

Millgram
2008

Writing Your Philosophy Paper:
Common Problems to Avoid

1. Make sure you're not spreading yourself too thin by trying to make too many unconnected points. If you try to make too many points, you won't have time to develop any of them—to argue for any of them—properly. To focus the paper, pick *one* point, and take the time you need to explain it clearly, and to produce the structured argument you need to support it.
2. The backbone of a philosophy paper is an argument, and a frequent problem is a paper's simply not having one. Make sure you've got an argument!

When you think argument, you should think of the things I outline on in-class handouts. An argument is something that starts with premises that you expect your reader to believe, and shows him why, given that he believes the premises, he *has to* believe your conclusion. You should be clear and explicit about what your premises (assumptions) are, what your conclusion is, what the intermediate steps are, and how each step (and ultimately the conclusion) follows from already stated steps (ultimately, premises).

Your paper should be an argument clothed in text. Make sure you have one before you start writing: a good way to make sure is to produce an outline that displays its logical structure *first*. Bear in mind that an outline of an argument and an outline of a paper are two different things. You want to have the former before you start to think about the latter.

3. Once you've picked the one point you want to make, and picked the one argument you want to make for it, use your argument as an inclusion criterion. If you can't say why a paragraph or point is necessary for your argument, throw it out. (If you *can* say why it's necessary, then *say* why it is.)

This goes for the introduction, too. Keep your intro terse. Don't bother with "Ever since the dawn of civilization, philosophers have been puzzled by the problem of..." Cut to the chase.

4. You'll often be discussing someone else's argument. A common problem is that of filling up the paper with unnecessary exposition of the views of the person you're discussing, and having no space for developing, and arguing for, your own views. Make sure you allow enough room in your paper to lay out your argument. You need *only* as much explanation of other people's views as you require to get *your own* argument going. (But you *do* need *that* much.)

To make sure you understand what you need to say (and so, what you don't), *before* starting to write your paper, outline *two* arguments: the argument you'll be discussing, and your own argument. Check that you're clear about precisely where your argument bears on the argument you're examining.

Once more: you do *not* get credit for rehearsing what's in the readings or what was said in class. You will probably have to do some of this anyway, in order to set up your own argument (for which you do get credit). But it should be kept to the minimum necessary for that purpose. Many of the readings are good models, and worth imitating. But that means: do what they *do*. *Don't* repeat what they *say*.

5. Blurriness is often the reason one doesn't notice that an argument is defective—or simply missing. I don't have a magic formula for eliminating blurriness, but the first step is to become aware that it's there, and one way to do that is to try to explain what you're arguing for and how you're going to get there. You have to have an audience in mind, and you can think of me: I'm *real* slow, and if you don't spoon-feed me the idea, and your reasons for it, I just don't get it. Imagine me saying, at *every* step, "Hold on, I didn't get that—what does that mean? Why does this follow from that? Why do you think this?"

Give a map of the argument at the outset, and put up road signs as you traverse the map. Here's an example of a map:

In this paper I will show that Korsgaard's Two Front Argument fails because it ignores a property of persons that I will call Impudence. I will first briefly outline Korsgaard's argument, and highlight the inference that I will show to be flawed. Then I will explain what I mean by Impudence, and argue that any decision maker must have this property. I will argue that if an agent is Impudent, Korsgaard's argument

does not go through. Finally, I will consider, and reject, a response that Korsgaard might make to my argument.

(Again, a short paper should be trying to make *one* point. Make sure, before you start writing the paper, that you can say, in a single short sentence, what that point is. Then, first thing you do, tell your reader what it is.)

Here are examples of road signs:

Now that we've seen Korsgaard's argument, and now that I've indicated where I think the problem lies, let me describe the property of Impudence.

:

We've just seen what Impudence is. It's not obvious that all persons have this property; I will now demonstrate that they do.

:

Impudence, I have just shown, is a property of all persons. But, I will now argue, if Impudence is a property of all persons, then Korsgaard's inference from (4) to (5) fails.

:

Korsgaard's argument, then, seems to be invalid. But before we accept this conclusion, we need to consider what I take to be the most plausible response available to her: what I will call the Appeal to Temporal Infirmity. Let me explain.

6. A second way to eliminate blurriness is to practice Orwellian Newspeak. In the novel *1984*, Newspeak, a form of English from which whole categories of words have been deleted, is presented as a tool of political oppression. The idea is that if you can't *say* subversive thoughts, you can't think them either; Orwell takes it that deleting words from your vocabulary is a way of preventing you from thinking.

