

How to Write a Philosophy Paper



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Introduction

I am not an expert. I have been doing this for a while, and I have developed my own strategies and techniques that work well for me. Essentially this is going to be a list of “dos and don’ts” but it should at least give you some direction for writing your own paper. I am going to talk about two situations in paper writing: an ideal one and a crash course called *Panic Mode*. The ideal situation hardly ever comes about since there’s always stuff that interferes with our plans, but this is something that I aim for every time I have to sit down and write a paper. The crash course, on the other hand, is usually what ends up happening because we haven’t budgeted our time properly. No use criticizing ourselves now, the paper’s probably due in 12 hours. Each of the following sections will be followed by a *panic mode* section that deals with writing the paper the night before. It is essentially a condensed version of the longer process of writing a paper; not exactly ideal, but should be enough to get you through the night.

What is philosophy, and why do we study it?

Some people say that the point of philosophy is to discover the truth of the matter, to discover the true reality that underlies the everyday world. On a more general level, philosophy is about asking questions. It is about asking the right question, at the right time, and in the right way. For paper writing, this means that you are constantly asking yourself *what is the paper about? What is the point I am trying to make? What is the next step I need to take in order to establish this point?* These are the questions that should be constantly running through your head as you write the paper.

Other people say that the point of philosophy is to make people better at arguing. Philosophy is the practice of making and assessing arguments. An argument is a set of statements (called premises) that work together to support another statement (the conclusion). This latter type of person can readily see the continuity between philosophy and being a lawyer. Philosophy in University usually consists of a combination of both. If nothing else, philosophy helps people to become better readers and writers.

Essential Books

General Writing Books:

Buckley, Joanne. *Fit to print : the Canadian student's guide to essay writing*. 7th ed. Toronto: Nelson Education, 2008.

Foster, Daniel. *Process and collaboration : developing your writing*. Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Canada, 1993.

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Fowler, H. *The Little, Brown handbook*. 5th ed. Toronto: Pearson Longman, 2008.

Hacker, Diana. *The Bedford handbook*. 7th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2006.

Philosophy Writing Books:

Blackburn, Simon. *The Oxford dictionary of philosophy*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Seech, Zachary. *Writing philosophy papers*. 4th ed. Belmont CA: Wadsworth/Thomson, 2004.

What Is a Philosophy Paper?

What does one do in a philosophy paper?

Already we're starting to get into the tricky parts of understanding How to Write a Philosophy paper because what you are expected to write is often nothing like what professional philosophers actually write. Your papers are supposed to be in clear and concise prose that explains an idea and defends an argument in an easy to understand format. Anyone that's read philosophy will already know that, though it might be the case that all philosophers think they're being clear, they're often anything but.

In every philosophy paper, at least the ones that you will be writing, you need to make a claim and support that claim with evidence. The strength of your paper will depend on the strength of the evidence and the strength of the relationship of the evidence to the conclusion. The evidence that you use has to be more than just opinion or some other unsupported claim. Opinions are philosophically uninteresting because they are unsupported claims. In philosophy, we don't look for what to believe, we look for reasons to believe something. The stronger the reasons, the more likely we are to change our beliefs and opinions. For example, if I told you that Hobbes just *is* better than Rousseau but without giving you reasons to believe that, then it is unlikely that you will be persuaded. However, if I said that Hobbes had a better conception of the natural state than Rousseau because of x, y, and z, then you are much more likely to be persuaded. If nothing else, at least we have some things we can discuss. Just telling me your opinion doesn't open up discussion at all. Philosophers try to avoid anything that stifles discussion.

One way to begin a philosophy paper is to start from some common assumptions between yourself and the reader. By finding a common ground to stand on, you will be much more likely to persuade your reader than if you simply run up to your reader and

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tell them all the reasons why they are wrong. This needs to be a nuanced approach, however. Stating something like, “as you all know, Aristotle believed that the transcendent Platonic forms ignored the hylomorphic nature of material reality...” is not likely to get your reader on your side. However, stating something like, “a common reading of Aristotle is that he rejected the other-worldliness of Platonic forms. A closer reading reveals...” This way, you can hook your reader without assuming that your reader has already taken up a position; likely they already have a position, but it’s not good to assume that you know what your reader is thinking.

Try to avoid the trap that, since something is so obviously true to you, it couldn’t possibly be considered false by anyone else. This approach leads to undefended claims in philosophy papers. One of the common mistakes in philosophy papers is assuming that we are smarter than previous generations because we have more scientific knowledge and technology. Because of this, people hundreds or thousands of years ago couldn’t possibly create strong arguments. It might be easy to see the problems with this approach now, but inevitably there will be at least a dozen papers submitted in a first year philosophy class with just such an argument form.

When you’re writing a philosophy paper, it is very difficult to determine how much information should be presented to support your claim. There is a gray area between assuming your reader knows too much and assuming your reader knows too little. You need to be able to explain your point to your reader in a way that your grandmother can understand but you also need to present a lot of information to your grandmother. The key is to ensure that you only present the information that is necessary for your grandmother to understand the point that you are trying to make. The only way that you can demonstrate the information that you need and avoid the information that you don’t need is to ensure that you really understand the point that you’re trying to make. This comes down to the bare fact that there is no substitute for fully understanding the information that you’re presenting.

Also difficult to work through with the too-much/too-little gray area is the tone of your writing. If you assume that your reader knows something and they don’t actually know it, your reader will become alienated. The important point here is to ensure that you support each one of your claims with some information that is readily accessible to the reader. This will also help to avoid the trap of providing inadequate information to support a point because the point is clear to you. You may not be aware of it, but while you’re re-reading a philosophy text, you are creating a pathway deeper and deeper into the text for your reader to follow. If you do not explicitly provide the directions for that pathway, then your reader will certainly become lost.

No matter what length your philosophy paper should be, you should try to limit yourself to making a small point. Shorter papers usually make one small point, whereas longer papers make more and more small points that are strung together, creating a larger point out of the smaller points, rather than creating a large point and trying to fill in the

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gaps. For example, a paper that would try to explain Kant's system of philosophy would certainly be inadequate to its reader's demands. But a paper that focused on explaining transcendental time determinations and what this means for Kant's philosophy as a whole would be a much more interesting paper. The first would require a description of all the major components of Kant's philosophy; the second would focus on a small detail and show the implications of that small detail—a much more manageable approach. To do this, you need to be okay with the fact that you're not going to blow your reader's mind with a new and overwhelming take on a particular theory. It's much easier to make an interesting point than a mind-blowing one.

Of disappointment to some students and relief to others is the limited role of your own personal philosophy in your philosophy papers. Many students come into philosophy thinking that it will be a forum for talking about the student's own personal philosophy, their thoughts and feelings on the world in general, their relationship with others, etc. This is not the case. The majority of philosophy classrooms are an attempt to contextualize some of those thoughts by using a particular philosopher to ground the theories. Developing one's own personal philosophy only really comes out indirectly through talking about a particular philosopher's theory. It is important, then, to ensure that comments in papers centre on the particular philosophy and whether it is a strongly supported theory, independently of how you might feel about that theory.

This approach is helpful too for students that think they need to provide an original interpretation or criticism of a theory; philosophy papers are primarily meant to demonstrate that you understand the material and it is only through understanding the material that a good criticism can come about. A solid, original paper is one that provides a particular interpretation of a theory. Originality shows up best in the way that the material is strung together in a paper.

Types of Philosophy Papers

Thought experiments

On some rare occasions, usually in an applied ethics course like bio-medical ethics or philosophy of medicine, you will be asked to write a response to a thought experiment. This usually involves a particular scenario and your response to that scenario. Say, for example, that a man was in the process of redrafting his final will and was hospitalized and in a coma and he showed no signs of recovery. The original copy of the will included a Do Not Resuscitate order that was quite upsetting to the family members and so he was in the process of changing the will to make his family happy but was unable to provide a final copy to the family and his attorney. You are the doctor. What should you do? One way to attempt to answer the problem would be to look at the situation as absurd and improbable, thereby scrutinizing all the details and showing how it would be impossible for this situation to actually occur. This is the wrong approach. Your

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professors want you examine the situation from as many perspectives as possible to demonstrate that you can see the problem from different sides. For example, what would the doctor/lawyer/family member say in this scenario? They are not going to have a single point of view, so the work in the paper then becomes understanding what responsibilities and duties each of the participants have in this scenario. The more detailed response you can provide that examines the role of each individual in the situation, the better your paper is likely to be. Your argument should conclude with attempting to determine what the right or wrong thing to do is in the situation given the information that's provided. You can often rely on the theories that you've learned in class to help you decide what the right thing to do is.

Application papers

Similar to thought experiments is an application paper. Application papers ask students to take the principles from a given theory and apply them to a new situation. Though this type of paper often only comes up in applied ethics courses, it can pop up in just about any theory class. The key thing about these papers, just like the rest of your philosophy papers, is to understand the theories that you're talking about. Once you've been able to boil the philosophy down to a handful of principles/key points/concepts, then you can begin to apply those concepts to the situation at hand. The structure of the paper would take the form of, first, explaining the relevant principles/points/concepts and then using them as a basis for understanding the scenario: how would a concept apply to the situation? How would the philosopher reply if you put him/her in the situation? The key here is to understand the theories to such a degree that you can explain what the most relevant concepts are for the problem and how they relate to the problem that you're working through.

Compare and contrast papers

A comparison paper looks at similarities between papers. For example, you might be asked to compare Kant and Mill on the role of reason in ethics. This paper would then proceed to look at the similarities between the two. A contrast paper, on the other hand, looks at the points of contrast between two authors or ideas; how they are different.

Though it will often be the case that your professor will ask you to write one or the other, and I apologize for how confusing this is, they usually mean both. The best thing to do is to ask what the professor is looking for.

Critical summary

A critical summary is strong requirement of any philosophy paper, but often these function as standalone papers as well. With standalone critical summaries, usually one or two pages on a weekly reading, you're being asked to do a couple of things:

1) Show the structure of the argument:

The structure of the argument is the most important part in a summary. Here you identify the conclusion that the author is putting forward and the reasons/evidence/premises that the author is using to convince the reader of that conclusion. Your summary should look something like this:

In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes is looking for something certain that can provide the foundation for scientific knowledge. In order to find something certain, Descartes must throw out anything that is not completely certain. Because it would be impossible to look at every single belief that he holds, he looks at the origin of those beliefs and decides to throw out any beliefs that do not have a strong origin. Thus, Descartes throws out all beliefs arising from the senses... After rejecting all of his previous beliefs, Descartes finds a method that he can use to determine which beliefs are worth holding and which ones are not. ... He finds one belief that he is absolutely certain of... etc.

If you find that there are problems with the argument as presented, ensure that those problems are in the argument and not in the interpretation of the argument (which means giving a lot of credit to the philosopher), and once you can confidently state that they are a problem with the argument then you can go on to give a critical assessment of that argument.

2) Give a *critical assessment* of the argument.

In the critical assessment, you put forward your criticism, whether that be positive or negative, and your reasons for holding this criticism. At this point you should be able to identify why this point is worth mentioning, what it means for the rest of the philosophy. It could be the case that you have found something that calls into question the entire philosopher's system (which would mean that you would have to explain the entire system in a brief summary—not really easy with someone like Descartes or Kant), but it is more likely the case that you will find a small detail that calls into question some of the other arguments the philosopher makes or, on the other hand, supports some of the other claims the philosopher makes. Some of the best critical assessments are those that take a humble approach to the text, stating not that the philosopher is “obviously wrong” in the position they hold, but beginning with the possibility that maybe the philosopher just missed a point that is worth mentioning.

