

# A (Very) Brief Guide to Writing Philosophy Papers

## The introduction

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1. **Make sure that your paper has a clearly articulated thesis.** Your thesis is the main claim you are arguing for in your paper, and it must be presented clearly and concisely in your introduction. Get to the point as quickly as possible in order to let your reader know immediately what your paper is trying to achieve. Never introduce your argument with a fancy historical narrative or personal story, no matter how enamored you are with it.
2. If necessary, **briefly motivate your thesis.** You will likely need to do this in longer assignments, when it is not obvious why a reader would care about the claim that you are arguing for.
3. Briefly and concisely **explain how you will argue for your thesis.** Your introduction is the ‘roadmap’ of your paper, so make sure that your reader knows what to expect at each step along the way. Your paper *must* align with this roadmap, so keep to it or change it. Never include any information in this roadmap that is not directly relevant to your argument for the thesis.

## The main part

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4. **Make an argument that really supports your thesis.** In order to make the strongest possible argument for your thesis, do not skip any steps and try to avoid relying on premises that your reader might not be willing to accept. It is virtually always more effective to focus on one argument and make it as compelling as you can than to use several arguments supported less comprehensively.
5. **Be straightforward in your language,** careful with your choice of words, and say precisely what you mean. Unnecessary or vague information is a hallmark of bad writing and will only distract and confuse your reader.
6. **If you need to use technical or ambiguous terms, define them.** You should always write so that your paper can be clearly understood by a fellow student who has taken some philosophy classes but not this particular one. (It is helpful to think of this imaginary reader when you judge the overall clarity of your work.)
7. Always read the (relevant portions of) the texts and arguments by other writers you are **engaging with closely.** This point cannot be overemphasized. It is completely normal to have to read a philosophy article several times in order to fully understand its details – even for professional philosophers.

8. Whenever you explain or summarize the arguments of other philosophers, you must **interpret them charitably**. This does in no way mean that you are barred from criticizing them; but you must always interpret their arguments in the strongest way possible while still being consistent with what they have written.
  - 8.2. If another philosopher's argument seems obviously wrong to you, chances are you have not understood them properly. Of course, no one precludes the possibility that you are a philosophical genius to whom things are obvious that accomplished academic philosophers find perplexing; but you still need to rule out the former option before concluding the latter.
  - 8.3. Even when another philosopher's argument seems obviously right to you, make sure you do not accidentally confuse their argument with another one you are already familiar with.
9. If necessary, **explain the argument(s) you are criticizing in your paper**.
  - 9.2. *Always* explain the argument(s) you are criticizing in your own words, and be clear about their logical structure. (Note: this logical structure may not be exactly represented in the way the author themselves wrote their argument.)
  - 9.3. *Always* stick to the essentials of the author's argument and avoid dispensable information. In your explanation of the author's argument, write in a way that makes the argument understandable to someone encountering it for the first time.
10. You must **cite the text you are referencing every time you make a claim about it**. In academic writing, it is absolutely crucial that you provide evidence for your interpretation and make it easy for your reader to fact-check your argument.
11. If possible, **avoid long quotes**. At best, it gives your reader the impression that you are lazy, trying to rely on someone else's words so you don't have to do as much work; at worst, it gives your reader the impression that you haven't understood the text you are referencing well enough to summarize it yourself.
12. Make sure to **introduce and explain quotes from the texts** you are referring to in your argument. Your reader can read, too; but why is the quote important at this point in your argument? Never just assume that your reader will draw from the quote what you want them to draw from it.
13. Philosophical questions are *never* obvious – if you think so, you likely have not understood the question at issue. Consequently, there will always be compelling reasons on both sides. **Take into account the most compelling reason(s) why someone might disagree with you**, and show why they are mistaken.
14. **Always consider the strongest objections to your position/interpretation** that you can think of. At best, choosing a weak objection to respond to makes you seem incompetent; at worst, choosing a weak objection makes you seem insincere. In the highly unlikely case that you really cannot think of any compelling objections to your position, admit this. If you cannot

answer an objection to your thesis, the correct response is to revise your paper and argue for the opposite view with which you started.

## The form

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15. Throughout your paper, make sure to **use transitions and signposts**. In other words, make sure that the connection between your paragraphs and sentences is always clear.
16. **One point, one paragraph**. If you are starting a new point, start a new paragraph; if you are still making the same point, continue the paragraph.
17. **Avoid the passive voice**. It is standard in most academic fields – including philosophy – to write in the first-person.

## The conclusion

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18. Keep it simple; your conclusion must not contain any surprises. Really, your conclusion should only **remind us very briefly of what you already said** in the main part of your paper, nothing else.

## The process

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19. **Never try to write a philosophy paper from scratch**, from beginning to end. Instead, leave plenty of time to plan things out. First, write a sketch of your initial ideas and arguments, and keep rewriting it as you think through the topic. When you are ready, write a concise outline of your argument with maximal logical clarity. Do not hesitate to revise your outline until your argument appears completely satisfactory to you.
20. Once you have a satisfactory outline, write a first complete draft of your paper. **Don't hesitate to revise your draft** with regard to both your choice of words as well as your argument's structure. Strong philosophy papers are always the result of multiple stages of revision, and professional philosophers often produce 10+ drafts of a paper before circulating or publishing it.