

Some Advice on Writing Philosophy Papers

General Comments

Writing is a form of communication. This is an obvious point, but one that it is surprisingly easy to forget when you are locked in the throes of composition. Composing, after all, is a very private activity (“Please do not disturb!”); yet it is pointless if no one can understand what you are trying to say.

So this is the first thing to remember: you are trying to transfer ideas from your own head to your reader's in a clear and persuasive way. To do this, you must have a picture in your own mind of the points you want to make that is crystal clear. I have found it helpful to keep asking myself over and over during the organizing and drafting process, and again as I write, “What is it I am trying to say?”.

But all this is very general. Isn't there any more pointed advice that can be given? There is, unfortunately, no secret to writing well, no magic formula that will guarantee success. It is largely a process of writing a lot, preferably under a critical eye. It is like acquiring a physical skill, skiing or swimming for instance. Ultimately *you* have to do it. You learn mainly by trial and error, and also to a lesser extent from the example of others.

This explains the approach of this course. Apart from this handout, you will receive no explicit instruction about writing in general -although I shall give you specific criticism and feedback on your own writing samples. But the texts have all been chosen so as to be examples of good *writing* as well as of good philosophy. When reading them, you should not only try to understand what the author is saying, but also how he or she says it. Ask yourself what points are being argued for, how the writer organizes these points, and how he or she moves from one sentence or paragraph to another.

More Specific Advice

- *Choosing a thesis:*

If you haven't had much experience in doing philosophy, you may find yourself in unfamiliar territory, and perhaps a little overwhelmed to begin with. Don't panic! Once you have chosen a topic area, or have selected a topic from a list of topics given out, you will need to focus in to obtain a thesis you can argue for. To do this, you need to step back from the material a little, and to try to assess your own reactions. Often there is something that you find particularly interesting, or a little ambiguous, or that you just plain don't agree with. If so, you may already have

found your thesis: what you have to do is to explain what it is that is, in your view, interesting/ambiguous/wrong, and why.

But perhaps nothing like this has occurred to you yet. Then what you need to do is to find more secondary sources that discuss the material or problem you are dealing with. It is very rare for there to be complete agreement among them; once you locate a source of disagreement, this will give you an 'in': you can set yourself up as arbiter of the dispute, first explaining what is at issue, then giving the arguments on each side, then making some judgement as to which seems more convincing and why.

- *Constructing your argument:*

Remember, a philosophy paper is always centered around an *argument*. (In this it differs from the book reports that you may have been used to writing for High School.) That is, there will be some overall point you are trying to make (the conclusion of your argument), and there will be various other points you will need to make in order to convince the reader of this conclusion.

So you should begin by working out for yourself exactly what your argument is. Be clear with yourself what you want to say *before* you start to write. Never begin without a focus. Almost certainly, this will change as you do write; but that is absolutely NOT a reason for not beginning with as specific a focus as you can. The alternative is vagueness and disaster.

The best way to get clear about what you are arguing is to draw up a specific *outline* of your argument. Write down the main point you are arguing for, as well as any subsidiary points that you think are important. Write them in full sentences -outlines based on words and phrases can deceive you into thinking you have a coherent argument when you don't.

Next, determine the order in which your main points should be made, and number them on your outline. Then decide what it would take to *establish* these points in this order. This requires thinking up *arguments* for them, and perhaps also finding *examples* that illustrate them -people always find it easier to concentrate on a concrete example than an abstract argument.

- *Using sources:*

In all but the most exceptional cases, you will certainly need more than one source. Generally, you will have at least one *primary source*, a work perhaps by an important philosopher. In addition, you should have more than one *secondary source*, which will perhaps be a commentary on the primary source. If you only

have one secondary source, you will be captive to her interpretation. Getting at least one other perspective almost always helps to open the subject up for you; remaining content with one secondary source virtually condemns you to reproducing that interpretation, to the point of giving a mere paraphrase. A mere paraphrase is not original thinking, and will get you poor rewards.

When you take notes on your sources, be very careful to distinguish what are your paraphrases from what are quotes, and to mark clearly their location. This involves more than a mere page number and book title: the *author* of whatever you have quoted, cited or paraphrased (make sure you know the difference between these three activities!) *must* be given. For instance, if the book is an anthology or translation, the author will usually be distinct from the editor, in which case it will not be enough to give the editor's name and the book title and date.