Research papers/exegesis papers

A research paper involves going to the library, finding multiple sources on a particular topic, and bringing them together in a synthesized whole. Research papers and exegetical papers differ in that exegesis papers can be about one text whereas a research paper usually involves many texts (although it would be good to check with your Professor to see what kind of paper they are looking for). The main point of both papers is to demonstrate that you understand the material. Although these papers can work towards a critical interpretation, this should not be the bulk of the paper. The difference between the research/exegesis paper and a summary (although not a critical summary) is usually just the length and number of sources.

Steps in exegetical analysis (for the purpose of essay writing)

1. Read over the essay question multiple times and, each time, make sure that you are looking for anything that you might have missed.
2. Identify the key terms or concepts of the question.
3. Read through the text and identify passages that have those key terms/concepts in them.
4. Read those passages and find any peripheral, but related concepts—they might come in handy when trying to explain a concept.
5. Look at the relationship between these different passages. Is the concept used the in the same way? Is it different? Is this an important difference? Often the concept will change slightly between passages and it is this slight change that can really show a) you understand the concept and b) you understand the relationship of the concept to other parts of the text.
6. Begin describing the relationship of the concepts in each of the different passages. Take notes, and lots of them; they will help you when you're putting the final draft together.
7. Once you have lots of notes about the key terms, begin putting together an outline. An outline should take the form of a) a definition/explanation of the main concept or idea, and b) how this concept/idea fits together with the rest of the text. You don't need to know everything about the text, that would likely be impossible, but you do need to demonstrate that you have a familiarity with the aims of the text. Ideally you would show how this concept opens the door to understanding the rest of the text.

Thesis papers (Greek: Θέσις = view)

In a thesis defence paper, you take a stance on a particular issue and argue for that stance. You should be able to state in a single sentence what exactly you are going to prove. A good thesis is "Although Mill and Kant both argue for the prioritization of reason in ethical thinking, Mill has a more comprehensive theory." In the previous statement, there is definitely a side being taken: Mill is better than Kant. This is a

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comparative thesis. In another sort of thesis, you can simply argue that a philosopher fails to take account of a particular problem. This type of thesis is a more sustained critical assessment. In both situations, your own philosophical theory of something is not as important as demonstrating the viewpoints of the particular philosophers in a way that is accessible to your reader. If you focus on making a claim and then providing support for your claim, the goal of any good philosophy paper, then you're likely to avoid the trap of using the opportunity to explain your own philosophical theory. You need to embed your theory in the philosophy that you are studying. Only in this way can you be assured to stay on topic and convince the reader of your views. To assess your ability to successfully convince the reader of your own views, your professor will be checking to see whether you adequately grasp the material and its implications, can critically analyze and evaluate the relevant issues, and can reasonably defend your thesis.

Panic Mode

The majority of papers you will write are research papers that incorporate a thesis. Every paper should have a thesis. A thesis is essentially a statement of the topic of the paper. There should be some form of argument, even if it's simply "Both Hobbes and Locke discuss the state of nature but Hobbes is more clear on what the state of nature is" or something to that effect. You will then use textual support to explain this position. This is where the research comes in. You need to find quotes that explain the position of each philosopher. Don't worry about comparing them yet, just try to understand their positions first. Then, once you've understood them, you can start comparing them.

Knowing the assignment

This is the first thing you should be concerned with: you need to make sure that you fully understand the assignment that you have been given. Sometimes your professor will just ask you to write a paper on whatever you feel like, but sometimes there will be a specific assignment sheet that outlines the requirements for the assignment. It is often easy to turn your assignment sheet into a sort of checklist that you can use to make sure you have all the relevant parts.

Although you might write a competent paper, it might completely miss the point. There have been more than a few philosophy papers that are perfectly constructed in every way, and in any other circumstance, they would receive a 90, but because they didn't answer the questions they were supposed to answer, they ended up with a 70. That's a twenty percent difference.

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Read over the assignment many times. Write out the assignment question at the top of your rough draft so you constantly have something to refer back to. Be sure about the instructions. Are you asked to analyze a particular work or concept? Are you asked to summarize without evaluation? Are you asked to compare and contrast the positions of different philosophers or philosophies? How many words are required? Is it a short paper or a longer one? Whatever the length, be mindful of staying close to the established limits. Writing a too-short paper will mean that you don't spend adequate time to sufficiently develop and explore complex ideas. A too-long paper may suffer from repetition or may be 'long winded' and simply defeat the purpose of the assignment (e.g., to be able to present material in a concise manner).

One of the best places to turn is a philosophy dictionary or encyclopaedia. A good example is <http://plato.stanford.edu>. The entries vary from basic background information to in-depth information that would provide material for years of research. Do not use a regular dictionary, even one like the Oxford English Dictionary, because the definitions you will find there will likely be too abstract to apply to your philosophy papers. If you are really having trouble situating the topic, then try talking to your TA, your Professor, or Writing Services, if your school has such a program.

Panic Mode

Most of the time your topics are given to you, so picking your topic seems a little redundant. However, even when you are assigned a given topic, you should be looking for a particular perspective to unify the paper. If you are asked to compare Descartes and Hume on scepticism, you need to make a value judgment—who has a better argument? Is one more realistic than another? Does one have more presuppositions than another? Start thinking about these questions as you work your way through the following steps.

Scheduling your time

It's probably the third or fourth class and already your professor is talking about the first essay assignment—it doesn't seem like that big of a deal because it's weeks away and you feel like you have all the time in the world before it's actually due. The problem is that philosophy isn't like some other subjects: you can't bang it out the night before if you haven't put a lot of thought into the work already. You might be tempted to wait until the very last minute to actually start writing it, but by then five other assignments from your other classes are also due. The unfortunate consequence of that is that all five of your assignments will likely turn out much worse than if you worked on each one individually. One of the tricks of succeeding in academia is turning that "I can't work without outside pressure" into creating the pressure yourself by making your own deadlines.

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Philosophical problems demand careful and sustained attention, something that is impossible if you're rushed. Philosophical problems require time to research, to ruminate, to digest, to think about some more, to write, to rewrite, to rethink, and to rewrite again. This all requires a great deal of time, an impossible task if you're starting the night before.

You should break the project down into specific tasks and create a timeline including each one. Fill your schedule in backwards—starting from the final copy. You need to leave yourself enough time to think about the topic and write a detailed outline. Only then should you sit down to write a complete draft. Once you have a complete draft, you should set it aside for a day or two. Then you should come back to it and rewrite it. Several times. *At least* 3 or 4. If you can, show it to your friends and get their reactions to it. Do they understand your main point? Are parts of your draft unclear or confusing to them? A large portion of your time should be spent editing your paper. Sample timeline: 3 days of editing, 4 days of writing the rough draft, 2 days for the outline, 4 days reading, 4 days of research (depending on availability), 1 day of thinking about the assignment. That's 18 days altogether. All of this takes time. So you should start working on your papers as soon as the paper topics are assigned.

Panic Mode

So it's the night before the paper is due. It's 7pm and you've got your soldiers all lined up: your vanilla bean latte on one side and your textbook and notes on the other. You're ready for war. Yes, you can chastise yourself for not doing this weeks ago, but it's too late for that, you need to start writing. Your schedule probably looks something like this: 1) write this paper for the next twelve hours followed by 2) sleep. So let's get to work.

Picking a Topic

Choose a topic that genuinely interests you, but be wary of topics that you are passionate about. Passion is the best way to write a convoluted and incomprehensible paper (the perennial abortion paper comes to mind). Aristotle talks about the necessity of a stable disposition for making decisions; this isn't more true than in writing a philosophy paper. Topics should not be so broad that they can't be examined thoroughly and should not be so narrow that they are not worth writing about.

What happens when you aren't given a topic?

This is something that happens a lot in philosophy classes because it gets the professor off the hook for devising the assignment (partly so they don't have to read 150 iterations of the same paper) and partly because it gives the student freedom to work on something that interests them rather than something they are forced to do. But with

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all that freedom comes a whole new level of pressure. How are you going to devise your own topic when you've just read over the text?

There are many strategies that you can employ for picking a topic. For one, you can look at the standard interpretation of a text and examine the plausibility of that interpretation. For example, many people have argued, including Heidegger, that there is no basis for an ethics in *Being and Time*. You could simply pick a side and argue whether there is or isn't a foundation for an ethics in his book. Sometimes you will want to argue something controversial and sometimes you'll want to argue something seemingly more banal. For example, you might argue that Nietzsche is an atheist. It doesn't matter what topic you pick so much as what evidence you use to support your position. If you said that Nietzsche was an atheist and then used the "God is Dead" quote, then the reader isn't going to be too impressed with your argument. However, if you argue that Nietzsche is an atheist, but were able to provide evidence that he wasn't the type of atheist that we commonly assume him to have been by showing that contemporary definitions of atheism don't match up with the definition of atheism that can be applied to Nietzsche, and then you can go on to show how contemporary interpretations have missed this point, then you've got a really strong paper. The key is not so much the claim you make or the question you want to answer, but the evidence that you use in support of that claim or answer.

Another technique involves being very attentive to the reading process. Oftentimes, when we're reading a text, we get caught up on a particularly frustrating passage and we don't really know why. Perhaps it was something that we read earlier that doesn't jive with what we're reading now, perhaps the language wasn't translated very well, or maybe we just weren't paying attention to what we were reading earlier. At the point of confusion, you should go back and re-read the earlier sections that have led up to this point. Once you have done that, if you're still confused, then you've got a really good starting point for a paper. You can simply examine two seemingly inconsistent passages for their points of overlap and divergence. For example, Locke's primary and secondary qualities distinction might mean something very different depending on the context that it's used in. You might simply state that in the opening section of your paper: in section X, Locke uses the primary/secondary distinction like this and then in section Y, Locke uses the primary/secondary distinction differently. Examining these two contexts will reveal a deeper meaning to the distinction and possibly reveal some inconsistencies that weren't evident earlier. The key here is to be able to identify the points of confusion and to be able to explain why they are confusing.

Another similar approach involves pulling out a particularly important or difficult passage and simply analyzing that passage. For example, Kant's statement that "concepts without intuitions are empty and intuitions without concepts are blind" is a particularly difficult passage to understand because it presupposes that one understands what concepts are, what intuitions are, and how they relate to each other. A lot of the work in this paper will be exegetical, which is fine. The best papers begin by

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demonstrating that the author understands the position that they are critiquing before they go on to make that critique.

Another slightly different technique, and one that I employ most often, simply follows through instinctual reactions to a text. Does it seem like there's something not right with the text? Does it seem like the author is missing something that you just can't quite put your finger on? Is the author inconsistent/abrupt/avoiding a possible conclusion? There are a variety of things that could be going wrong in the text and these things only become evident once we start paying attention to our own reactions to that text. Follow your hunches. After you've been doing philosophy for a while, you're likely to have some pretty good instincts that are worth following through. Again, you want to identify exactly what you understand the problem to be and why, exactly, it is a problem. Those two steps make for some really good philosophy.

After you have chosen the topic

As soon as you know what you want to write about, begin writing. Start asking yourself a series of questions: what do I know about the topic? why do I find the topic interesting? what do I want to establish in this paper? what do I know about related topics? what is confusing about the topic? where does the topic lead? Basically ask yourself as many questions as you can to get your thinking going. If you can already get to the point where you can identify particular points of frustration or particular concepts or ideas that you want to write about, then you're in good shape. Don't try doing this the night before--you won't be thinking clearly about the general ideas because you'll be too busy working on finishing the paper. Philosophy requires that you think about these things far in advance. The key thing at this stage is to just start writing. The more you start writing and get the ideas flowing, the easier it is going to be to transition to the formal writing stage.

