

hopefully good (or at least tolerable)

Helping Students Write[^] Philosophy Papers

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Step 1: Being Able to Read Philosophy

- The first step to writing good philosophy is knowing how to read philosophy.
- Insofar as a philosophy paper is going to involve interacting with other texts, this is indispensable.
- Like riding a bicycle, learning how to read philosophy is a skill, not mere data. It cannot be passed on through a set of instructions.
- The same is true of writing philosophy.

Step 2: Understand the Assignment

- There are different kinds of philosophical papers.

Explication Papers:

- E.g., "Explain Descartes' Theory of X"
- Make sure you understand the author's view, as well as the arguments the author gives for that view

Application Papers:

- Most often found in ethics courses.
- E.g., "How Would the Kantian Categorical Imperative Evaluate Lust?"
- You cannot adequately apply a theory if you neither understand nor are able to describe that theory adequately
- Builds off the skills required for Application Papers

Argumentative Papers:

- The most common form of philosophical paper
- E.g., "Why Baseballs Don't Exist"
- Can either be constructing your own argument or critically engaging (i.e., arguing against) someone else's argument
- The single most important factor is not necessarily the conclusion. Rather, what matters most is the argument for that conclusion (this includes the fact that the conclusion should actually follow from the argument).

Step 3: Execute the Assignment

Step 4: Revise the Assignment

Step n>4: Repeat Step n-1.

Helping Students Write Philosophy Papers (cont.)

Things to Do:

- Start early.
- Do the assigned task. No matter how good your paper on the French Enlightenment, it probably won't earn you a good grade as an assignment addressing Aristotle's metaphysics of change.
- Have someone else read your paper before you turn it in.
- Engage the argument.
- Properly use of sources; proper citations.
- Clarity of writing and expression.
- Define any technical terms.
- Proper flow and development (outline).

Things NOT to Do:

- Procrastinate.
- "Shot-gun" approach to papers.
- Turn in sloppy or rushed work.
- Name-calling (*ad hominem*), disparagement, detraction.
- *Plagiarism!*
- "High-School Honors Writing"
- Equivocation; unclarity.
- Jumbled structure.

Argumentative Papers:

- Identify the premises.
- Make sure that the premises establish (or at least support) the conclusion. For a deductive argument, this means make sure the argument is at least valid (and preferably sound).
- Know what you are trying to do and **organize** your paper around that goal.

Typical Structure:

- I. Introduction
 - Including a clear presentation of thesis.
 - Avoid starting with a dictionary definition.
 - Indicate what you will be doing in the paper (both in terms of content and structure).
- II. Argument(s) for your Thesis
- III. Objections to your Thesis
- IV. Replies to Objections
- V. Conclusion

Final Thoughts:

- Know where to go for good research/sources.
 - *Philosophers Index* (available via Copley Library)
 - Library/Books
 - Ask your faculty
 - *NOT* Google, SparkNotes, Disgruntled Dan's Existential Webpage...
- Take advantage of your faculty.
 - Not in that way, sicko. I meant for rough drafts!
- Learn from feedback.