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Writing Help Desk

Writing Philosophy for Undergraduate Courses

This project aims to create a short handout for the Cornerstone Writing Help Desk focused on how to write undergraduate philosophy papers. It is motivated by a general unfamiliarity among writing mentors and students with what is expected in this type of paper. Because of this, the handout should be useful for both guiding mentors and informing students, as it will attempt to sum up and convey important guidelines in a digestible manner. There are many guides to writing philosophy available to students, but the majority of these are too lengthy or specialized to be very useful for quick reference during a tutoring session. This handout is intended to be notable in its accessibility and concision, while still covering the most important information.¹ Ideally, a student or mentor will be able to review the entire handout in a couple minutes, and gain a basic understanding of how to approach writing a philosophy paper.²

This paper will proceed by sketching out the justification for the advice given in the proposed version of the handout. It will present information in five sections parallel to the handout: *Purpose*, *Substance*, *Structure*, *Style*, and *General Advice*. These handout sections are intended to present information in a coherent, succinct fashion in order to make understanding and incorporating the guidelines easier for students. Each section will first examine relevant advice from contemporary literature on writing in the

¹ Almost every student that I have helped with a philosophy paper has admitted that his or her professor has suggested some published guide. However, when examining papers it is evident that most either have not read this guide or have not absorbed the most important information from it. This trend is one of the reasons the proposed handout strives for concision.

² One of the original goals of this project was to map out the differences in writing expectations between the main subfields of philosophy. Subsequent research and interviews have revealed that these distinctions are largely unimportant in undergraduate writing. Because of this they will not play a prominent role in this paper or the proposed handout, though they will be mentioned where relevant.

discipline of philosophy, and then integrate information from a series of personal interviews with current philosophy professors.³ Each section will end with a summation of the most important points as they appear in the handout. The proposed version of the handout is appended.

I. Purpose: *What is the aim of philosophical writing?*

Research:

Much of the literature on writing in the discipline of philosophy includes some comment about the general purpose or goal of philosophy. This may be a helpful starting point, as many of the readers will be unfamiliar with the discipline. Such a comment can keep the overall purpose of writing in mind and serve as a guiding principle for all the specific advice that follows. There are many different takes on how exactly to phrase this purpose, but a passage by Brian Mogck seems to generally portray the consensus in the literature. He says, “The purpose of doing philosophy is to lay out in plain view our concepts, our commitments, and our reasons so that we can assess their adequacy and their underlying values” (104).⁴

Interviews

Most of the professors I interviewed accepted this very broad portrayal, though a few emphasized other points as well, such as the fact that philosophy is a *discussion* based on the negotiation of reasons. They pointed out that personal beliefs and opinions are largely irrelevant – philosophical discussion is only interested in what *reasons* there are for holding those beliefs (or not). In fact, one thing that is evidently valued highly in

³ Interviews were conducted between Nov. 14 and Dec. 7 2011 with faculty from the Philosophy Department at Washington University in St. Louis.

⁴ Nicholas Rescher has a very similar general portrayal (57) but puts more of an emphasis on the *kinds* of questions philosophy ultimately seeks to answer – namely, the ‘big questions’ of the nature of reality (44).

students is openness to new ideas and willingness to change their opinions based on rational inquiry and argument.

Main Points

- [Mogck quote]
- **Rational Inquiry** – Philosophy aims to question our understanding and common conceptions through the negotiation of reasons.
- **Reasons** – What you *believe* is largely irrelevant – your writing should be focused on the *reasons* that you have for that belief.

II. Substance: *What should a philosophy paper accomplish?*

Research

As the substance of a paper is perhaps its most important aspect, I found a good amount of specific advice in the literature. For instance, in his guidelines for students new to philosophy Jim Pryor says that a basic philosophy paper should seek to do three main things: 1) present an *explicit* argument; 2) make some small point; and 3) demonstrate some originality of thought (Pryor 1-2). He also advises students to try to anticipate objections to their argument (10), and to consider explaining and addressing the views of other philosophers (8), though he does not put nearly as much emphasis on these points.