Panic Mode

Right, so, first things first: what's your topic? If you are given lots of time then you can think about what really interests you. But as it stands now, it's already 7:15 and you haven't written a single word. Quickly look at the assignment sheet again. Are you asked to explain some point or compare two philosophers? If yes, then you've already got your topic. Are you asked to compare Hobbes and Locke on property rights? Explain Hobbes, explain Locke, then say which one you think has a better argument. Voila, your topic is established. If you are given an open topic, then you can simply write about what the philosopher said and say whether you think s/he's right or wrong based on his argument (not based on what you think about the argument, but on the argument itself). Try to be as specific as possible. Talking about Aristotle and the polis isn't specific enough; you need to focus in on, perhaps, the relationship between the philosopher kings and their subjects. Keep in mind that the majority of a philosophy paper is about demonstrating that you know the philosophical positions. This means that the majority

of the paper should be an explanation of the philosophy, which, unfortunately, involves very little of your own opinion.

Researching Philosophy

Philosophy: A Discipline Like No Other

Philosophy, unlike a lot of other disciplines out there, requires you to focus a LOT on you, perhaps the reason why most of us who study philosophy are pretty neurotic. We spend so much time in our own heads that, it could be argued, we're actually spending more time sorting ourselves out than sorting out the author of the text. Because of this, there is something to the claim that we should be cultivating a calm and stable disposition in order to begin writing philosophy. How do we do this? One of the first things we need to focus on is our environment: how much sound can we get away with without being distracted? How warm/cool should the room be? What kind of lighting do we need—natural or artificial? Do we work best when we're hungry, full, caffeinated, having to go to the washroom (that little bit of extra anxiety really helps some people), listening to white noise, classical music, nine inch nails? The point is to get your body relaxed enough that your mind can do all the thinking it wants without interruption. Ask yourself what you need to do with your environment to make this work?

Sources

After you've got your topic and put down a few thoughts about it, you need to find out what is out there. Read as much background material as you can get your hands on. By reading everything you can find, even if you don't use it for your paper directly, you will at least become familiar with some of the language and the problems of your topic. It will also help you to narrow your topic as much as possible. Often it doesn't take very long to figure out that a particular article is relevant or irrelevant to what you want to write about.

The first place to go is the library. Library books and journals are likely the best sources that are available on any given topic. That said, make sure you don't just take the first book or journal that you find at face value; there are many books that are published that really shouldn't have been published. One of the best ways to find out if a source is a good one or not is to see who else has written about that source; if there are lots of negative reviews of that source, avoid taking everything the source says as gospel. Of course it might be the case that everyone has misinterpreted the source, but it might also be the case that you've spent a whole lot of time trying to understand a source that won't be that helpful for your work. Moral of the story: read as much as you can, wherever it's from. Don't assume that a source is a good one because it confirms some pre-existing intuitions that you have about a text. To make a really strong point, try backing up your claim with two or three sources.

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Although the internet has tons of information, it isn't necessarily the best place to start. The best place to start is your assigned textbook. The best textbooks contain a list of recommended readings that provide direction for further research. There might also be footnotes in the text that provide other directions for research. Follow these though. It's like the beta version of hyperlinking.

If you find that you work better through the internet, here are a few things to keep in mind. Wikipedia is good, but only to get a general idea or general framework for the discussion. Wikipedia is not a reliable source for information for a paper because it is not peer-reviewed and could contain just about any information. Other good sites are the ones that end with ".edu" such as Stanford.edu. (There's also an online dictionary there.) These sites are educational institutions and usually the only content you find there is by a professor. Make sure, however, that these are a professor's papers because you might get some student's rant about some bizarre interpretation that really wouldn't be good to include in a paper. Fortunately, many people have taken the time to put together websites that list various resources for you to use. As well, search engines like HIPPIAS (<http://hippias.evansville.edu/>) go a great distance to help people find philosophical materials. It is important to be able to search effectively and critically so you can distinguish a dubious site from one that is a potential goldmine.

What to do with your Sources

Once you've got a selection of readings, you can start sorting through them to discover which ones are most relevant. If you've already made notes on them then most of your work should be done for you. You just need to pull the quotes together, look for common themes or areas of disagreement and you're on your way to writing.

But how do you even get that background information to read? If you've been in philosophy long enough, and succumbed to the same undeniable desire to have every copy of every book you read, then you can likely just consult your own bookshelf for that extra material. That works. But it's often not enough. Where do we go when we need more?

The moment that I have my assigned topic and I know what concepts/ideas/names that I'm going to have to deal with, I head over to the library. There is no better place for passing through a whole bunch of relevant information all at once than the books on the library shelves—they're already ordered for you and everything. I then turn to the table of contents (if the book is new enough to have one) and the index (see previous comment). I look for the word that I need to write about and then stack the books that will be helpful beside me as I move through the entire section. For example, I wrote a paper on Plato's Republic that focused on the role of Cephalus. I went to the library, went to the section on Plato, and then proceeded to root through every book to see what I could find about Cephalus. . I go through every single book in that section, checking every one for any detail that I might be able to include. Read the table of

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contents, look at the author's introduction, look at the index to see what key terms are mentioned frequently. Use those key terms to find other sources. If you look up a book on a shelf, look at all the others on the same shelf. If you found a useful article in a journal, look at previous issues and later ones (perhaps someone has written a rebuttal to the piece you like). If there's a blurb on the book jacket, read it; the name of the reviewer on the book jacket might also be someone you want to research. In the case of Cephalus, I found about twelve books with relevant information, stacked them in my arms, then went and sat down at one of the tables and started reading. I found out pretty quickly which ones were trite, which were only passingly interesting, and which ones would be beneficial to read in further detail. I also paid attention to the possibility that one or two books were being cited more than others. These are the books that I had to read, whether they were in the library or books that I had to order from other libraries (sometimes I need a book so bad that I'll drive to another city a couple hours away to pick it up myself).

After plopping yourself down in a library aisle and finding potential sources, grab a photocopier and start making copies (be sure to check the copyright regulations) for your personal use. If you work better writing things out then make sure you properly cite everything. There's nothing worse than spending hours searching through a half-dozen books for a proper citation for a quote that's essential to your project. Although I check every book on that philosopher in the philosophy section, I also make sure I check other sections, like the psychology, linguistics, or politics sections, depending on the subject matter I am dealing with. With Cephalus, I took the interesting books home and started pouring over them in greater detail. I then noted which passages were particularly interesting by sticking a small post-it note beside them and, once I was done reading the book, I went back and entered every single quote into a document on my computer. That's right, I typed out every quote. By the time you've been studying philosophy for a few years, you'll notice that you'll probably go back to the same sources again and again and there's no better place to keep those sources than in a searchable database, ie, your computer. Once I've typed out all the quotes, I begin reading the quotes and grouping them under common headings. I look for contradictions/consistencies and made note of them. While I am reading these quotes, I am constantly making notes in a separate document (usually titled something like "Cephalus Notes"). I might use those notes later, or I might just ignore them, only to be used a few years later. At this point, themes, problems, issues, etc start to emerge in the text and you've got some good material for writing a paper.

If you aren't having luck finding anything on your topic, you may want to ask for further guidance from the librarian or from your professor. If you haven't taken an official tour of your library yet, do so. Find out where things are. Find out how to look things up. Find out where the reference books are, the periodicals, the photocopier machines... Ask questions. Ask for assistance. Scout out the place before wasting any more time otherwise you'll be doing this every time you have to return to the library to research a paper.

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If you've looked hard and still can't seem to find anything, then it may be the case that you'll have to just change your topic to find more fruitful material. Try broadening your topic a little. If, on the other hand, you have found too much material, then try narrowing your topic so it only deals with one aspect, such as dealing with *Mitdasein* instead of just *Dasein* in Heidegger.

Panic Mode

You've picked your topic and it's 7:45 and you still don't have a word written down. No time for worrying about that now, you've got to figure out where you're going to get information from. The first instinct is always the internet, and Wikipedia is a good place to start, but not an accepted source for information you can cite. But don't worry, you have all the material you need right in front of you: your course text and your class notes. A lot of the time professors just want to see that you understand the material, and sometimes they specifically say they don't want you to use secondary sources. If you've taken good notes then the majority of the paper is going to be an explanation of those notes. What do the notes say about your topic? Next, turn to the textbook. You are looking for key terms in the text that will help you with your paper. If you decided to write on Rawls and the veil of ignorance, then start highlighting all the parts of the text that have those words. Is there someone else in the text that has written those same words? If yes, then you have your point of comparison. If not, don't worry, just try and explain Rawls' position as best as you can.

Reading Philosophy

Read the article quickly first to get the gist of the argument

When you first approach a text, I wouldn't recommend that you pause and pour over every single word, trying to get everything down pat before moving on. First, let your eyes pass over the page, reading every word, to get a general sense of the article. Look to the introduction and conclusion because those are usually the places that tell you what the argument is about. When you've done this, ask yourself what the article was about, in the most general terms possible. And no, "the article was about philosophy" is not good enough. What were some of the key words that the philosopher kept mentioning? Does the author actually define words, i.e., "by liberty is understood, the absence of external impediments." Write this down. Once you get these definitions, a big chunk of your work is done. Usually a definition is the starting point in an argument and, for the most part, the rest of the argument builds on that definition (See, for example, Spinoza's *Ethics*).

Contrary to articles that we're supposed to write, philosophers hardly ever write in the form, "Here is the argument I want you to accept and here are my three points for it."

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The argument is often hidden amidst a web of unclear and confusing tangents, unnecessary definitions, and obscure references that few people grasp. Nevertheless, we need to put their argument in a clear form. For example, the author might put forward an argument such as this:

I want you to believe that you need to give 10% of your income to charity. Why would you want to do this? Because, in order to be a good person, you need to give 10% of your income to charity. Everyone wants to be a good person, so everyone should give 10% of their income to charity.

My argument needs to establish that someone is a good person if and only if they give 10% of their income to charity. If I can establish this point, and if it is true that all people want to be good, then all people must give 10% of their income in order to be good.

There are other ways that philosophers can argue their points. For example, the author might use thought experiments, definitions, or from the rejection of another philosopher's argument. Pay attention to these because they often do more work than just illustrating a point.

Look for signposts that signal important moves in a philosophical argument. Such words are *because, since, given this argument, thus, therefore, hence, it follows that, consequently, nevertheless, however, but, in the first case, and on the other hand*. For example, one philosophy article might run as follows:

Hume argues against Locke's conception of consciousness based on the following points... Locke could respond that Hume misses a couple of points... Locke's response contains a few errors, such as, one, that, ... Two, ... However...

The connector words "following," "response," "one," "two" provide directions for the paper that you are reading. You should try to incorporate these whenever possible in your own writing.

The second time through, read more slowly and start asking questions

Once you've skimmed the article and gotten a feel for the language and the key words, and can begin to formulate the author's argument, it's time to go back and carefully re-read the article.

Look more closely for those signpost words. They will probably indicate not only the overall argument, but how individual pieces such as definitions fit.

Write down each of those definitions. They will probably come in handy

Are there distinctions that the author makes (from other authors, between words, etc.)

Are there distinctions that the philosopher fails to make?

Are there assumptions or stereotypes the author is relying on?

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You might be the type that likes diagrams. Can you draw a conceptual map of the flow of the argument once you've mapped out the key words? How do the thoughts connect with one another?

The point the first couple times through is to begin to formulate questions, even if they are just of the "Wow, I never thought someone could be so confused about the mind. How could Descartes possibly think that the pineal gland is the seat of the soul? What kind of soul could he be talking about? Is he talking about a religious soul? What happens to the soul when we die? Does it just kinda detach itself from the gland and float away?" The next step is to answer those questions on your own.

