

What NOT to Do When Writing a Philosophy Paper

- 1) Do NOT forget to have an argument.

Philosophy paper assignments usually ask you to explicate some text or issue and then offer an argument of your own on the matter. Many students make the mistake of spending the whole paper explicating the text or issue, and then forget to offer their own argument, or spend so little time on it that it is crammed into a short paragraph at the end, which is almost as bad as not having your own argument at all.

- 2) Do NOT forget to make the argument clear at the beginning of the paper.

Many students only discover what they think about a given topic in the process of writing their papers. That is fine—in fact, it is a large part of the reason why philosophy professors assign papers, i.e. to make the students think. However, having thought their way through the problem, students often forget to write or revise their opening paragraph so as to reflect what the conclusion of their paper will be. Statements like “This paper will explore . . .” or “I will investigate . . .” are not adequate thesis statements, because exploring and investigating are not indications of what one thinks.

- 3) Do NOT forget that each paragraph should have a topic sentence at the beginning, which indicates what the point of the paragraph is.

All too often, students write paragraphs that have no discernible main point or have a jumble of points that are unrelated or better treated separately. Just like the way that the paper overall should give an argument for some position, and this argument should be made clear at the beginning, so too for each paragraph. Even if a paragraph is not arguing any particular point, but merely giving summary, then the paragraph should open by stating that it is going to give a summary and the reason why. For example: “In order to understand why Socrates thinks he is invincible, we should first review what he says earlier in the *Apology*.”

- 4) Do NOT let rhetorical questions serve as arguments.

A rhetorical question is intended to elicit a certain reaction from a reader that is favorable to the author’s position. For example, “Could anyone possibly think that justice is not a virtue?” is intended to be met with the answer, “No, everyone must think that justice is a virtue.” However, a reader may not share the author’s point of view (and philosophy professors are usually skeptical readers), in which case the rhetorical question will not evoke the desired reaction, and the author’s move will fall flat. For that reason, while rhetorical questions are nice for literary effect, they are not arguments and should not be used as substitutes for arguments. Either avoid using them altogether, or if you do use them, follow them up by answering the question yourself and giving an argument for why it should be answered in the way you suggest.

- 5) Do NOT think that quotations from textual sources are self-explanatory.

Especially when writing papers on the history of philosophy, students will often quote a passage from some text and then claim, “Thus, thinker X believes Y,” where it is not obvious the quote supports that claim. Often, passages are ambiguous, and they tend to become especially ambiguous when removed from their original context. Thus, except when the claim that is made on the basis of the passage does little more than to restate the passage using mostly the same words, any quotation from a source should be followed by an explanation of what you think it means, and the explanation should *point to specific words in the quoted passage* in support of your interpretation of it. One ramification of this point is that you should not end paragraphs with quotations, because that leaves out the explanation.

- 6) Do NOT be sloppy with quantifiers.

Quantifiers are dangerous things, and mishandling them can result in the early and painful demise of your arguments. Here are some examples of *strong* quantifiers that must be handled with care: “all,” “any,” “every,” “everyone,” “everywhere,” “always,” “not at all,” “none,” “nobody,” “never,” “nowhere,” and “only.” In order to disprove an argument using one of these quantifiers, one needs only to find a single solid counter-example. It is usually safer to use *weak* quantifiers such as “some,” “sometimes,” “somebody,” “some places,” and so on, because a single counter-example is not enough to defeat such claims. There are quantifiers in between these two sets, e.g. “many,” “most,” and “often,” which will also not be defeated by a single counter-example. However, because they are still fairly strong, they need to be used with caution. Judge carefully what sort of quantifier is needed for your argument, and do not use stronger medicine than it requires.

- 7) Do NOT try to use fancy words and phrases.

Philosophers spend their lives reading boring books and they LIKE them that way. Why? The reason is that philosophers value clarity in argument, and clarity requires stating things in simple, easy-to-understand language. Also, in order to avoid subtle switches in words that might mask faulty arguments, philosophers value picking a set of terms, assigning them definite meanings, and then using them consistently, all of which makes for boring prose (but clear arguments). Accordingly, in your own writing, you should stick to simple and straightforward prose. Using fancy words and phrases is dangerous, because they may wind up causing problems for your argument (e.g. by switching meanings of what you are saying when you change expressions). Also, if you do not use them correctly, they will have the effect of making you look ignorant, rather than learned. So, stick with expressions over which you have comfortable mastery. Clear, boring prose will usually not be penalized in grading.