

## General Advice on Writing Philosophy Papers

Steve Coyne

### General Thoughts

- Philosophy papers are evaluated for their clarity, originality, and mastery of the course material. So a good or excellent paper should be clear, original, and show a mastery of the course material.
- There is no formula for making your paper good or excellent, but I attach below some comments that students have sometimes found helpful.

### Introduction and Thesis

- The paper should have an introduction and a thesis.
  - The introduction should contain a thesis - a one-sentence explanation of the claim that your paper defends, and it should explain how the paper defends that claim.
  - Introductions should be helpful to your reader.
    - Bad introduction 1: “Since the dawn of time, philosophers have argued about liberty.” (Cliché, doesn’t tell the reader anything useful, shouldn’t even be the first line. Get straight to something informative, even your own thesis.)
    - Bad introduction 2: “In this paper, I will discuss Berlin’s argument, then Taylor’s argument. Then I will argue my own view.” (You should start with what you are arguing – your thesis, in enough detail that the reader can grasp its main idea – and then explain how discussing Berlin and Taylor’s arguments help you defend your thesis.)
  - An introduction should be helpful to you, as a writer, too! It forces you to consider the argument you are making (what are you trying to convince the reader of?) and how exactly each part of the paper helps you to get there.

### Explaining Philosophy

- You must *explain* the relevant views of the relevant philosophers. (For example, if you are discussing Taylor, you should explain the difference between positive and negative liberty, and how that relates to negative and positive liberty.) Copying slides or quoting passages does not demonstrate much understanding of the material. As a first step in the right direction, reword or paraphrase the text. Better yet:
  - give non-trivial examples,
  - draw comparisons and contrasts,
  - assemble their points into arguments (note there may be many ways of doing this). Ask yourself: is the author making several arguments for a single conclusion? Or is there more than one argument? For example, what exactly is the conclusion of Taylor’s paper? In what sense is he making an argument

for positive liberty? (Is he saying, for example, that we shouldn't care about negative liberty at all?)

- Note ambiguities where they exist, and comment on whether you think they are resolvable (e.g. Taylor is not clear about the difference between positive liberty and negative liberty understood as an exercise concept. He says they are different in this way.... But here he seems to think they are interchangeable...)
- The dictionary explanations of philosophical concepts are usually inadequate for a philosophy paper. (Wikipedia is sometimes a little better, but still a no go.) To fully understand why, we would have to get into a deep argument about the purpose of philosophy, but I think it is because dictionaries strive to give the common usage of words, while philosophers are generally criticizing and revising the common usage in order to find the concept we actually care about. (For example, giving the Webster definition of 'liberty' will be unhelpful – all of the philosophers we discuss use the word in a more technical way than common usage.)
- Your paper should be self-sufficient: someone who has never read any of the authors and has not read the topic question should be able to follow your paper.

### Making an Argument

- Once you have explained the relevant concepts in the paper, you will be in a position to begin making your own arguments. These often take two forms:
  - 1) An argument against another person's argument. (e.g. an argument against Taylor's argument for positive liberty.) You could show that one of the premises of their argument is wrong, or that the argument is invalid: even if you grant the premises, the conclusion does not follow.
  - 2) Your own argument, completely from scratch.
- This might seem obvious, but remember that your task is not just to put an argument down on the page, but for that argument to actually persuade your reader. A former professor of mine said that you should make your arguments as though you would win a large sum of money if your reader changed their mind, and while I have never won any money from my arguments, I think it's good advice.
- One way to make your arguments more persuasive is to anticipate and address objections to your arguments. Try to make sure that they are the objections that your reader would actually have; otherwise, they will walk away from your argument with lingering doubts about it.

### The Mechanics of the Paper

- Use citations with page numbers to support your exposition of other people's views, especially when you are quoting directly, but also when you are paraphrasing. (When you are paraphrasing, you can insert a reference every few sentences – only when the page number changes.)
  - e.g. Taylor argues that we are free when we act on desires that we identify with. He gives the example of a man who has stage fright. (pg X)
- Feel free to divide your paper into sections with headings.

- The use of “I” and “me” are perfectly acceptable, often helpful, and occasionally indispensable in a philosophy paper: “I will show that”, “it seems to me that”, etc.
- Transition words matter a lot. Without a transition word between two sentences, you are leaving it entirely up to your reader to guess at the relationship between those sentences. Sometimes this is OK, but in the middle of a complex paragraph, it can become very difficult for the reader. Here are some examples of transition words: lists (first, second, etc), logical consequence (‘therefore’, etc), temporal order, (‘before’, ‘after’, ‘then’..), illustration (‘for example’), and so on.
- Keep your sentences and language as short and direct as possible. Use paragraphs. Shorter paragraphs are better than longer paragraphs. One page is too long. One paragraph per idea; one idea per paragraph.
- Some important but often misused words: “premise”, “conclusion”, “argument”, “view”, “position”, “therefore”. Remember that there can be multiple arguments for a single position or conclusion, and that there can be good arguments for incorrect conclusions and bad arguments for correct conclusions. You can reject an argument without rejecting its conclusion (perhaps you believe it for other reasons).
- Stick to the word limit. It may be tempting to demonstrate to your reader that you have a great deal to say, but at this point in your academic career we are evaluating you more on your ability to make a concise, effective argument. Besides, anyone who goes over the word limit faces the following dilemma: if you are a little bit over the word limit, you simply could have edited your paper more effectively, and if you are quite a bit over the word limit, you are have given yourself an unfair advantage over your classmates who did respect the word limit.