Start Analyzing the Argument

Once you've worked through the bigger questions that come out of reading the text (the littler ones can form a Master's thesis in a few years), then you're in a better position to evaluate the argument put forward. Make sure you understand that argument first and then ask yourself if you agree or disagree with the argument. If you find that you're disagreeing with the author because she is putting forward a position that makes no sense at all, then you might have missed a thing or two about the author's argument. You need to get those down before you proceed. If you disagree with the author, even though he has a compelling argument, then you need to state why you disagree. Not every paper has to disagree with the philosopher; a lot of good papers have been written that agree with the philosopher but maybe point out a thing or two that the philosopher might have skipped over. Whether you agree or disagree, you need to be very specific as to why you agree or disagree. Do the conclusions not follow from the argument? Are the definitions flawed/missing something? Are there implicit assumptions that force the reader to question the soundness of the argument?

Often these arguments are disastrous webs of interconnected ideas and trying to understand everything the philosopher put forward would be a nearly impossible task. Even if you could, you wouldn't be able to put everything you have learned in a single paper. Don't worry about trying to understand everything. You should be shooting for understanding what you take to be the main point of the argument, that is, how the argument all hangs together. You might only need to understand a small portion of the argument for your paper, but you should still be able to articulate the overall structure of the argument.

Discuss the issues with others

Now that you've got a handle on the argument, you should be able to explain it to other people, and not just people in your class, but ANY other person that has or has not taken a philosophy course. This is the next step in understanding: being able to put it into your own words. If you find that you are saying "you know what I mean" a lot

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when describing a philosophical position, then you need to work harder getting the argument clear. You will find that these arguments are even more complicated than they first appear. Once you are able to articulate the position, then you are able to write an outline. That will come later. In the next section we're going to look at some tools commonly used to analyze arguments.

Panic Mode

So you don't exactly have three weeks to read and re-read the material. No problem. You still need to read it to have a general overview of what the philosopher is talking about and you still need to know the main idea. Look at all the instances where the philosopher mentions the concept you want to deal with, the veil of ignorance for example, and look at the concepts around that concept. Are there other things that the philosopher continually mentions right after or before the concept you are dealing with? You are probably going to need to explain those concepts: what are they and how do they relate? Is the veil of ignorance used to explain something else? Is something else used to justify the veil of ignorance? These are questions you should be asking yourself as you read along. If you find that one section of a work doesn't seem to make sense with another section that you already read, go back to that first section and read it over. You might have just found the perfect essay topic.

What to Look for in a Philosophy Paper

Oftentimes, the best approach is to continually ask questions when you are reading the paper. What is the main point the author is talking about? What are the key terms the author refers to again and again? How do these different iterations of the terms highlight differences and progressions in the text? The best papers I've written come out of a basic question like, "he says this here, but it seems different than something a few pages ago. How can he reconcile these points?" Asking this will usually lead into identifying and clarifying the key terms. A big step along the way to understanding and being able to identify the main point of the paper is to ask questions.

Logic

This is definitely one of the more ambiguous and difficult areas to pin down. When we are looking for the logic of the argument, we are looking at the relationship between the claims and the evidence used to support those claims. Often philosophers are taking us on a short journey. They usually tell us the destination before getting there and they also point out features of the trip on the way there. We are looking for is the argument as abstracted from the more thorough treatment that the author would give. In this way, a longer paper can be summarized in just a few lines, a syllogism perhaps. Putting the argument in your own words will help this process along.

In philosophy, you need to look at the relationship between the different parts of the argument. If I say that George Bush was a bad president, it is not enough that everyone

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just nods their head in agreement. In philosophy we ask *why?*, why was George Bush a bad president? If I then say that he was just obviously a bad president, then that's not good enough; I need to put forward evidence that he was a bad president. If I say that George Bush was a bad president because he attacked Iraq under the pretence of weapons of mass destruction but he didn't verify whether they actually had those weapons, and if I say that a president is bad who doesn't verify information before acting on it, then I have offered evidence to support my claim that George Bush was a bad president. I have defined what a bad president is. I have offered evidence to say that George Bush satisfies the requirements of a bad president. And I have stated my claim that George Bush is a bad president based on the evidence I have put forward. That argument could take this form, a typical syllogism:

Premise 1 Any president who acts based on insufficient evidence is a bad president.
Premise 2 George Bush acted on insufficient evidence when he attacked Iraq
Conclusion George Bush was a bad president.

The argument states a definition, shows how a particular entity fills that definition, and then draws a conclusion from that definition and application.

In philosophy papers, you not only need to look for the argument, but you need to look for the evidence of the argument. The more evidence you can find for a claim, the stronger the claim will be and the greater the likelihood that your counterarguments will be valid and persuasive.

Two Types of Argument:

An argument is *deductive* if it claims that the conclusion must be true if the premises are true. The conclusion is, therefore, guaranteed by the truth of the premises. For example, "Two million and thirty-seven lottery tickets were sold for Wednesday's drawing. I bought two tickets. So my chance of winning Wednesday is 2 in 2 000 037." An argument is deductively valid if it is deductive and if the truth of the premises would make it necessary that the conclusion is also true. In other words, an argument is deductively valid if it is deductive and if it cannot be the case that the premises are true and the conclusion is false. The following argument is deductively valid:

Premise 1 If I eat popcorn for dinner then it will rain tomorrow.
Premise 2 I am eating popcorn for dinner.
Conclusion It will rain tomorrow.

The argument is deductive because it claims certainty for the conclusion, and it is valid because its conclusion would have to be true if the premises were true. When you evaluate an argument for deductive validity, you do not yet check for the truth of the premises.

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An argument is *nondeductive* or *inductive* if it claims only a high degree of probability for the conclusion. An inductive argument, then, allows for some doubt of the truth of the conclusion, and it bases its claim of accuracy on the very good chance that its premises are correct. For example, "All cats that I have ever seen will eat mice. Jake is a cat. Therefore, Jake will probably eat mice."

Nondeductive arguments make claims in their conclusions that go beyond the evidence of the premises. If I claim, for example, that "since my chances of winning the lottery are 2 million to 1, then I will probably lose the lottery," then I am making a nondeductive argument because I am claiming only the probability, not the certainty, of my conclusion. An argument is nondeductively valid if it is nondeductive and if the truth or high probability of its premises make the conclusion highly probable also.

The reasoning in the following argument would be valid, and the argument would be called a valid one, even though one of the premises is false.

Since all historically important philosophers have been Germans, and any German is an extremely systematic thinker, all historically important philosophers have been extremely systematic thinkers.

The argument is valid because if the premises were true, then the conclusion would have to be true.

To decide whether an argument is sound (and thus whether the conclusion should be accepted), you must determine whether it passes both of the following tests:

1. the argument must be valid
2. All premises must be true

Test 1 requires that the evidence actually prove the conclusion. Test 2 requires that the evidence be reliable evidence. Obviously, when the reliable evidence proves the conclusion, that conclusion should be accepted as true. The argument has both a good inference (it has passed the first test) and good evidence (it has passed the second test). If the argument fails either test, it is unsound.

Premises

When we talk about conclusions and premises, we are talking about the claim the author is making and the evidence used to support that claim. Evidence and premises function in similar ways, if not in identical ways.

Here is an example that concludes with the statement that "Abortions are immoral."

- Premise 1 All physicians take the Hippocratic Oath that states that they should not harm their patient.
- Premise 2 To kill a living being is to harm that being.

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Conclusion Abortion is immoral

But the argument could take a different form:

- Premise 1 All physicians take the Hippocratic Oath that states that they should not harm their patient.
Premise 2 Occasionally, such as when the patient's life is in jeopardy, the physician must perform the lesser of harms.
Premise 3 There are some occasions when abortion is a moral act.

The trick with a lot of philosophical arguments is to provide enough context that will concretize your argument without providing too much context so that the argument only stands within that context. In the above example, the first argument is a universal claim that provides little context. Because of this, the argument is susceptible to a series of attacks from multiple angles that seek to contextualize the argument and thereby refute the argument because it leads to absurd conclusions. In the second situation, the conclusion is a much weaker statement but provides greater applicability to a given situation. In both cases, it is important to know the scope and context in which you want your conclusion to function.

Fallacies

Writers commit fallacies when they use certain unreliable patterns of reasoning to argue for their conclusions.

The *fallacy of the Straw Man* is committed whenever we attack a misrepresentation of someone's position or argument. For example, saying that someone can't be a good hairdresser because they're bald.

A *false dilemma* is created when an author puts forward two possible situations as the only possible situations when there exists a third possibility. For example, either it will rain today or it will rain tomorrow. It is possible that neither one is true. A real dilemma is that either it will rain today or it will not rain today.

The *fallacy of common belief* is committed when an author puts forward a statement as true because everyone believes it to be true. For example, it was once obvious to everyone that the world was flat.

The *fallacy of two wrongs make a right* is committed when an author justifies an action based on the fact that someone else committed the wrong action too. For example, It's alright that Jeff steals because Mary steals too.

The *fallacy of slippery slope* is committed when the author says that a situation should be avoided because it will inevitably result in further, unwanted conclusions. Marijuana,

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for example, is often considered the “gateway drug” that will necessarily lead to using crack and heroin.

The *fallacy of contrary-to-fact hypothesis* is committed when an author makes a claim about what would be different today if an event in the past had not have happened. For example, arguing that the world would be a better place today if Hitler never lived. It might be the case that someone worse than Hitler could have rose to power and caused more destruction than Hitler.

The *fallacy of questionable cause* is committed when an author makes a claim without sufficient evidence of the cause for that claim. For example, saying that the postal service is a horrible organization because I didn’t get my mail today.

The *fallacy of evidence suppression* is committed by an author when they intentionally hold back evidence that might weaken his or her point. This is similar to a defence attorney intentionally withholding evidence that would incriminate the client.

Criticising an Argument

There are many, many ways that a philosophical argument, or any argument for that matter, can be criticised. Here are just a few. You will notice, however, that even if there are problems with an argument, there are always things that can be learned from these philosophers. To dismiss a philosophy completely because of an error would be an uncharitable and unhelpful reading of that philosopher. Even with your criticism, always try to draw out the positive from a particular philosophy.

1) The argument doesn’t accomplish its aims

If an argument starts out with very clear intentions, but never actually achieves those results, then you have a solid basis for criticism. Descartes’ attempt to provide a solid foundation for the sciences is never achieved because there are problems with his argument that introduce a crack in his foundation.

2) The argument’s internally contradictory

Sometimes an author will make a point in one section of the writing and then completely contradict himself in another section. A close reading of those sections will draw out this contradiction. Criticising the author using this method would show exactly what the criticism is and potentially how the criticism could have arisen.

3) The argument’s premises are false

It might be the case that a philosopher simply has certain facts wrong. If those facts are wrong then it might be the case that the conclusion does not follow. A charitable reading would scrutinize those facts to ensure that their truthfulness is essential for the argument. In other words, can the argument stand without those facts being correct?

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4) The argument has assumptions, whether justified or not

A very patient and careful reading of the text will nearly always reveal certain assumptions that the philosopher relies on. This often takes the form of relying on the work of previous philosophers. For example, Descartes relies on the scholastic distinction between material, formal, and objective reality. Is this a fair assumption? Is this assumption unquestioned? Does his argument rely on a justification of this assumption? There isn't a lot that hangs on this distinction, but there are other assumptions that Descartes makes, such as the hierarchy of being. If this assumption is unjustified then it will create a lot more problems for Descartes' argument. It is not enough to identify the assumption; the importance of the assumption must be spelled out. As with other criticisms, if there is a charitable reading of the text that allows the author to avoid this criticism, then that reading should be stated.

In all of the above cases, nothing can take the place of careful, attentive reading. Only a careful and thorough reading of the text can provide the type of insight that characterize great philosophy papers.