In *Writing Philosophy*, Richard Watson portrays the three core principles of philosophy as *reason*, *clarity*, and *argument* (Watson 3-4). The main goal of a paper should be to support a specific claim using arguments that consist of “sequential logical developments of premises, statements of evidence, and inferences resulting in the position or statement that is the point of the presentation” (4). These arguments should be presented in an explicit and unambiguous fashion: “in the name of clarity, plain writing is preferred to rhetorical flourishes” (3). Further, these arguments must follow the principle of reason: “In all of philosophy, the flaw that always rules a position or

argument out of play is lack of logical consistency” (3). Watson goes on to emphasize that a philosophy paper should address a specific philosophical problem (5). Along with this, he notes that two of the most common mistakes made by new writers are attempting to address either too large a problem or two problems at once (6). Nicholas Rescher also focuses on the importance of explaining and arguing about a specific philosophical issue (58).

Interviews:

By and large professors agreed with these points, but many placed emphasis on slightly different areas. For instance, almost every professor stressed that a substantive, clear, contentious thesis statement is the most important aspect of a paper. Much of the literature seems to assume that this is central, but does not elaborate on it explicitly. Several professors indicated that the most common student failing is a lack of a strong thesis. Because of this it is important for writing mentors to focus heavily on a student’s thesis, and this emphasis must also play a prominent role in the handout. Professors agreed that an argument must be put in support of the thesis, and sided with Pryor in that this argument must involve independent thinking and engagement with the material. Several noted further that a paper should try to be rigorous. To this aim, good papers will almost always address how others may contest their claims and arguments. This is especially true when a paper is critiquing or expanding on another author.

Beyond comments on the literature, several professors said that displaying an understanding of the material is an important part of a paper. One of the main aims of philosophy classes is for students to learn how to think and write clearly, but learning to comprehend and comment on difficult material is also desired. The readings done for

philosophy classes are often challenging; if a student can demonstrate that they understand the texts by summarizing, critiquing, and actively engaging with them, that itself is an accomplishment.

One area from my personal experience that I thought might distinguish philosophical writing is the type of evidence used – the *way* one goes about proving a claim. This was not generally discussed in the literature, but most professors partially agreed with my statement. While several admitted that any type of (relevant) evidence is acceptable in a philosophy paper, the discipline is generally distinctive in its use of non-empirical, speculative evidence such as thought experiments.

Moving to the way citations should be used in a paper, it appears that they generally (but not exclusively) should be used in setting up the views of other philosophers to show how your argument fits within the discussion. Most professors prefer paraphrasing to quoting as it demonstrates some understanding of the text. Further, a writer should never let a quote stand on its own – it should always be clearly analyzed and explained. In fact, writers should, in general, only introduce quotes for the sake of clarifying or analyzing a specific point and how that point relates to their main argument. Use of citations is one area where the different subfields may separate to some extent. Classes focused on the history of philosophy are more likely to focus on an interpretive argument, i.e. analyzing the views of a certain author. This type of argument will usually rely much more on textual evidence than other fields, though independent analysis, evaluation, and engagement should always play a prominent role. A philosophy paper should never be literature review.

One professor put forward an interesting metaphor for the biggest problem he sees in undergraduate papers. He said many papers end up “floating, not walking”. By this he meant that students often use big words and fancy rhetoric that don’t actually *do* much – the paper doesn’t make logical steps and move forward. This may make a paper *sound* sophisticated and intelligent, but it doesn’t actively engage with the material. Further, this type of writing doesn’t display independent activity, which is what he thought is the most important thing a paper should demonstrate: “I just need to see them walk”.

Main Points

- **Thesis** – Your paper must put forward a *modest, meaningful, contestable thesis* that addresses some philosophical issue.
- **Argument** – The thesis should be supported by an explicit, logical, and clear argument.
 - Your argument must exhibit independent thinking.
 - Your argument should actively engage with the subjects you are discussing – make sure your paper *goes* somewhere by making logical steps.
- **Evidence** – The best way to illustrate a claim is often to use examples, which need not be empirical. Thought experiments can be a good way to do this.
- **Understanding** – Your paper should demonstrate that you understand the material you’ve been discussing in class.
 - This need not involve direct citations – it may be enough to simply portray the issues correctly, perhaps using your own examples.
- **Citations** – You should consider using citations to help frame the philosophical question you are addressing, as well as to show other relevant ways of answering it.
 - Try to paraphrase whenever possible as this demonstrates your understanding better than quoting.
 - If you quote a passage, make sure to explicitly explain how it relates to your argument.

