

Most important in writing philosophy essays is to formulate your own argument for the view that you wish to defend or criticize. Merely summarizing others' views is not just good enough; it does not make a philosophy paper. Choose one point or two that you wish to argue, and discuss them in depth. Narrow down the scope of your discussion as much as you can. Digging down one point deeper is harder, but always better, than jumbling up many miscellaneous points.

This guide is designed to help you write good philosophy essays. It is organized into the following topics:

1. Preparations

2. Draft Writing

3. Rewrites

4. Types of Philosophy Papers

Thesis Papers

Compare and Contrast Papers

Research Papers

Case Studies in Ethics

5. Gender-Neutral Language

6. Plagiarism: what it is and how to avoid it

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Appendix 1: Parenthetical Citation Format

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1. Preparations

Discuss your idea with others

When you have an idea for your essay, discuss it with others, preferably with those who are not in the class. Describe and explain to them your idea and see their responses: in other words, pretend to teach them your idea and learn from their reactions. This will help you understand, develop, and organize your idea better. You will also realize what more needs to be done for your essay.

Outline

One of the best ways to give a good structure to your essay is to make its outline before you begin to write. You can organize your points better this way because the outline gives you a sense for how your points will fit together and jointly support your idea. The outline lets you identify and structure your main argument.

Writing from the middle

Perhaps you have tried outlining a paper and you found that it did not work well for you. Here is another way to get started. Begin by simply writing down whatever ideas occur to you about the topic. It does not have to be long (about 300 words is a good start, which is a little more than one typed page); neither does it have to be well-formulated or your most polished work. Once you have these ideas down, take a break (go for a walk, have some coffee, etc.). And then come back to what you have written, and try to revise/restate it in a way that is clearer and more organized. Repeat this process two or three more times, until you get something that satisfactorily expresses what you are trying to say. Then and only then, start writing an introduction and conclusion to your paper.

It takes time to write philosophy essays

Writing philosophical essays requires careful and extended reflections on philosophical problems. One should give herself enough time to contemplate on the topic and prepare a detailed outline. When you have completed a draft, set it aside for a day or two. **Read and revise it a number of times.** Show it to others and rewrite it with their reactions – others' comments can help make your points clear and accurate. All of this takes time. So, start work early.

2. Draft writing

Make your essay “sell” with simple prose

Imagine you are a writer who wants to have her essay read by a good number of people. If you want to “sell” your essay, make your prose simple and straightforward. People would not like essays if they are too complicated. Keep your sentences and paragraphs short. Do not assume that the reader of your essay is your professor who knows all about its topic; instead, try to write an essay as if you taught other students who are not familiar with the topic.

Make your point clear and concise

Do not jumble up unrelated issues. Do not try to prove that you are an intelligent person who has done a lot of reading. Address the given topic directly and deal with the particular problem with no digression.

Explain your terms

Be sure that you define any technical terms you use in your paper. Do not assume that your reader will automatically understand technical language.

Be nice and kind to your readers

Pretend that your reader is not familiar with the topic of your essay. Do not assume that she has read the materials you are discussing. You need to explain your point to your reader nicely, and kindly, as if you were teaching her. Give uncontroversial examples and analogies. In short, make your essay as nice and kind as you are!

3. Rewrites

You have now completed a draft of your paper. Do not submit it today. Set it aside overnight, or better, for a couple of days. Then come back to the draft and read it again. You may remember what you wanted to say, but that might not be what you have actually written. You will want to make changes. Show your draft to others and see their reactions: Do they understand your point clearly? Discuss your draft with them and get their comments. If no one is available for discussion, read your paper out loud by yourself and try to “feel” if your point makes sense. This will help you notice possible problems in your prose and arguments.

Keep rewriting – expect to write many drafts of your paper.