Panic Mode

When we talk about the logic of the paper, we are talking about the relationships between the concepts. There is going to be some sort of starting point for the philosopher, something they want to explain or justify or perhaps they are arguing for a change in the world, such as what animal rights defendants argue for. The key is to see the starting point and the conclusion and then fill in the details of the argument. For example, an animal rights activist might argue that it is unfair to extend rights to all humans but not to animals. They start from the position that humans have rights because they can suffer and they need protection from other humans. Then they state that animals suffer, therefore animals should have some of the rights humans have. This is all based on a compassionate standpoint. Ask yourself: what is the main concept I want to explain? How does that concept relate to other concepts? Does it contradict something else the author says? Is it a conclusion? a premise? or is it evidence for a larger claim? These are logical questions.

Making an Outline

An outline is basically the blueprint of the paper. In the outline, you should clearly identify what your thesis is and the evidence you will use in order to support that thesis. But there is more to it. When you are working on an outline, you get to see the logical progression of your paper. You might have a set of fantastic points, but they won't

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make a lot of sense unless they are in an order that makes them make sense. At this point you need to ask yourself if one point needs to go ahead of another point. For example, it would not make sense to put the following argument in this order:

This shape is a rectangle
All squares are rectangles
This shape is a square

But if you put it in this order then the argument makes sense.

All squares are rectangles
This shape is a square
This shape is a rectangle

As a more concrete example, you wouldn't say that Hobbes and Rousseau are both talking about the same sort of social contract without first defining what each of them mean by the social contract.

By creating an outline, you will be able to envision the entire paper before you write the first draft. This will help you avoid that "um, what do I need to do next?" question that keeps popping up while you're writing the paper. Creating an outline before you start writing enables your mind to give the full attention to each paragraph as you write the paragraph. Below is an example of an outline.

Opening paragraph

Thesis statement

Main points to be argued for in support of the thesis statement

Point one

Point two

Point three

Definitions

Are there any technical terms that need to be defined before you get into your argument? Put them up front, just after your introductory paragraph.

First Main point

First subordinate idea

Evidence: Reason, example, illustration

Detail supporting reason (exposition)

Second Subordinate idea

Reason, example, illustration

Detail supporting reason (exposition)

Second Main point

First subordinate idea

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- Evidence: Reason, example, illustration
Detail supporting reason (exposition)
- Second Subordinate idea
 - Reason, example, illustration
 - Detail supporting reason (exposition)
- Third Main point
 - First subordinate idea
 - Evidence: Reason, example, illustration
 - Detail supporting reason (exposition)
 - Second Subordinate idea
 - Reason, example, illustration
 - Detail supporting reason (exposition)
- Closing Paragraph
 - Restatement of Thesis
 - Restatement of main points supporting the thesis
 - Implications of this argument for future research

This kind of outline can be abbreviated by using only one piece of evidence for each main point. Keep in mind also that an essay doesn't need to have exactly three main points. Many a good essays have been written with as little as one main point and with as many as five or six. How many points you have will depend on the length of the paper. If you are writing a 250 word essay, then there shouldn't be more than one or two points. If you are writing a 15 page paper, then there should be at least two points. It is more important in philosophy to have one point explained very thoroughly than five points only superficially explained.

Panic Mode

If you have time, you should still think about writing an outline. This will help you quickly answer the questions of what is my point? and how am I going to explain it? and what is the next thing I need to look at? These are questions you should be constantly asking yourself. Having an outline answers these questions for you and makes your job easier. It doesn't take long to do and can be as detailed or as rough as you like; whatever works for you.

Writing the Philosophy Paper

Before you begin

Writing a philosophy paper begins long before your fingers hit the keys, long before you sit down to write the first draft. The best way to write a solid philosophy paper is to ensure that you've understood the material, and the best way to do that is to make sure that you take a lot of thorough notes while you are reading the text. Oftentimes those notes are cut and pasted into a draft of the paper. The more thorough the notes, whether they just be interesting quotes, paraphrases, or rough ideas, the better your paper is going to be.

There is one really important thing to keep in mind while you are thinking about writing your paper: Do not think you need to know everything about the philosopher. You are probably new at this stuff. The people you are reading have been doing it for a very long time and probably have a few different books under their belt. In order to understand everything they are talking about, you would have to spend a lifetime reading this stuff. There are people that do this so that you don't have to early in your academic career. For your paper this means that you only need to describe a small handful of ideas and show how they relate to each other rather than trying to cover everything in one 1250 word paper. If you tried to encapsulate everything that the author is saying based on a few pages from one of her books, then chances are you're going to miss something. It's better to show that you understand the text first and then come up with a brief criticism later.

If you think that you need to provide a substantial attack on the philosopher, then I'd say you're setting your goals a little too high. Instead, just showing that you know what's going on and how the pieces fit together is a better mindset to get yourself in before you start. Many of my own papers began to take shape once the writing process got going and not before. You don't know exactly how each point is going to develop so allow yourself the opportunity to explore ideas. The outline is good for being able to conceptualize the whole essay, but be prepared to throw it out if it's not working with the thoughts you are following. Keep in mind, though, that it can be dangerous to follow thoughts too far—you can end up on a pretty serious tangent that is barely related to the main idea you began with. If you are going to allow yourself to explore an idea that you hadn't thought about in advance, then be prepared to go back and edit your paper afterwards so that you can tell the reader in advance where you are going. Avoiding doing this would be like telling someone to come on a trip and then blindfolding them half-way through and yanking them along without telling them what's going on. If you keep the blindfolds off and keep telling the reader where you're going,

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then they're probably going to be inclined to want to explore the new territory with you.

Rough draft

After you've compiled all of your notes, brought your ideas together in an outline with some relevant quotes, then you'll be ready to sit down and work through a draft of your paper. You don't need to write a final copy the first time you write so don't be too worried about making sure the wording is correct—the best papers are the ones that are edited heavily and not the ones that are written in one sitting.

Beginning your paper

Introduction

There are basically two types of introductions: the formal/straightforward and the rhetorical. The rhetorical is difficult to do and even harder to describe, so the majority of this section will be focused on the formal/straightforward. The words "formal/straightforward" are not meant to be a criticism of this approach. In fact, it is to be preferred a lot of the time. Your professor and/or TA will probably be marking at least a few dozen and as many as 300 of these papers; the easier you can make it for them to read and understand your argument (i.e. by being straightforward with the reader and telling them upfront what's going on and how you're going to do it) the more likely they will be to understand your point and make it easier for them to understand your paper.

The first line of your **formal paper** should answer the question: "why are you writing this paper?" And a sufficient answer isn't "because my prof told me to." Seriously ask yourself why you think it's important that you write this paper. Not every paper will be able to answer this with a great deal of gravity, and some papers will not have much to say about this at all, but this is something you should be striving for. An example of a good opening sentence could be, "Kant's schematism has either been simply misunderstood or intentionally misinterpreted." At this point the reader knows exactly what the paper is about and has a context to situate the essay that will follow. The reader can very readily answer her own question of "what is this paper about?" with "the understanding of Kant's schematism." That's the kind of clarity your opening should have.

All philosophy papers have a clear introduction and a clear conclusion with a narrow scope for each. Please don't try to use the hourglass approach of really broad opening sentences, narrowing midsection, and broad conclusions. Papers that begin with sentences like "Throughout all of history..." don't tell the reader what the paper is

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about—they are trying to hook the reader in by telling the reader about the importance of the topic by overselling the topic. The reader just wants to know what your paper is about, they don't need to be sold on why they should read the paper. Try to avoid dictionary definitions as well. They can be helpful, but only if there is some specific language of the definition that you want to use. Often non-philosophical dictionaries just state the obvious and don't really do much philosophical work, thus resulting in a misuse of valuable introductory space. The best hook is just telling the reader what you're writing about and why it's important.

As a simple fall back strategy, you can use a very formal structure that helps the reader to anticipate the structure and main points of your paper by explicitly stating what those points will be. In philosophy, we generally don't have a deep appreciation for papers that have plot twists or different narrative structures that would make something that could be boring more interesting; these ideas are complex enough on their own and using complex structures will only make the papers more confusing. To write this kind of formal introduction to your paper, make two things clear to the reader in the very first paragraph: precisely what your thesis is and how you intend to support it. Whatever method you use, ensure that the reader knows what the paper is about, where you are going, and how you are going to get there. When in doubt, write formally. For example:

Thomas Hobbes and John Locke are two philosophers that discuss the emergence of a political society out of the state of nature. Though these are not the only two philosophers to deal with the state of nature, they are contemporaries and their divergent views are worth comparing. The purpose of this paper will be to explore Hobbes and Locke's version of the state of nature on the following three points...

Somewhere near the beginning of your paper, you should define the terms that you are using. This is a good way of demonstrating that you understand the material and have put some of your own thought into putting the argument in your own words.

An alternative approach is the **rhetorical paper**. This type of paper is different than the formulaic paper described above and, in a way, does not have such a clear-cut description. This is especially hard to do in a short paper of a few pages, but a longer paper of 15-20 pages, for example, allows for some flexibility and will actually help to maintain the reader's attention. This kind of approach usually emerges after seeing a particular way to describe a theory or idea that requires an approach different from the formulaic one above. For example, a good way of explaining Kant's schematism is through understanding impressionistic paintings, such as the work of Seurat. This analogical form of a paper is not going to have exactly the same structure as the formulaic one, but it will have some of the same features, such as the emphasis on demonstrating the main ideas or concepts. You should be careful with papers like this, however, because some professors might not be so amenable to them. It's best to check with your professor before writing or handing in a paper like this. You can check

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in by submitting a rough copy of your introduction for some feedback long before the paper's actually due.

The Body of the Paper

The body of the paper is everything between the opening and closing paragraphs. The body should include all the information necessary to support your argument. If you require additional information to support your argument, then that information should be clearly referenced.

If you have clearly outlined the steps necessary for proving your thesis in your introduction, then the body of the paper should be just a matter of going through the motions to explain how each of the pieces fit.

Each section within the body of your paper should be a self-contained unit. It might be the case that your paper requires three steps, each of which has three smaller steps. Each step or idea should be its own self-contained paragraph. A person should be able to pick a paragraph at random and understand everything within the paragraph as a complete idea. If there is too much information within a paragraph then the paragraph will be confusing, likewise if there is not enough information. The body of your paper should begin by focusing on exposition and evaluation.

Exposition and Evaluation

This should take up the bulk of your paper. It can be a bit of a daunting task to think that you need to fill up five or six pages of space with something that be explained relatively simply. But the point here is not to explain something, but to provide evidence for the thing that you are trying to explain. It is a putting on display of the evidence that you used to support your thesis. When you put something on display, you don't want to just show it to the reader, but you want to talk about the details of it and explain why it is relevant to you. In like manner, you should be able to explain how each thing you have is relevant and necessary for proving your point.

When you are summarizing an argument, make sure to simplify the argument as much as possible. This does not mean that you should make a caricature of the other's position (this is called a *straw man argument* in philosophy and is a pretty bad fallacy), but it means that you should try to explain the philosopher's position in as simple language as possible. Does the argument follow a series of steps that are indicated by transition words (see below)? If you've identified the transitions in the argument, then you can likely replicate the structure of the argument and the path that the argument is on.

Part of the work, oftentimes the majority of the work, is identifying and defining the key terms. In an exposition and summary paper, you should be focusing on the key terms and how they relate to each other.

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If there is a point that is unclear in your reading, don't attempt to avoid it by focusing on a less relevant point; it might be the case that the philosopher is unclear and that you are exposing a problem in their work, but it might also be the case that you haven't quite been attentive enough to the text. By writing out the problem and working through the response, you might find that the problem wasn't really a problem after all. This work is not done in vain because this type of exploratory, exegetical work makes for a great paper.

I keep stating the same thing again and again, but it is absolutely imperative that you understand the philosophy that you are discussing. Sometimes this understanding comes about through the writing about the philosopher, but you do need to have a solid starting point of understanding before you can begin criticizing the philosophy.

