

How to Write a Philosophy Paper

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Here are several important points to keep in mind when writing a philosophy paper.

Point #1: Argue!

Philosophy papers are not "opinion papers." They are not venues for you simply to state what you believe. Rather, they are *defenses* of a certain position or belief or thesis. Thus, philosophy papers contain an *argument(s)*. So, you should not simply say something like:

"I believe that abortion is morally wrong."

Instead, your paper should contain a *reasoned defense* of some view. That is, it should read more like this:

"I believe that abortion is morally wrong for the following reasons. ..."

Or this:

"I find that the following considerations provide a convincing argument against the moral permissibility of abortion. ..."

Or this:

"Abortion is morally acceptable under the right circumstances because ..."

Note that you do not always have to defend straightforwardly one side or another of some controversial issue. Indeed, you could do any one (or more) of the following:

1. Defend a certain view by giving arguments for it.
2. Defend a certain view from someone else's criticism of it.
3. Argue that a certain position has certain consequences.
4. Criticize an argument for a certain view (even if you agree with the view).
5. Argue that a certain view is subject to counterexamples.
6. Argue that there are good reasons to believe a certain view, even if the view suffers from some difficulties.
7. Argue that a certain view needs to be revised to accommodate some objection to it.

Other options are available. The point is that you should defend, *via* argumentation, a certain line on the issue. No matter what angle you take, it should be supported with reasons. That is, it should be argued for, and it should not merely be an opinion, nor should it read like a "book report."

Point #2: Consider the Other Side of the Issue

You should always consider an objection to your view. Philosophical issues are controversial, and so there is always something to be said for the position against which you are arguing. Thus, you should consider in your paper how your opponent might object, *and you should respond to that objection*. Certain ways of writing are helpful here. You might, for example, after presenting your own reasons/arguments, begin a new paragraph thus:

“One might object to my argument that.... I think this objection does not succeed because....”

When you consider the other point of view, it shows that you are aware of what can be said on both sides of the issue, and you make your own case much stronger. Be sure to consider a plausible objection to your view, and not one that is obviously bad and easy to respond to, for your paper then lacks credibility.

Point #3: Be Original

Philosophy papers are *not* book reports. They should not simply report some argument and/or objection that you have read or heard in class. Instead, think very hard about what you want to say. Read, think, take notes, think, go over your notes, think, jot some thoughts down, think, go for a walk, think, and then sit down and write out your argumentative line as *clearly* as you can. If you don't have any thoughts about where your paper is heading, if you don't have a plan, then do not write yet! It is important to be original, but it is also a lot of work. The key is to get an early start, and discuss with others, including your professors.

Point #4: Use Good Grammar, Citations, etc.

Although it is barely worth mentioning because it should be obvious, be sure your paper is grammatically coherent, and that all quotations are properly cited. You should also cite anything you take from a text, even if it is not a quotation. For example, if you write:

“Descartes' argument for dualism is roughly this: ...”

Here, even though you may not quote Descartes, you do interpret a specific part of his text, and so it should be cited.

Point #5: Be Sure Your Writing is Organized

In general, your paper, if it is well organized and sticks to the points above, might exhibit something like the following format:

I. Introduction

What is the issue, and what are you going to argue? Be sure to avoid "sweeping" introductory statements such as, *"Euthanasia is one of the most important issues our society faces,"* or *"Plato is one of civilization's greatest thinkers."* Instead, get right to the point.

II. Your Reasons/Arguments for your View

Begin, as clearly and carefully as possible, to present your argument.

III. Defend Your View from an Objection(s)

Explain how someone who disagrees with you might object to your view, and defend your view from that objection. (See point #1 above.)

IV. Conclusion

Draw a reasonable conclusion, and do not overstate your case (For example, do not write: "I have conclusively shown that Plato's argument is the most successful ever given on this topic, etc.").

Point #6: Go Through Rough Drafts

It is ***absolutely imperative*** to work through rough drafts. However good you think your first attempt might be, rest assured it could use substantial improvement. Your professors go through ***numerous*** drafts when writing papers and books. Indeed, the greatest writers in the world go through rough drafts, and that is probably why they are such great writers. There is simply no substitute for getting critical feedback on your drafts, and using that feedback to improve your paper.