4. Types of Philosophy Papers

Thesis Papers

A thesis paper is the basic form of most papers in philosophy. In such a paper you will present a view and defend it by giving arguments and responding to objections. It is important to note that arguments are the currency of philosophy: you should give reasons that provide clear support for your view. Your preferences, unsupported opinions, and feelings have no place in a thesis paper. Rather, you are expected to provide your reader with rational support for the view you are defending.

The following gives a broad outline of what your paper should include.

- (1) You should begin with a paragraph that contains a clear and concise statement of the view you will defend in your paper. This will be your thesis statement. Below are several examples of such statements from different courses.

History of Ethics:

"Hume underestimates the role that reason plays in moral decision making."

Business Ethics:

"Vander Ark ought not be allowed to publish a physical copy of the Harry Potter Lexicon."

Medical Ethics:

"Voluntary euthanasia is morally permissible."

"Life-saving emergency medical treatment is a human right and should be provided at no cost."

Theory of Knowledge:

"Gettier problems demonstrate that justified true belief is not knowledge."

The following are examples of statements that are NOT acceptable theses:

"I will discuss Hume and Kant."

"Plato's views are very thought-provoking."

"Abortion has always been a major problem."

Any sentence beginning with "Since the beginning of time..."

"Belief in God is subjective and cannot be argued."

- (2) Describe the view you have expressed in the thesis.

- (3) Provide supporting argument(s) for this view. You cannot just say that you like a specific view. You need to show why you think the view is a good one.

- (4) Consider objections to the view and its supporting arguments. Philosophical thinking progresses through discussion and debate, and you can always solve philosophical problems better by dealing with objections to positions you are considering.

(5) Give rebuttals to these objections and save the view and its supporting arguments. The view you are defending is now more solidly established because it has survived attempts of refutation.

(6) Finally, you should end with a conclusion that briefly summarizes your paper.

Compare and Contrast Papers

A compare and contrast paper has a thesis, but supports it through a compare and contrast process. Compare and contrast papers can be directed towards many different parts of philosophy. For example, you may be asked to compare and contrast the ideas of specific philosophers, ideas in philosophical movements, or ideas in specific books or articles.

A comparison-contrast paper always includes a comparison, which is an explanation of how the two thinkers or ideas differ. Therefore, your thesis must go beyond the observation that the two differ. Likewise, it must go beyond the observation that they are similar in some way.

Your thesis should highlight the importance of the difference or similarity.

Examples of acceptable theses include:

Theory of Knowledge:

"Epistemological internalism has serious problems avoided by externalism."

History of Ethics:

"Mill's criticisms of Kant fail to undermine Kant's basic orientation."

"Mill's concept of freedom has several advantages over Kant's."

"Aristotle better captures our intuitions of friendship than Kant."

History of Philosophy:

"Aristotle's concept of Form avoids the most obvious problems facing Plato's theory of Forms."

"Plato's concept of the Good plays the same epistemological role as Descartes' God."

Philosophy and the Arts:

"R.G. Collingwood's analysis of expression is both more complex and more useful than Tolstoy's."

There are at least two different ways to approach writing a compare and contrast paper. If you are being asked to compare the ideas of two different philosophers, for example, you could start your paper by carefully explaining the ideas of one of the philosophers, providing evidence from the text to support your claims. Then, you would explain the ideas of the other philosopher, again providing evidence from the text to support your

claims. Next, you would explain how they are similar, and then you would explain how they are different.

Another way to approach the same assignment is by focusing on the similarities and differences themselves. Using this approach, you would first explain how the philosophers are similar, using examples and textual evidence to support your claims. Then, you would explain how they are different, again using examples and textual evidence to support your claims.

Research Papers

Research papers in philosophy require you to use sources in your paper that go beyond the sources you have read in class. You will have to search for additional sources, most often in the library or in one of the library's electronic databases. Different professors may have different requirements for the number and type of outside sources you are required to use, so you should read your assignment carefully.