Orwell was wrong. Deleting words from your vocabulary is way of making sure that you *are* thinking. Whenever you're tempted to use a very abstract term, or a bit of philosophical jargon, make sure that you can say what you want to say without it. If you can't, you need to consider the possibility that what you had was only the *appearance* of a thought. (Think of the test this way: can you say it so that your

garage mechanic will understand it?) If you can, go ahead and say it without the jargon. See the appendix for the beginnings of a list of words to avoid.

7. A third way to eliminate blurriness is to make sure that you can give a couple of very low-key, very concrete examples of the kind of thing you have in mind. The ability to come up with such examples is a reality check; if you can't do it, you should be worried that you don't understand what you're trying to think about.
8. Before you turn them in, reread your papers for style. It's important to control the textual surface of your paper. You should make sure that the grammar is correct, and that you've gotten rid of stylistic infelicities such as using the wrong word for what you're trying to say, using words that sound bloated and puffy, or shifting from written into spoken register.¹ Getting a friend to edit and proofread your papers is a really good idea. Don't forget to turn on the spell checker. Check the punctuation.

Cleaning up your paper will help you avoid mistaking content-related problems for surface sloppiness. Even if you think of surface sloppiness as a venial crime, it's worth getting rid of so you can get to the other problems it often masks.

You can improve your writing enormously by the following admittedly painful expedient. Finish a first draft of the paper. Then shorten each sentence by one-third. This will tighten up your writing, force you to figure out what's essential and what's not, and force you to figure out what each sentence is actually supposed to say.

9. Mechanics:

Make sure to give full citation information first time through, like this.² When available, please use citation conventions that are standard across editions.³ Want the official rules? You should have

¹Here's what that means. 'Wittgenstein and I agree that it is important to pay attention to how our words are actually used' is written register; 'Ludwig and me agree that how our words are actually used is key' is spoken register. In philosophy writing can be more talky than some other disciplines, but there's still a difference, and you need to pay close attention to what is which.

²Nerdly Dweeble, *How to Cite* (Salt Lake City: Academic Etiquette Press, 2007), p. 21. Further references to this volume will be by given in the running text by HC and page number.

³In some cases, you'll have to be inventive. E.g., J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Nome, Alaska: Obscure Editions, 1931); cited by chapter and paragraph.

a style manual (such as the *Merriam Webster's Standard American Style Manual* or the *Chicago Manual of Style*) on your bookshelf.

Don't cite web pages, if there's any way around it: they're too ephemeral.

Track down a paper source and cite that.

Don't forget to title your paper.

Make sure your pages are numbered.

10. Start early. If you want to talk through your paper, I'm available. Bring the (typed, please) outline of your argument.

Appendix
Tabula verborum interdictorum

Words that prevent you from thinking:

- absolute
- abstract
- constructivist
- context, context-dependent
- deconstruct (unless you can actually say what it means)
- external, externalist
- instinctive
- internal, internalist
- intuition⁴
- _____ itself (i.e., constructions along the lines of ‘time itself’)
- logical, illogical
- nature, naturalism, naturalist
- negate
- normative, normativity
- objective⁵
- physicalism, physicalist
- real, reality, realism, realist⁶
- reason (as the name of a mental faculty), rationality
- relative
- subjective
- valid⁷
- value (noun)

⁴Except as a technical term of Kant’s.

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⁶On ‘real’, see J. L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, ed. G. J. Warnock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 73–77. There are occasional exceptions, that is, uses of words in this family that are nevertheless carefully introduced, and which have a precise meaning; for an example, see Dummett’s ‘realism’.

⁷Except as a technical term, meaning, of an argument, necessarily having true conclusions when it has true premises.

Undergraduatisms to avoid:

- affect/effect (before you use either, make sure you understand what *both* words mean, as nouns and as verbs)
- begs the question that... (i.e., using the phrase “begs the question” to mean, “invites the further question”)
(The concept ‘question-begging’ is an important philosophical tool to have—make sure you understand it before you use it!)
- core (as in, “is core to”)
- expand upon
- expound on, expound upon
- create
- delve
- essentially;⁸ also watch out for “fundamentally,” “basically,” “ultimately,” and so on.
- feel (as in “I feel that,” “they feel that”)
- key (as in, “such-and-such is key”)
- posit, postulate (verb)
- relate to
- semantics (when it’s used to mean “a trivial verbal quibble,” as in “that’s just semantics”); of course, it’s fine to use the word as a philosophical technical term.
- shatter
- shine light on (as a description of what you’re going to do)
- Some have suggested. . . [always give an instance of someone who’s got the view you want to discuss]
- truly
- unearth (as a description of what you’re going to do)

⁸Except as a technical term, in a metaphysics class.