III. Structure: How should a philosophy paper be organized?

Research

The overall message from the literature regarding paper structure is that it should be set out in a way that is conducive to making one’s argument as clear and understandable as

possible. Watson suggests writers get straight to the point: “the problem and how you approach it should be indicated in the title, and fully identified in the first paragraph” (5). In order to make the progression of a paper clearer, he suggests that immediately after explaining the central claim the writer should briefly outline the steps he will take to prove it (5), something that is often called a ‘roadmap’. Rescher is more specific about how one should introduce the philosophical issue: “Three questions are crucial at the outset: (1) just what is at issue – what is the problem being addressed? (2) Whence does it arise, how did it come to figure on the philosophical agenda? (3) What hinges on it...” (58).

After this initial set-up, Watson is the only author of those I reviewed who gives specific advice about structure. He outlines a very formulaic paper structure: a half-page introduction with thesis and roadmap; a one-page introduction to the problem; a paragraph for every point in the argument; and a conclusion that serves as a concise summary of the paper (8). In contrast with these specifics, the other guides give much more general advice. For instance, Rescher notes merely that a paper must “present ideas in a rational and coherent way. But this does not mean that it will exhibit a predestined sequential order...” (56). Pryor advises students to make an outline first so they can see how best to structure their paper (3), and to make the structure obvious through the use of connective words and signposts (5), but does not go into much more detail than that.

Interviews

Professors’ views on structure struck a line in between these two extremes. They all gave some specific advice as guidelines, but also noted that these specifics are useful only as a means to the overall clarity of the paper. None of them put forward a strict formulaic

approach like Watson. The only particular section of a paper that all professors agreed is necessary is a *short* introductory thesis paragraph that states the general philosophical question and the paper's response. Unlike Rescher's portrayal, most said that the background and overall relevance of the question need not be explored in this opening paragraph. Most thought a roadmap at the end of this thesis paragraph is often a good idea, although one professor disagreed and said that it was usually a "waste of words" in short undergraduate papers. He said that if one writes clearly, a roadmap is generally unnecessary; instead words should be spent on the actual argument.

Most professors thought that after this paragraph, a 'stage setting' is helpful. This section should explain the philosophical problem more thoroughly, along with the various philosophical positions that are relevant to the main argument of the paper. As this usually requires invoking other authors, this is the section most likely to involve citations. It is also a good section to explicitly define relevant terms of art and explain the main assumptions or premises of the paper. However, some professors cautioned that this must be done as efficiently as possible, and only for ambiguous assumptions and definitions. They worried that telling students broadly to 'define their terms' may lead them to spend too much time doing so. Again it is important to emphasize to students: words should be spent on the argument.

Moving to the structure of the actual argument, there are no universal ways to set this out – the structure will largely depend on the content of the claim itself. The most specific advice professors could give was the following general approach. A student should first figure out exactly what points she has to prove in order to prove her thesis. This should involve figuring out what the audience will already accept and starting from

there. Once the student has made these main steps explicit, she should consider what order makes the most sense based on how the steps relate to one other. After laying out this general structure of the argument, the student should consider where to place potential objections. If they are general then they can often be lumped together at the end, but if they apply to specific points then it may be better to address them immediately following those points.

Professors agreed that the conclusion need not do very much – a simple summary is usually plenty. Overall the paper should be structured so that its logical progression is clear and concise. One method suggested for testing this is to go through every paragraph and make explicit exactly why each paragraph is necessary to prove the overall claim. If a student struggles with this, they may want to consider restructuring or removing certain paragraphs.

Main Points

Here are some general suggestions for structuring your paper. They are not strict rules, but you should always *consider* whether these sections are necessary to prove your argument.

- **Thesis Paragraph** – Your paper should open with a *brief* paragraph that states the philosophical question you are addressing along with your answer.
 - It is sometimes a good idea to sketch out the main steps of your argument in an explicit ‘roadmap’ at the end of this paragraph.
- **Stage Setting** – After the thesis paragraph it is generally a good idea to introduce the philosophical issue and relevant positions more fully.
 - This often involves citing other philosophers and their positions.
 - It is good to consider whether you need to define and spell out important terms of art or assumptions of your argument. Only do this if *not* doing so would make your argument unclear.
- **Argument** – There is no standard formula for how to structure the body of your argument. Here is a good general approach:
 - Figure out the main points of your thesis that you have to prove.
 - Order these steps to make the logical progression as clear as possible.
 - Consider objections. These may be lumped at the end or interspersed throughout the steps, depending on which approach makes the logical progression more clear.