Research papers are not different from the other kinds of papers except in the expectation that you will find your own additional sources. In other words, they are normally thesis papers or comparison-contrast papers, and the guidelines above still apply.

Because research papers require you to do the additional step of finding multiple sources outside of your class readings that are relevant to your project, it is very important that you start on your research paper *well in advance of the deadline*. Plan time to go to the library and conduct a search for articles and books relevant to your topic. Not all of the books and articles you find during your initial search will be relevant to your paper, so you should leave yourself time to look through what you've found and to search for additional articles and books. As you read, you will want to keep notes about ideas you find interesting or which you don't fully understand. Some of these ideas will be useful to you as you write your paper. Be sure to make good notes about the authors and titles of the articles you are reading so that you can include helpful books and articles in your Bibliography.

As with writing any philosophy paper, you should have a plan and a thesis statement in mind when you start writing your research paper. Your project should not simply be to reiterate what others have said, though you will most likely do some of this in your paper. Your thesis should clearly state your original contribution to the subject or your position on the matter at hand. Part of your job in the body of your paper is to make your argument for your position clear. While making your argument, you will most likely be responding to the readings you've done in class and the readings you've done as part of your outside research. You should make sure that you are carefully citing the sources of your ideas and claims in your paper. Be sure to make clear which of the ideas you present came from others and which are your own. See the end of this document for more information on citing sources.

Case Studies in Ethics

A case study requires you to address a specific case related to moral issues discussed in class. You will be presented with a particular situation and asked to make a decision with regard to the situation, or evaluate a decision already. Your paper should have a thesis (see the example of a Business Ethics thesis above) and follow the general guidelines of a thesis paper. Certain elements particular to a case study should also be included.

- (1) Summarize the relevant facts of the case. This should be a short summary, no more than a paragraph.
- (2) Identify the ethical issues involved in the case.
- (3) Identify the stakeholders and their stake in the decision.
- (4) Identify various alternative solutions to the problem presented in the case. You should explain the alternatives you identify as well as strengths and weaknesses of each alternative.
- (5) You should indicate your preferred solution (and this should already be obvious from your thesis) and present arguments in favor of this solution.
- (6) Finally, you should consider possible objections to your solution and respond to these objections. One likely approach to this is to imagine why someone might prefer one of the other alternatives you identified (4 above). Considering why someone might support a different solution should suggest reasons that they might object to yours.

5. Gender-Neutral Language

The accepted writing practice recommended by the American Philosophical Association is gender-neutral writing. Instead of exclusive, male language, use inclusive terms such as "anyone," "someone," "a person," "us," and "we." Of course, the fact that the APA recommends gender-neutrality is not itself a reason for you to use it. So let us offer you a compelling reason to adopt this practice. It is that the words "man" and "mankind" do not refer to humanity. Phrases such as "everyone has a right to his own property" contain a faulty pronoun reference (substitute "abortion" for "property" to see why). Similarly, the sentence "When a man is faced with a moral dilemma, he should follow Kant's advice" should be written in one of the following ways:

- "When people face a moral dilemma, they should follow Kant's advice."
- "When one faces a moral dilemma, one should follow Kant's advice."
- "When we face a moral dilemma, we should follow Kant's advice."

When quoting writers who utilize non-inclusive language, leave their words in the original. Similarly, it is fine to use male language when you are explicitly talking about a male (e.g., "When Mill got older, his views diverged from Bentham's"). In all other cases, though, you should use inclusive language when you mean to include men and women.

Students are strongly encouraged to read "Guidelines for Non-Sexist Use of Language" by Virginia L. Warren, originally published in the Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association in February 1986 (Vol. 59, No. 3, pp. 471-482). This can be found online at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3131589>.