Exactly how to reference your sources, I will spell out in another handout. For now, the important thing to remember is that there's no time like the present: make a note of the bibliographic details while you have the book open in front of you. It doubles the work to have to come back later to get this information.

Getting down to the writing:

Don't put this off for too long. The sooner you begin writing, the sooner the piece will fall into place. The best preparation in the world does not guarantee a good piece of writing.

When you begin to write, you should state clearly the aim of your paper, and sketch the argument you are going to use to support it. It is not enough to announce the mere area you are writing on: you must announce the specific thesis, or at least set the scene for one by giving the reader enough orientation. Don't simply say that you are going to write about 'x' and let it go at that.

It's true that you are writing the paper for me, and that often (but by no means always!) I will know more about the topic than you. But even so, it is very unlikely that I will understand the problem you are addressing in exactly the same way as you. And if you try to take for granted what you think we both understand, the odds are that I will lose the thread of your argument, or simply find points taken for granted that I think should be argued for. So it is much better to assume that you are writing for a general reader, say a sympathetic but not uncritical friend. Do not assume your reader knows as much about the topic as you do. Give enough background information for your argument to be understood, but not so much that the argument gets swamped by it.

Always *get to the point as quickly as you can*. Try to avoid insipid beginnings like “Thales was an Ionian thinker who lived in the 6th C B.C... “. This might begin a history, but it doesn't set the scene for an argument. In the same vein, *leave out irrelevant facts*. If a fact is relevant to your argument, introduce it where it can contribute, and make sure that it does-don't leave it dangling.

When you get to the end of your paper, *summarize what you have argued*. Don't leave the reader to draw her own conclusions (she'll do that anyway): leave her with a digestible kernel of your argument.

Comments on Style

The fewer words you can use to make your point clearly the better. I can think of no advice more important than this. Some examples:

- Not “they made their appearance”, but “they appeared”.
- Not “previous to”, but “before”.
- Not “the reader may be led [or, worse, “lead”!] to the conclusion”, but “the reader may conclude”.
- Not “due to the circumstance that”, but “because”.

Avoid lengthening expressions in a redundant way in an attempt to make them sound scholarly. Examples:

- Use “often”, not “oftentimes”.
- Use “now”, not “at this time” or “at the present moment”, or whatever.
- Use “I” rather than circumlocutions like “the author”, “the writer”, or worst, “the present writer” (as if the writing is so autonomous that it could easily take on some different author in the future!).

Avoid the passive whenever possible. Don't write “This idea was developed further in a later paper by Bohr”, but “Bohr developed this idea further in a later paper.” The latter is more direct and forceful.

Similarly, don't say “The point of departure adopted in this paper is based on the principle... “, say “I take as my starting point the principle...” The passive here is anonymous, a shield behind which timid academics and bureaucrats cower.

Finally, please introduce your own views with “I think” or “I believe” rather than “I feel”. You may hold your views with the greatest emotion, but I’m only interested in them insofar as you have arguments for them. The same goes for reporting the views of others. Leave feelings to Dr. Ruth: you’re dealing with ideas, not emotions.

Common Spelling Errors

Not seperate	but	separate
Not existance	but	existence
Not compatable	but	compatible
Not arguement	but	argument
Not definate	but	definite
Not concious	but	conscious
Not alot	but	a lot
Not Décarte	but	Descartes
Not Sarte	but	Sartre
Not Nietsche	but	Nietzsche
Not it's	but	its (for the possessive of ‘it’)
Not its	but	it's (for the contraction of ‘it is’)

Lastly, remember the rhyme: “i before e except after c” for words with an ‘ee’ sound. Thus: yield, believe, but conceive, perceive.

Final Advice

Always leave time to proof-read your paper before handing it in. In my experience, this means planning to finish your paper as much as a day ahead of the deadline - papers always take longer than you expect.

- Remember Murphy's Law of Computer Technology: Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong, exactly when you least have time to deal with it!

With much appropriated (by permission) from John Spencer,

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