How to Write a Philosophy Paper

Arc Kocurek (UCSD)

A good philosophy paper has 3–4 parts:

1. **Introduction.** Your introduction should include 3 things:

   - ☐ a brief statement about the topic you're writing on
   - ☐ a statement of your thesis
   - ☐ an outline of the paper

   For a short paper (3–5 pages), the introduction should be about a paragraph. Longer papers generally require longer introductions, but shouldn't be more than 1–2 pages.

   Example of a good introduction:

   > Zeno of Elea was famous for four paradoxes that purport to show that motion is impossible. In this paper, I will examine one of those four arguments, known as "The Racetrack." I argue this paradox fails to show that motion is impossible. I start by reconstructing Zeno's argument, as stated by Aristotle. Then I go on to explain why the argument fails. After that, I consider a response on Zeno's behalf to my objection, and then criticize this response.

2. **Exposition.** Explain the relevant background needed to understand your thesis. This includes:

   - ☐ key terms or concepts
   - ☐ the position(s) your paper focuses on
   - ☐ the main argument(s) your paper addresses

   As a rule of thumb, aim to spend between one-third and one-half of the paper on this part. This is not a hard-and-fast rule. You want to give sufficient background for the reader while leaving room for your own independent analysis.

   Tip: You can write this part of the paper even *before* you know what your thesis is. Summarizing a philosophical argument/issue can give you ideas for what to say about it.

3. **Analysis.** Consider an objection to the main argument you're discussing.

   - ☐ present the strongest objection
   - ☐ consider a reply to the objection
   - ☐ assess whether the reply is convincing

   Tip: You can write most of this part before you know what your thesis is. Even if your view changes, if you've followed this outline, then only this very last part of your analysis needs to change.

4. **Conclusion.** For shorter assignments, this is optional (at least in my classes). For longer papers, a concluding section is recommended.

Writing tips:

- *Target audience.* Pretend your reader is a fellow student with no prior background in the topic but who is very smart and good at spotting holes in your reasoning. Don't assume the grader will just know what you're talking about.

- *Be clear.* Use simple and straightforward language. Don't overcomplicate things. Get to the point.
  - *Unclear:* "Piety or impiety as an abstract concept cannot be encapsulated into a single yes or no situation, rendering Euthyphro's definition insignificant." (What??)
  - *Clear:* "The problem with Euthyphro's answer to the question "What is piety?" is that he only gave an example of piety, not a definition of it."

- *Be concise.* Don't use grammatically complex sentences. Keep your sentences short.
  - *Too long:* "It would be nice to know what Zeno actually thought about these arguments, but unfortunately, we don't know what exactly Zeno's thought was since all of his original writings have been lost, and the only thing we have is Aristotle's version of his (Zeno's) reasoning for the conclusion that motion is impossible:. . . " (ugh too much)
  - *Concise:* "According to Aristotle (*Physics* 6.9, 239b9–13), Zeno presents the following argument in order to establish that motion is impossible:. . . "

- *Use consistent terminology throughout.* Don't "thesaurize". That makes it harder to following your prose. This is not a vocabulary test.

- *Avoid epically long paragraphs.* Each paragraph should make *one* point: no more, no less. It's hard to read a single long paragraph. It's easier to read several shorter paragraphs. Break up the points into smaller, bite-sized chunks.

- *Signpost.* Give your reader an idea of where you're going at the beginning of each paragraph. Here are some examples of signposting:
  - "One problem with this argument is. . . "
  - "According to substantivalism, space is a substance. This means. . . "
  - "To explain the argument, we first need to distinguish between X and Y. . . "
  - "Why does Descartes think we are not our bodies? The reason is. . . "
  - "Plato could respond to this objection as follows. . . "

- *Use examples.* A simple, intuitive example can make your point clearer. Like what I just did.

- *Stay focused.* Every sentence should have a purpose. The reader should never ask, "Why are we talking about this?"

- *Quality over quantity.* Focus on one objection-reply pair in your analysis, *maybe* two if space permits. It's better to go deep on a small number of objections/replies than to give a hasty, superficial sketch of a bunch of them (depth $\gg$ breadth).

- *Consider your opponent's perspective.* Ask what a critic would say in response to your arguments. Even if you disagree, build the best case for the opposition. The stronger they are, the harder they fall.

  Don't write as if the philosopher you are criticizing is dumb (even if they are!). Your argument will come across as unconvincing if the reader thinks you are addressing a straw man or misunderstanding your opponent. If you write this way, then you probably are.

Specific tips:

- *Use quotations, but sparingly.* Anyone can quote stuff. That is not impressive. Quoting does not show you understand anything. Explain things in your own words. Don't let the author explain it for you. (They'll likely do a terrible job.)

  To be clear, you can and *should* use direct quotations (especially in the age of LLMs). Just don't use quotations in lieu of an explanation. Instead, use direct quotes to support your interpretation of an author. Then rephrase in your own terms what they're saying.

- *Avoid grand sweeping claims about the history of philosophy that you cannot possibly defend*. Statements like this will elicit an eye roll:
  - "For two millennia, philosophers have assumed that there are only two truth values." (did you examine two milennia of philosophical work?)
  - "Kant, the most famous philosopher in all of philosophy,. . . " (doubt it)
  - "The oldest problem in all of philosophy is the problem of consciousness." (how do you even prove a claim like that??)

- *Avoid saying something is "subjective" or "relative".* These locutions are *notorious* for being obscure, meaningless, and intellectually lazy. Unless the paper is about a philosophical position that upholds the relativity or subjectivity of some concept (such as moral relativism/subjectivism), you will almost always be better off using more direct language.

  If you are tempted to use this language, ask yourself: What do you *mean* when you say it's "subjective"? Relative to *what*? Whatever your answer, why couldn't you just say *that* instead? Can you explain what you mean in more precise terms?