To criticize a paper well, you have to make sure that you understand what the position of the philosopher is and not just what the position sounds like. Oftentimes students make the mistake of arguing against a particular position that sounds like the position that the philosopher holds because the student hasn't done enough work trying to understand the position itself but immediately places that position under another, more easily argued against position. There are some things to keep in mind when you're criticizing the theory:

1. Make sure you get the theory exactly right, not just sort of right. If you ever have to say "yea, but you know what I mean" then there is something that you've written which is certainly unclear. Take some time, think about it, maybe say it out loud, and then write down what you've just said. Sometimes an audio recorder can help in this respect.
2. If you think that the philosopher is arguing for a position that is obviously wrong, then it's likely the case that you don't understand the philosopher. The people that have been read for generations have likely been read for generations because they are incredibly intelligent and, very likely, because they avoid making gigantic errors in their writing. It is much better to think that the gigantic error is one of understanding than one of ineptitude on the philosopher's part. Try to look for evidence why they might be making a claim that seems outrageous rather than simply criticizing the outrageous claim.
3. You can avoid arguing against outrageous claims that are false by ensuring that you spend a lot of time demonstrating the structure of the argument in your own paper. Once you've done that then you'll be in a better position to criticize the argument.
4. Don't think that you need to explain everything that you know about a particular philosopher or theory; you should only be explaining the points that are relevant to your paper. Too much detail will bog the reader down and your point will be lost somewhere in the process. Focus on the points that are specifically relevant

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to your main point, avoiding things like biographical or contextual information that is unnecessary.

Anticipate objections

Possible objections to the point of view which you are arguing for should be considered. You should show why these objections are not fatal to your position. It is important to make the objections against your position as plausible as possible. For instance, if you object to some philosopher's view, don't assume he would immediately admit defeat. Use what you know about the author's general position to construct a reply that is consistent with other things the author has said, as well as with the author's original argument.

If you think of an objection to your own position but then fail to include it, it might be the case that the reader will immediately recognize the objection and think that your paper has not adequately addressed competing views (a serious downfall of any philosophy paper). You might be able to deal with the objection in just a few lines. This is much better than not dealing with it at all.

One thing that is dreaded in philosophy is the objection that refutes our position. However, in philosophy papers this is not nearly as fatal as it may seem at first. If you find a knock-down objection to your argument then you can do one of two things: you can conclude that your original argument did not hold up to the criticism, and state this very clearly in your conclusion, or you can swap arguments and take the knock-down objection as your argument and use your original argument as the objection to your argument. Either one of these approaches is much better than trying to disguise or ignore an argument.

If you find that an objection actually is fatal to your position, don't worry, just rework your paper and start arguing for the other position and use your initial position as your objection. Your first position will probably now make an excellent objection, but definitely not a fatal one. This will only make your paper stronger.

Make the structure of your paper obvious

The reader of undergraduate philosophy papers don't have a lot of time—they are interested in seeing the ideas that you put forward. Putting those ideas forward in a quagmire of convolution doesn't make the reader happy, so make sure the structure of your paper is obvious from the very first paragraph.

There are ways to make this as easy as possible. For one, you can simply write, "In this paper, I will show that Charles Peirce has a more comprehensive understanding of Pragmatism than does William James. I will do this by first looking at how each author

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defines 'pragmatism' and then look at their points of comparison. Ultimately, we will see that Peirce's definition has wider applicability than James' definition does." From here we can clearly see what the structure of the paper is going to look like:

1. Introduction
2. Peirce on 'pragmatism'
3. James on 'pragmatism'
4. Similarities
5. Differences
6. Conclusion

This is the kind of simplicity that your reader is looking for. Make the structure obvious and don't worry about being boring.

Transitions

When you are moving from one point to another point, make sure that the reader is aware of this. The simplest way of doing this is to state it clearly: "we have dealt with the first main objection and now we will move on to the second main objection." It can be as simple as that. In each instance, you are informing your reader that there is a shift in argument taking place and that your reader should anticipate another point that is being addressed. This also provides a good opportunity to refer back to your thesis. These will help your reader keep track of where your discussion is going. Be sure you use these words correctly! If you say "P. Thus Q." then you are claiming that P is a good reason to accept Q. You had better be right. If you aren't, we'll complain. Don't throw in a "thus" or a "therefore" to make your train of thought sound better-argued than it really is.

There are transition terms and phrases that make the structure of your paper glaringly obvious. Here are a few examples:

First let's look at...

In advance of dealing with the structure of the paper, there are a few key terms that need to be defined....

By the preceding quote, I understand that the philosopher means ...

My position can be defended by focusing on ...

The Conclusion

Similar to the two types of opening paragraphs, there are two types of closing paragraphs. If you started with the formal, then you should end with the formal, and likewise for the non-formal approach.

The formal conclusion mirrors the structure of the opening paragraph insofar as it restates the thesis and outlines the main points of your argument. This could be done as simply and straightforwardly as stating something like, “In this paper we have focused on two different theoretical perspectives with respect to euthanasia, those of deontology and consequentialism. Ultimately, we concluded that deontology had a more robust response to the issue of euthanasia, focusing on the freedom of the individual and the duty of the doctor. ...” You should also be able to show some of the implications for your idea. For example, if your thesis has implications for Locke’s theory of knowledge then it probably has implications for Hume’s theory of knowledge. Point the reader in this direction without necessitating a full explanation of this. The other type, the informal, doesn’t not obey the same structure as the formal, but it should still include a reformulation of your thesis, your main points, and possible implications of this reading. Although informal, you still want to summarize your work for the reader.

Concision of Explanation

In a philosophy paper, it is very difficult to determine the exact amount of information that is necessary for making your point. Too much information and you will drown your reader in unnecessary details. Too little information and your reader will finish without understanding your point. The only sure-fire way to ensure that your reader understands your point is to provide just enough detail for your point. You can do this by following a few simple steps:

1. Introduce your topic—why are you writing the paper you are writing, what is the specific point you are trying to make. Keep the answers to these questions in mind when you are writing your paper.
2. Find one or two main concepts or ideas that you want to explain. Any more than this and your paper will likely become too confusing for the reader to keep straight, that is, depending on the length of the paper. A good guideline for concepts to pages is one to five, that is, one concept for every five pages. A six page paper, therefore, could explain one concept well and two concepts only superficially. This is a bit of a conservative estimate; it’s best to keep in mind what the requirements that have been given to you by your professor.
3. Spend some time explaining how that concept fits in with the rest of the work that you’re reading. If you’re reading a large book, such as *The Critique of Pure Reason*, then don’t bother explaining how that concept fits in with the rest of the book; rather, focus on how that concept fits into the section you are focusing on.
4. The last thing, and probably the most important thing, is to explain one thing well rather than a few things incompletely. It is often preferred to show depth rather than breadth of understanding.

Examples and Definitions

This is a bit of a contentious issue: some people say that you should use plenty of examples in your writing. I usually recommend against using examples where straight up definitions and explanations can make your point clearly. Examples can be a problem because of their ambiguity. If you are trying to explain a point based on an experience that you have had, then the point may not clearly explain the point you are making; there may be a difference in the way you understand the situation and the way that the reader will understand the situation. Because of the inherent ambiguities of most examples, I advise students to stay away from using them.

On the contrary, I advise students to use definitions for all the technical vocabulary they use. Definitions are the easiest way to show that you understand what you're writing about. Students often think that definitions are unnecessary because they are obvious, but this is far from the case. A lot of work in philosophy is demonstrating that you understand the concepts you are writing about and the easiest way to do this is to provide a definition. It is often the case that a definition, once stated, will reveal some implicit assumptions that the author is working with. The most fruitful philosophy papers begin by identifying and attempting to rectify those assumptions.

Writing Style

Be consistent in your terminology. Don't worry about switching the language up for the sake of keeping your reader's attention; philosophers like things to remain as consistent as possible. On top of that, by switching up technical terminology, you might change the meaning of your exposition without intentionally doing so. For example, if you start talking about Kant's "concept" and then start talking about his "idea," you are talking about two completely different things and they should remain separate.

I will talk more about this later, but be careful with the language that you are quoting. If you don't know what a term or quote means, then do not use it. It becomes quite obvious to the reader if you do not know what a particular term or quote means because the explanation of that term or quote is not sufficient. It is better to leave the term/quote out than to use it improperly. However, the best thing you can do is to spend some time really understanding what the term/quote means in order to demonstrate that you understand it fully. This is usually a problem that people from outside philosophy have when they enter into philosophy: other disciplines are not quite as strict as philosophy when it comes to explaining ideas clearly. For example, if you don't know what "phenomenology" means, then don't start talking about the "phenomenology of x." That said, you don't need to know the difference between

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Husserlian and Sartrean phenomenology in order to employ the term, but you should be able to explain the meaning of your term in one or two simple sentences.

I often tell my students to write like a 5 year old. By this I mean that they should try to write as simply and clearly as possible. I constantly have people coming in to me with really complicated papers and they think that their sentences need to be complicated in order to sound “academic.” But this is patently false. The clearer you write, the better you write. Often you will encounter philosophers who are confusing and, ultimately, not clear in their writing. Do not try to copy these people because you think that that’s what it takes in order to sound smart; these thinkers are famous despite their shortcomings as writers, not because of those shortcomings. Always strive to be clear before sounding smart.

Some people say that you shouldn’t use the first person in academic papers. That depends. It depends on whether the use of the first person takes the form of “I think that...” or “I believe that...” When people write like this, the reader immediately begins questioning whether the claims being asserted should be accepted because the author says it’s so. When you’re writing a paper, the “I think” or “I believe” statements are often implicit in every sentence you write. It wouldn’t make sense to include it at the beginning of every sentence, so it doesn’t really make much sense to include it at all. Often these terms are used as apologetics for someone making a point that they don’t really have solid evidence to make. As a consequence, the thoughtful reader will pinpoint these areas as being insufficiently defended and immediately begin criticising the argument for a lack of evidence. There are, however, situations where the use of the personal pronoun is perfectly acceptable. For instance, if the author is highlighting steps that are going to be taken in the essay, then saying something such as “In this paper, I will argue that...” is perfectly acceptable. This takes a much different form than the apologetic “I think that...” and thus the latter should be avoided.

Students often complain about feeling like they are making the same point over and over without really adding anything new. I advise those students to group those points together and to see if there’s a better way of structuring the paper. If you feel that you are making the same point over and over, there are probably important differences in the way that you are emphasizing the point that should be brought out more clearly. For example, if you are constantly stating that Descartes’ argument is circular, but that this usually functions as a conclusion for each one of your points, then it would be helpful to turn that structure around so that you begin by stating that Descartes’ argument is circular and then providing numerous reasons of why this is the case. It is often helpful to create a list for the reader to follow through using numbers such as “Descartes’ argument is circular for four reasons. 1).... 2).....” Making the structure abundantly apparent to the reader will only increase the chances that the reader will understand your point and thus increase your grade.

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Be careful with connectives that signal a transition in your argument. *Therefore, thus, hence*, etc. are very important words because they signal that you are drawing a conclusion out of your argument. It must be clear to your reader by the time she gets to these concluding statements that you are making an argument that requires a concluding statement. If you just use these concluding statements without providing the necessary framework in advance, then the reader will be confused and not really sure what evidence is being put forward; the result is a confused and unconvinced reader.

It is very important that we can show that we understand both sides. However, in your paper, you should take a side; take a stance on the abortion issue, for example. If you think that both pro-life and pro-choice arguments are good, then say so. But do not say that you will “examine the issue” in your paper. Take a stand and defend it. It’s not necessary that you actually believe in the position that you are arguing for, but it’s necessary that you clearly understand the position you are arguing for. Is there a particular aspect of the pro-life argument that is especially strong, so much so that the pro-choice advocates can’t adequately respond? Then make sure you make that the thrust of your paper.

