a philosophy paper graded?

Your paper will be graded on three basic criteria:

1. Content: How well do you understand the issues you're writing about?
2. Clarity: Is your writing clear and well organized?
3. Argument: How good are the arguments you offer?

Your paper will NOT be graded by whether or not the marker agrees with your conclusion. Professional academic philosophers do not even agree amongst themselves about what the correct conclusion is to most issues. But they generally have no trouble agreeing about whether or not someone has done a good job arguing for a conclusion.

Here are two tips to achieve clarity:

1. Assume the reader (the marker) is **STUPID** (I need things explained simply), **LAZY** (I won't read things twice if they're not clear, I won't try to figure out your argument if it's not obvious) and **MEAN** (if you're ambiguous or confusing, I'll assume you're wrong or you don't understand).
2. Try reading the paper out loud (seriously). If you find yourself reading something you wouldn't say, DON'T WRITE IT. If you find yourself having to use nods and winks, you haven't expressed it clearly enough.

Comments that markers make most often:

"Really?" "Why?" These comments appear when people do not acknowledge that a position that they're advocating is contentious, or when they assume that people should accept something that is, in fact, debatable.

"Awkward" or "Unclear"

"More detail needed" "Give an example"

"Not relevant" "What does this show?"

One of the main ways in which people lose marks is by not answering the question.

III. How to write a philosophy paper.

Some people find it useful to write an entire first draft, warts and all, before beginning to revise it (don't worry if it's too long, confused etc. It might be just a good idea to get everything out, and use the draft as a basis for further revisions). Here are some tips (*PTO*):

Introduction with Thesis:

State in clear language at the beginning — don't worry about spoiling the surprise. Begin **BOLDLY**, not **BLANDLY**. Leap into your essay in a purposeful way, and say what you're going to say. (Tip: Many people find it helpful to write a longish intro paragraph which later gets cut to help you get started. Do edit it out: don't submit a paper that only begins in the second or third paragraph).

Roadmaps:

Every paragraph should be a link in the chain of the argument. It is enormously helpful to add lots of signposts to help guide the reader through the argument (it also helps to show how you're answering the question). You can say what you've done so far, what you're going to do next and so on.

All this hand-holding might seem a little patronizing, but it's what you're aiming for: sometimes it should feel like you're trying to explain things to a third-grader. This comes across in two ways:

1. Third graders have short attention spans. You should keep reminding me where you're at, and where we've been so far to keep me focused on what you're up to.
2. Third graders need simple plain prose. The virtues of keeping things simple, avoiding jargon and long, clumsy, rambling sentences, and being **PRECISE** cannot be understated. Many professional philosophers get bad marks for this, but they are famous despite writing obscurely, not because of it.

Mistakes to avoid:

DON'T appeal to authority.

DON'T use complicated or arcane language when you can think of simple ways to say the same thing.

DON'T cite important and/or interesting sounding material without also saying how it supports your thesis. If it doesn't support your thesis, cut it out.

DON'T have things in your paper that are not needed.

DON'T make sweeping claims unless you can support them with evidence and argument.

DON'T leave crucial words or concepts undefined.

DON'T worry about being wrong.

DON'T wait until the last minute to start writing.

DON'T ever be afraid to ask for help. Getting help is a mark of a good student.

Avoid overstatement: Watch out for words like "all", "every", "always", "no", "none", and "never"; supporting a claim that uses these words could be difficult. For example, it would be much harder to prove that lying is always wrong than to prove that lying is usually or sometimes wrong.

Avoid the pitfalls of "seeing both sides": Suppose you think Kant's argument is pretty strong, but you still disagree with his conclusion. You might be tempted to say "Kant's argument is a good one. I disagree with it." This appears contradictory. If an argument really is good and you can't find any weaknesses in it, it seems rational to think that you should agree with the argument. If you disagree with it, there must be something wrong with it, and your job is to figure out what that is and point it out.

Avoid personal attacks and excessive praise: Neither "Mill was obviously a bad person who didn't care about morality at all" nor "Kant is the greatest philosopher of all time", adds to our understanding of Mill's or Kant's arguments.

Resource: <http://oisin.deery.googlepages.com/home>