6. Plagiarism: what it is and how to avoid it

(Adapted by Mark Chekola, Philosophy Department, Minnesota State University Moorhead, with permission, from an article by SuEllen Shaw in *Writer's Corner*, Winter 1995-96)

Definition

Taken from the Latin words *plagiaries*, meaning plunderer, and *plagium*, meaning kidnapping, plagiarism means "to steal and use (the ideas or writings of another) as one's own," according to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, second edition. Going further, Stephen Glazier in *Random House's Word Menu* defines plagiarism as "appropriation and publication of another's writing without consent" (409). He also defines it as "literary theft; stealing another's work without giving credit, passing it off as one's own (543). To summarize, plagiarism means taking someone else's words, ideas, or specialized information and passing them off as one's own; it is intellectual theft.

Avoiding Plagiarism: four pointers

In addition to definitions, applied examples are needed—how to and how not to use material.

Years ago, Mary Pryor, of Moorhead State's English Department, gave four pointers for students on avoiding plagiarism. Here are revised versions of her four pointers::

Pointer #1. Whenever you use more than three words in a row that occurred exactly in the same order in your source material, put the words into quotation marks and use a parenthetical note or footnote or endnote to give credit to your source.

Example #1 of correct use of ideas:

Source (a book on Robert Frost):

By the last stanza, however, we realize that the poet is talking about something more than the choice of paths in a wood, for such a choice would be relatively unimportant.

Your essay:

The poem "The Road Not Taken" is structured by a symbol, for the roads referred to are more important than just "the choice of paths in a wood" (38).

Pointer #2. If the words are your own, but the idea comes from your source, you do not need quotation marks, but you do need to give credit to your source parenthetically or in an endnote or footnote, and you need to supply a lead-in which tells whose idea it is.

Example of correct use:

Source: Same as example #1.

Your essay:

Symbolism is important in the poem "The Road Not Taken" because, as Laurence

Perrine indicated, by the end of the poem the reader realizes that Frost is concerned with something more important than deciding which path to choose in the wood where he was walking (Perrine 38).

Pointer #3. You must not just put a parenthetical note at the end of a paragraph to indicate that all the ideas in that paragraph come from a source. The reader has no way of knowing whether just the last sentence or the last several words or the whole paragraph is someone else's idea. Your lead shows where your summary/paraphrase starts.

Pointer #4. Any information you use in your paper that is not general knowledge requires that you give credit to a source.

Example: It is generally known that the composer Handel wrote a famous work called the *Messiah*, and that its most famous part is the Hallelujah chorus. You can mention that fact in a paper without citing a source. It is NOT generally known that several melodies found in Handel's *Messiah* were taken intact from Italian love duets by a composer other than Handel. If you want to mention this fact, you should cite the source where you learned it.

When in doubt, cite your source.

Summary and Paraphrase

Using another author's words and ideas improperly is often the result of careless or inept summarizing and paraphrasing. Diana Hacker in *A Writer's Reference* (216-217) writes:

"When you summarize or paraphrase, [naming] the source is not enough; you must restate the source's meaning using only your own words. You are guilty of plagiarism . . . if you half-copy the author's well-chosen words without using quotation marks or by plugging your own synonyms into the author's sentence structure."

The following paraphrases are plagiarized—even though the source is cited—because their language is too close to that of the original source.

Original version

If the existence of a signing ape was unsettling for linguists, it was also startling news for animal behaviorists. (Davis, *Eloquent Animals*, p. 26)

Example of unacceptable borrowing of words:

If the presence of a sign-language-using chimp was disturbing for scientists studying language, it was also surprising to scientists studying animal behavior (Davis 26).

Unacceptable borrowing of structure:

If the presence of a sign-language using chimp was disturbing for scientists studying

language, it was also surprising to scientists studying animal behavior (Davis 26).

Acceptable paraphrases of the same example:

When they learned of an ape's ability to use sign language, both linguists and animal behaviorists were taken by surprise (Davis 26).

According to Flora Davis, linguists and animal behaviorists were unprepared for the news that a chimp could communicate with its trainers through sign language (26).