Don’t make the essay personal. If you disagree with the pro-choice side but don’t have an adequate means of addressing their concerns other than to say “you’re just wrong” then you are going to write a bad philosophy paper. What matters is what you put down on the page and not what you believe. Similarly, don’t use words like “philosopher x is *obviously* wrong” and then take the point as given and move on. You need to demonstrate that you understand why you think philosopher x is wrong. Simply stating something that you think is obvious without providing the background support for such a claim is philosophically uninteresting.

Make sure that you don’t make claims that you can’t support. If you use words such as “always” or “never” then you’re going to have a much tougher time proving your point than if you say “often” or “very rarely.” Once you make these concessions, you might find that the point that you’re trying to make isn’t actually all that interesting in the end because it relies on your own set of assumptions that cannot be philosophically proven. For example, you might be tempted to say that “all Fords are bad cars.” In order to prove this point, you would have to examine all fords that ever existed or ever will exist. This isn’t to say that it’s impossible to do, but maybe that it’s hard to do in a one-semester course. You might be more inclined to say that “some Fords are bad cars.” At this point you need to ask yourself what the philosophical importance of your claim is and what, if anything, will be added to our knowledge if it is right. The answer is probably not much. Nevertheless, this is a much easier position to argue.

Last, but certainly not least, use common sense when writing your papers. Some people write in such a colloquial manner that their ambiguous language confuses the reader and loses the point. Some people write too formally and their sentences may be long,

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with lengthy and confusing clauses. If you ask what they meant in one of those unclear phrases, they may be able to tell you straightforwardly and immediately. These people need to write more like they talk. Write like you're explaining it to your mother or someone completely outside the field. I think to myself, "how would I explain this to someone who doesn't know anything about the topic?" That usually gives me a pretty good starting point. Strive for a paper that is both readable and precise. Say exactly what you mean but say it as clearly as possible. Read something similar to the style that you want to write in. Oftentimes I find myself thinking too close to the language of someone like Heidegger, and I find that there's no ground. I'll go and read Salinger or Orwell and then come back and have all the language that I need. Or, if I want to be really creative, I'll read some Shakespeare.

Some Roadblocks

Many people are unable to begin because they fear their writing won't be good. It's a good idea to start off with the knowledge that your first draft won't be perfect. That way, you won't have any pressure to write a masterpiece.

There are a couple of assumptions that you need to avoid. One, that you can write a good paper without doing multiple drafts. That is just not correct. Any good paper involves at least three drafts. Two, that you "aren't ready to write yet." There is never a good time to start writing and you won't realize that you are ready to write until you actually sit down and start typing. Sure, there are those situations when you are ready to write and you write down 2000 words in one sitting. But these situations are few and far between and waiting for that kind of inspiration for every paper will only leave you rushed and writing a single draft of something that isn't your best work. By forcing yourself to work early and work hard, you're more likely to be able to get something down on paper that you can work over into something good if you've given yourself enough time.

You might not think that you have anything to argue, but **your interpretation is your argument**. You might think that you're stating the obvious by providing an interpretation of a particular text, and that there isn't anything philosophically important about that interpretation, but oftentimes the best philosophy comes out of a particular interpretation that is taken to a further conclusion. For example, if you think that Aristotle's ethics is best understood by examining what he says about the right act needing to be done at the right time, then this will have implications for the rest of Aristotle's ethics and the rest of his philosophy as a whole. A simple interpretation like this could lead into a larger work on Aristotle's conception of time, something that would be incredibly interesting.

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Freewriting is a technique that just gets you writing. This can be done in an “email” to a friend or just by saying “during the next five minutes I am just going to keep hitting the keys and see what happens.” This is usually a really good way of getting your thoughts out of your head and onto paper, also a really good way to get out of a roadblock. Just by asking yourself, “why am I frustrated by this?” and trying to answer it on paper is a really good strategy. In addition, you can have a separate piece of paper beside you for writing down other thoughts that are interfering with writing your paper—grocery lists, people to call, things to do. Do not underestimate the amount of concentration it requires in order to understand philosophy and to write a paper.

Quotations

Quotations are often helpful but can become overwhelming if overused. Try to keep to one to two quotes per paragraph. If you can summarize the point without quoting then you should, especially for long quotes. Sometimes, however, you want to use the specific language of the philosopher in order to demonstrate an implication of the language used. In these situations, it is incredibly helpful to use quotes, just don’t use more of the passage than is necessary to make your point.

Although you should attempt to paraphrase wherever possible, sometimes you can’t say it better than the philosopher did. In those situations, a direct quote can be helpful. If the quote is longer than three lines of text (not sentences) then the quote should be indented and single-spaced with a line before and after the quote. For example, look at the following quote:

Everything that has its basis in the nature of our powers must be appropriate to, and consistent with, their right employment -- if only we can guard against a certain misunderstanding and so can discover the proper direction of these powers. (Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, APPENDIX TO THE TRANSCENDENTAL DIALECTIC THE REGULATIVE EMPLOYMENT OF THE IDEAS OF PURE REASON)

Whether you are citing someone directly or merely paraphrasing, you should include a citation to the original. Failure to do so could have dire consequences for your success in that course. When in doubt, cite.

You should never use a quote because you don’t really understand the point but it sounds relevant to the argument you are making. Ensure you completely understand a quote before incorporating it into your paper.

Feel free to modify quotes, but ensure that you use parenthetical brackets [] when you do. You might need to reconstruct the quote so that the argument becomes more

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obvious to your reader. That's fine, just make sure that the reader clearly understands that you are modifying a quote.

Paraphrasing and Summarizing

Other than quoting, paraphrasing and summarizing are the best ways to deal with a particular philosopher without the word expense of quoting the philosopher directly. The question then becomes, when should you paraphrase and when should you quote? In all cases, you should likely be summarizing unless there are particular details of the argument, such as particular words, or the particular structure of the argument that are important to talk about. In both cases of paraphrasing and summarizing, be sure to include a reference to the source that your paraphrase or summary comes from.

In both cases of summarizing and paraphrasing, the easiest way to ensure that you are not plagiarizing the source is to take notes while you are writing. You can and should always go back later and ensure that your notes are correct before you hand in your final copy. Taking notes while reading already gets you a step away from the text so that you avoid the pitfall of providing too close of a paraphrase when it is unnecessary.

Paraphrasing involves following the author's arguments very closely, providing a step-by-step explanation of the argument that mirrors the structure but not the content of the argument. Be very careful to change up more than the language; the sentence structure has to be changed in order to avoid plagiarism. Again, this method is important if there are specific details of the argument that you want to make apparent. If you default to this method without thinking of the role of the paraphrase in your overall paper, then it likely will appear as though you do not understand the argument enough to summarize it and move on.

A summary involves a relatively quick synopsis of the argument. Here you will only pick out the most relevant aspects of the argument that are necessary to make your point. This involves really understanding the argument so that you don't provide an inaccurate summary. Summaries are beneficial because they leave lots of room for either making a comparison between authors on a given point or for providing your own analysis of the author's work.

References

Every paper, unless otherwise specified by your professor, should include a references section at the end. There are many, many formats that can be followed and it is best to ask your professor which method she would like you to follow. For the most part, philosophy uses MLA and CMS. There is a lot more that should be said about these formats. For more information, visit <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/>

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Modern Language Association (MLA)

Books:

Lastname, Firstname. *Title of Book*. Place of Publication: Publisher, Year of Publication. Medium of Publication.

Journal Articles:

Author(s). "Title of Article." *Title of Journal* Volume. Issue (Year): pages. Medium of publication.

Chicago Manual of Style (CMS)

Books:

Lastname, Firstname. *Title of book*. Place of publication: Publisher, Year of publication.

Journal Articles:

Lastname, Firstname. "Title of Article." *Title of Journal Volume, Issue* (Year): pages.

Walk away!

The purpose of the whole planning procedure was to ensure that you had enough time to complete the paper properly. One of the most important steps in that process is to allow yourself enough time to walk away from your paper to achieve a more objective viewpoint of the paper. If you've been slamming away at the keyboard for the past 6 hours, the chances that you are going to catch minor grammatical errors are quite slim. I have often spent so much time working on a paper that I've become blind to the minor errors that are so obvious to any other reader. These obvious errors are going to cost you quite a bit if your marker is the first person to catch them. When you've walked away from your paper, go back to the source that you're writing about and reread it. This is a way of ensuring that your translation is accurate and remains faithful to the source and it also makes sure that you haven't made any major errors of misunderstanding. Give yourself at least a day of working on something else, then come back to the paper and look for the small errors first. Read each word carefully so that you don't skip over the small errors. The next step is to ensure that you have said exactly what you wanted to say the exact way you wanted to say it. The only way that you can do this without losing marks for lateness is to ensure that you've budgeted your time appropriately.

Panic Mode

So you don't have time to run through three drafts, or even one for that matter, you need to hammer something out now and then spend some time looking it over once you get a refill on your coffee. But you've got to start somewhere. You need to start writing.

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With your outline in mind, even if it's just as simple as, "I need to explain what Locke says about the state of nature then what Hobbes says and then compare them," now you need to start writing about one of the positions. A very simple formula involves a variation of the following. Opening line: "Hobbes and Locke both talk about the state of nature. This is an idealized position that existed before the current political state." Then comes the thesis: "Though both Hobbes and Locke talk about the state of nature, Hobbes presents a more comprehensive view of what that state is and why we wouldn't want to return to it." Then your evidence: "I will argue this by looking at the following three points of comparison: point one... point two... point three." Then your first point explained, your second point explained, your third point explained, all the while referring back to your thesis, then your conclusion, which is just a restatement of your introductory paragraph with a comment about the implications of your work for contemporary society. For example, maybe something about how contemporary global politics represent a possible return to the state of nature, which, according to Hobbes' account, isn't the greatest place to be. It should sound a little more sophisticated than that, but that gives you an idea of what should happen in the conclusion.

Editing the Philosophy Paper

"Writing," said Jacques Barzun, "is re-writing."

Edit and, when you're done, edit some more!

Editing your paper is probably the single easiest way to boost your mark. The more thorough you are with your editing, the better your paper will become.

- IS the thesis and structure of the paper clearly stated?
- Is the structure organized in the most effective way for getting your readers where you want them to be?
- Is your argument clearly stated up front? Do you offer support for your argument, both from your own analysis and from other authors?
- Do any of your claims require further justification? If so, have you stated what that justification is?
- Is your language clear and efficient? Have you dealt with all potential ambiguities?
- Are you consistent in your own definitions and explanations?
- Are there any major fallacies that you have committed?

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- Why is your argument the most convincing argument? Are there other arguments that should be considered? Why should they be rejected in favour of yours?
- Are there rebuttals to your position? Do you state what those rebuttals are?
- Are there any downfalls of your theory? If there are, what are they? Why is your argument strong enough to outlast these shortcomings?

Be careful in choosing your words. If you said “abortion is murder,” is that the same thing as what happened when the settlers came to North America and murdered the First Nations peoples? Are they the same thing or is there a better way of saying one or the other. Perhaps you mean that abortion is *a form of* murder. Make sure you are clear in what you mean. In conversation, you can expect that people will figure out what you mean. But you shouldn't write this way. Even if your TA is able to figure out what you mean, it's bad writing. In philosophical prose, you have to be sure to say exactly what you mean.

Sometimes the best way to edit a paper is not the most environmentally friendly way to edit the paper: print the paper off and read it in a different context, like at a coffee shop or somewhere different than where the paper was written. The different context might help you identify errors that you previously weren't able to notice.

Read your paper out loud. You can often hear errors that you can't see. Often reading the paper out loud to yourself or to a friend can bring out any leaps of logic, incongruities, digressions and basic presentation problems. This will help you tell whether it all makes sense. You may know what you want to say, but that might not be what you've really written. Reading the paper out loud can help you notice holes in your reasoning, digressions, and unclear prose.