- **Conclusion** – This need not be very detailed – a simply summary will usually be sufficient.
- In general, *words should be spent on the argument*. Attempt to streamline the other sections as much as possible.

IV. **Style:** *How should a philosophy paper be written?*

Research

As touched on above, Watson lists clarity as one of the core principles of philosophical writing, applying it specifically to style. Much of the literature agrees that clear writing is the most important element of writing style in philosophy. Watson says that it is necessary in order to monitor for consistency, which is one of the most important aspects of philosophical writing (3). In order to be clear, “one must say what one means as nearly as possible with univocal words and phrases, in detail, and at sufficient length to avoid misunderstanding” (3). Pryor agrees with this sentiment, and to that end he suggests that writers conceive of their readers as “lazy, stupid, and mean” (7). This may be useful as it encourages them to be extremely careful with how exactly they craft their statements. Rescher agrees when he states that writing that makes “the relationship between theses as clear and conspicuous as possible” is one of the most important parts of good philosophy (56).

Philosophical writing should also strive to be concise: “never say more than is necessary to make your point” (Watson 42). Pryor makes a very similar statement, though he balances it by noting that it may seem to contradict with the above considerations of clarity (6). He points out that saying ‘be concise’ means that one should *only* discuss what is directly relevant, but that what *is* relevant should be stated as clearly as possible, as explained above.

Interviews

Professors did not have many important comments on style. They all agreed that clarity is by far the most important aspect, and so students should generally use words and sentences that are as simple as possible. One professor said that new students often *think* using SAT words and complicated sentence structures makes for good writing, but they're wrong. Instead, good writing should make complicated material seem easy, and that is what he generally wants to see in a philosophy paper.

In terms of specifics, some professors warned that the first person should not be overused, but all agreed it is fine to use selectively for the sake of clarity. Another professor noted how students have a tendency to over-use connective words such as 'therefore' and 'thus' in order to make the paper *seem* like it is making logical moves. These words should only be used when they accurately describe the logical relationship between clauses. Overall, professors said they are not very particular about small style points. One captured the general consensus by saying, "as long as your style doesn't interfere with the clarity of your argument, it should be a non-issue". A few different professors recommended students look at some specific style guides, so I will include references to those suggestions at the end of the handout.

Main Points

- **Clarity** – This is by far the most important aspect of writing style. Basically the best way to write is however will make your arguments most clear.
 - Make sure your statements aren't ambiguous – don't give readers the opportunity to misinterpret you.
 - Don't be afraid to use 'I'.
 - Try to use words and sentences that are as simple as possible. The simpler your writing sounds, the better.
- **Concision** – Explain yourself fully, but only explain what is directly relevant to proving your thesis.
- Although it may be tempting, don't overuse words like 'therefore', 'thus', or 'essentially'.

V. General Advice

Research and Interviews

Pryor, along with the professors I interviewed, suggests that students should start working on a philosophy paper early (4). Several professors noted how a writer should spend a large amount of his time thinking about and discussing his ideas before he sits down to write anything. Then the first thing he should try to write is an outline – one will never write a good philosophy paper by trying to bang it out in one sitting. It takes time for a writer to develop ideas into clear, well crafted, and well-organized arguments, and this is what is demanded of a philosophy paper. Another piece of advice from professors was to plan to finish a complete draft of the paper at least a day before its due. This allows time for the writer to have others read and help revise it. Finally, one of the most important things for new writers to remember is to keep their claims simple and to stay close to the material.

Main Points

- **Keep it simple** – Make a single, small point.
 - Stay close to the material: don't try and develop your own theory when you're just starting out.
- **Start Working Early** – It takes time to develop your ideas into clear, well crafted, and well-organized arguments. This is what is expected.
 - Always write an outline first so you can explicitly connect your ideas before you write.
- Try to finish a draft early so you can have others read it. See if they understand and can explain your main claims afterwards.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to explain the logic behind the main points chosen for the proposed handout. The goal of this handout is not to explore philosophical writing in detail – that has been done and is available to students. Instead, it is aimed at

being accessible and useful for busy mentors and students who don't wish to commit the time to absorbing an entire book on writing philosophy.

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Appendix:
How to Write Philosophy Papers

Purpose: *What is the aim of philosophical writing?*

- “The purpose of doing philosophy is to lay out in plain view our concepts, our commitments, and our reasons so that we can assess their adequacy and their underlying values” --Brian Mogck, *Writing To Reason*
- **Rational Inquiry** – Philosophy aims to question our understanding and common conceptions through the negotiation of reasons.
- **Reasons** – What you *believe* is largely irrelevant – your writing should be focused on the *reasons* that you have for that belief.

Substance: *What should a philosophy paper accomplish?*

- **Thesis** – Your paper must put forward a *modest, meaningful, contestable thesis* that addresses some philosophical issue.
- **Argument** – The thesis should be supported by an explicit, logical, and clear argument.
 - Your argument must exhibit independent thinking.
 - Your argument should actively engage with the subjects you are discussing – make sure your paper *goes* somewhere by making logical steps.
- **Evidence** – The best way to illustrate a claim is often to use examples, which need not be empirical. Thought experiments can be a good way to do this.
- **Understanding** – Your paper should demonstrate that you understand the material you’ve been discussing in class.
 - This need not involve direct citations – it may be enough to simply portray the issues correctly, perhaps using your own examples.
- **Citations** – You should consider using citations to help frame the philosophical question you are addressing, as well as to show other relevant ways of answering it.
 - Try to paraphrase whenever possible as this demonstrates your understanding better than quoting.
 - If you quote a passage, make sure to explicitly explain how it relates to your argument.

Structure: *How should a philosophy paper be organized?*

Here are some general suggestions for structuring your paper. They are not strict rules, but you should always *consider* whether they are necessary to prove your argument.

- **Thesis Paragraph** – Your paper should open with a *brief* paragraph that states the philosophical question you are addressing along with your answer.
 - It is sometimes a good idea to sketch out the main steps of your argument in an explicit ‘roadmap’ at the end of this paragraph.
- **Stage Setting** – After the thesis paragraph it is generally a good idea to introduce the philosophical issue and relevant positions more fully.
 - This often involves citing other philosophers and their positions.

- It is good to consider whether you need to define and spell out important terms of art or assumptions of your argument. Only do this if *not* doing so would make your argument unclear.
- **Argument** – There is no standard formula for how to structure the body of your argument. Here is a good general approach:
 - Figure out the main points of your thesis that you have to prove.
 - Order these steps to make the logical progression as clear as possible.
 - Consider objections. These may be lumped at the end or interspersed throughout the steps, depending on which approach makes the logical progression more clear.
- **Conclusion** – This need not be very detailed – a simply summary will usually be sufficient.
- In general, *words should be spent on the argument*. Attempt to streamline the other sections as much as possible.

Style: How should a philosophy paper be written?

- **Clarity** – This is by far the most important aspect of writing style. Basically the best way to write is whatever style will make your arguments most clear.
 - Make sure your statements aren't ambiguous – don't give readers the opportunity to misinterpret you.
 - Don't be afraid to use 'I'.
 - Try to use words and sentences that are as simple as possible. The simpler your writing sounds, the better.
- **Concision** – Explain yourself fully, but only explain what is directly relevant to proving your thesis.
- Although it may be tempting, don't overuse words like 'therefore', 'thus', and 'essentially'.

General Advice

- **Keep it simple** – Make a single, small point.
 - Stay close to the material: don't try and develop your own theory when you're just starting out.
- **Start Working Early** – It takes time to develop your ideas into clear, well crafted, and well-organized arguments. This is what is expected.
 - Always write an outline first so you can explicitly connect your ideas before you write.
- Try to finish a draft early so you can have others read it. See if they understand and can explain your main claims afterwards.

Suggestions for Further Reading:

- "Politics and the English Language" by George Orwell
- *Style* by Joseph Williams
- "Guidelines to Writing a Philosophy Paper" by Jim Pryor
- *Writing to Reason* by Brian Mogck
- *A Rulebook for Arguments* by Anthony Weston