If you can, show your draft to your friends or to other students in the class, and get their comments and advice. I encourage you to do this. Do your friends understand your main point? Are parts of your draft unclear or confusing to them? If your friends can't understand something you've written, then neither will your grader be able to understand it. Your paragraphs and your argument may be perfectly clear to you but not make any sense at all to someone else.

Structure

Pay attention to the structure of your draft. When you're revising a draft, it's much more important to work on the draft's structure and overall clarity, than it is to clean up a word or a phrase here or there. Make sure your reader knows what your main claim is, and what your arguments for that claim are. Make sure that your reader can tell what

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the point of every paragraph is. It's not enough that *you* know what their point is. It has to be obvious to your reader, even to a lazy, stupid, and mean reader.

Look at the structure of the paper, paragraph, sentence. Would the paper have better flow and make more sense if one paragraph was moved up or down? I often find that I write a sentence or two, then a third that really should be placed back between the first and the second. Don't think that just because it comes out of your head in a particular order, that that's the order it should stay in. Logical ordering is something very difficult to come by and I don't know of anyone that maps out the entire thing in their head in perfectly precise order. Be open to following the direction that each argument takes you. The essay should be an exploratory device, something that starts with a question and takes you on a path towards an answer. This is not to say that you should completely let the paper go wherever it wants. You should demonstrate that you have a firm grasp of the concepts and how they relate to each other, but be open to the possibility of being wrong about a particular concept. I often find that, in writing the paper, I come to realizations that I never would have suspected had I not written the concepts down in the way I did.

Go through each paragraph and ask yourself if that paragraph can be easily summed up in one line. If it can't then it's probably too complicated; you probably have too many ideas in one place. You should find that each one of those paragraph summaries either directly corresponds with your introductory paragraph, and hence your thesis statement, or nearly approximates it. You should think of your paper as a pathway somewhere. Each step should be taking you to your goal. If you stop and observe the scenery, you will probably confuse your reader.

Keep asking yourself how each individual line relates to the point of the paragraph and how that relates to the thesis. If you can't answer that very well, then maybe that point is irrelevant and a tangent. Some tangents are relevant, but the majority are side-points that are not necessary in order to understand the point being made.

Now repeat these last steps until you are happy and/or until it is time to hand your paper in!

Panic Mode

So it's 6:30 in the morning, crazy tired, but more crazy than tired, and you just want to get this thing done. It's due in two hours and you doubt you'll even be able to make it to class. Here is the most important point in the final stages: how long can you wait to hit print? If you haven't spent a bunch of time editing as you write, and even if you have, then you're still probably going to have a ton of grammatical errors. When the grader is

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marking your paper, s/he will be immediately turned off of your paper because you used "than" when you should have used "then." Correcting these minor errors goes a long way to showing that you didn't just hammer the paper out the night before, that you took some time with it, and that you are concerned about the final outcome. Spend a little bit of time going over your paper looking at the nitty-gritty details, making sure there are no errors.

Minor Points

Grammar

This section should probably be its own book. There is not enough that could be said about grammar. The best way to deal with grammar is to consult a professional, either through your own school or privately. Writing can always get better, and grammar is usually the best place to start.

Mechanics

Aim to make your papers *less than* or equal to the assigned word limit. Longer papers are typically too ambitious, or repetitious, or full of digressions. Your grade will suffer if your paper has these defects. So it's important to ask yourself: What are the most important things you have to say? What can be left out? But neither should your papers be too short. Don't cut off an argument abruptly. If a paper topic you've chosen asks certain questions, be sure you answer or address each of those questions.

Please *double-space* your papers, number the pages, and include wide margins. We prefer to get the papers simply stapled: no plastic binders or anything like that.

Include your name on the paper. And don't turn in your only copy! (These things should be obvious, but apparently they're not.)

Panic Mode Summary

Once you've got your topic in hand, usually the assignment sheet itself, you should start doing some research. Make sure you know what the assignment is asking: a comparison, a contrast, a summary, or your opinion. Research will either consist of

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reading the text and your notes or, if the professor doesn't specifically say you shouldn't, getting out there and looking at books, journals, online journals, and usually in that order. Read the relevant passages of the texts and start asking yourself if there are problems, inconsistencies, that you see in the text. This is a good starting point. Otherwise, just try and understand the text as best as possible. Once you have written a little bit on the authors, summarizing their positions, then you'll probably be in a better position to criticize those positions.

Start off summarizing those positions by defining the key terms or concepts that are in the assignment. Sometimes you need to define other terms before you can define that key concept. This is good, it shows logical progression in the argument. Ask yourself questions like *what does the concept mean?*, *how is it related to other concepts?*, or *what function does it serve in the argument?* Answering these questions will put you well on your way to a good summary of the paper.

Once you have your summary down, your thesis should become much clearer. Write this down, even if it's just a simple statement such as *philosopher A has a better theory than philosopher B* or *We can learn more from philosopher A's theory than B's*. These simple statements are very beneficial for the reader in understanding your position. Now you need to buttress these claims with evidence from the text, either the textbook, notes, or from secondary sources (assuming you needed to use secondary sources).

By now you should have at least a couple pages of written text. Start shaping this into your paper. You probably don't have enough time for multiple drafts, but don't try to do a one-off either—edit your sentences as you work, keeping in mind your main thesis.

If you find that you don't have enough material, that you've only written a couple paragraphs when you need to write 4-5 pages already, then try broadening your conceptual framework—show how the concept relates to other relevant concepts, what the philosopher is arguing in general, and include some examples. It's not always easy to put the argument in your own words, so try using a metaphor or an illustration to get your point across, but make sure that whatever you use is very clear.

Once you get into comparisons, ask yourself if one position seems more realistic than another? Sometimes positions are created as hypothetical situations used to justify a larger project. Be aware of this and maybe mention that, despite the fact that the position is untenable, it still functions to prove the point the author is making. Perhaps suggest clearer ways that the point could have been made.

Lastly, you need to edit your paper. You need to read it at least a couple of times. Try reading it aloud to yourself or, if you have time, send it to a friend to look over. Print it and make changes that you see fit. The more work you do here, the more polished your work will look and the more respect you will gain from the reader.

How You'll Be Graded

Note: this is the grading procedure found in the Academic Calendar. Below that is something that I found on another site and should NOT be used as an official means for grading papers. The following can be found at <http://www.uoguelph.ca/registrar/calendars/diploma/current/c08/c08-grds-proc.shtml>

080-100 (A) Excellent. An outstanding performance in which the student demonstrates a superior grasp of the subject matter, and an ability to go beyond the given material in a critical and constructive manner. The student demonstrates a high degree of creative and/or logical thinking, a superior ability to organize, to analyze, and to integrate ideas, and a thorough familiarity with the appropriate literature and techniques.

070-079 (B) Good. A more than adequate performance in which the student demonstrates a thorough grasp of the subject matter, and an ability to organize and examine the material in a critical and constructive manner. The student demonstrates a good understanding of the relevant issues and a familiarity with the appropriate literature and techniques.

060-069 (C) Acceptable. An adequate performance in which the student demonstrates a generally adequate grasp of the subject matter and a moderate ability to examine the material in a critical and constructive manner. The student displays an adequate understanding of the relevant issues, and a general familiarity with the appropriate literature and techniques.

050-059 (D) Minimally Acceptable. A barely adequate performance in which the student demonstrates a familiarity with the subject matter, but whose attempts to examine the material in a critical and constructive manner are only partially successful. The student displays some understanding of the relevant issues, and some familiarity with the appropriate literature and techniques.

000-049 (F) Fail. An inadequate performance.

Below is some general information but, as said above, should NOT be understood as being official departmental policy.

Generally, graders focus on answering the following questions:

Is the thesis clearly stated?

Is the structure of the paper clearly laid out?

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Does the paper follow that structure?

Is there a better way to organize the structure?

Is each paragraph clear and coherent?

Does each paragraph make one point or are there many points that are confused?

Is the sentence structure clear and free of major errors?

Are there grammatical errors?

Are there spelling errors?

Do you present the author's position fairly?

Do you present your own position without bias?

Do you support your claims with evidence?

Do you deal with counter-arguments?

Do you understand the author/idea you are writing about?

Are there major errors or omissions in that understanding?

Am I, the reader, convinced?

Not every grader will make ask the same questions, but there will likely be some variation of these questions. The main questions always deal with understanding, thesis, structure, and clarity. These should be the areas that all editors focus on.

Once you've received your grade

Don't approach the grader right away, especially if you are upset about a grade. You will likely say things that you regret later on. Instead, go home, reread the grader's comments, try to see why those specific comments were made. Ask yourself if those comments are fair. If you don't think they are fair, then ask yourself why you don't think they are fair. Stating that the comments aren't fair or the grade isn't fair because you really really wanted to get an A on this paper and you ended up with a C isn't a sufficiently supported argument. If, however, you think the grader missed something, then feel free to approach the grader and ask her to take another look at it. If you are calm and even-tempered in your approach, you'll get a whole lot further than if you are visibly upset and express this to your grader.

Sometimes graders will allow you to rewrite a paper. It should be noted that this is at the discretion of the grader or professor of the course and not something that is automatically granted. If you have been given the opportunity to rewrite a paper, make sure that you work on the entire paper. Though it is often the case that the most glaring errors are the ones that should be corrected for the purposes of writing a better paper, there are always more errors than were specifically pointed out by the grader. Going above and beyond the grader's remarks will ensure that the grade will improve. To achieve this, start fresh with the paper, don't just try to edit out small mistakes. If

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you've written a paper that has received a low mark, you would do well to rewrite the paper, using your original paper as a rough draft.

Sources:

Seech, Zachary. *Writing Philosophy Papers*, 2nd Edition. Scarborough: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1997.

Garrison, Stephen M., Anthony J. Graybosch, and Gregory M. Scott. *The Philosophy Student Writer's Manual*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1998.

<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html>

<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/grades.html>

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http://www.ualberta.ca/~vladan/Pryor_Guidelines_Skraceno.htm

<http://www.cariboo.bc.ca/ae/php/phil/mclaughl/courses/howplan.htm>

<http://www.cariboo.bc.ca/Disciplines/eng309/howread.htm>

<http://cariboo.tru.ca/disciplines/eng309/howrit.htm>

<http://www.mit.edu/~yablo/writing.html>

[http://www.westga.edu/~jdonohoe/How%20to%20Write%20a%20Philosophy%20Term%20Paper%20\(upper%20division\).htm](http://www.westga.edu/~jdonohoe/How%20to%20Write%20a%20Philosophy%20Term%20Paper%20(upper%20division).htm)

<http://philosophy.chass.utoronto.ca/phlwrite/sousa.html>

<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~sousa/teach/GUIDE.SUM.html>

<http://philosophy.utoronto.ca/phlwrite/phladv.html>

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/philosophy.html>

<https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/cbagnoli/www/paperguidelines.html>

<http://www.uoguelph.ca/registrar/calendars/diploma/current/c08/c08-grds-proc.shtml>

Extra Reading

Feinberg, Joel. *Doing Philosophy: A Guide to the Writing of Philosophy Papers*. 3rd ed. Belmont, Calif.: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2005.

Holowchak, Mark. *Critical Reasoning & Philosophy : A Concise Guide to Reading, Evaluating, and Writing Philosophical Works*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004.

Last Note

What I've written here shouldn't be understood as the final understanding of what a philosophy paper should be. If anything, it should point out some basic ideas: 1) that nothing can take the place of understanding, 2) philosophy takes work, and 3) what constitutes *philosophy* is ever-evolving. I welcome and encourage any feedback that you might have that could make this a better document.

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