

4-Page Guide to a Successful Philosophy Paper

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Part 1: Thinking It Through

1. *Read the question carefully, several times.*

Ask yourself what kinds of claims can answer this question, and try to think of a brief answer. Remember that if you don't answer the right question, you aren't doing the assignment correctly. If you were not assigned a question, pose an interesting question yourself – it will help keep you on track

2. *Read the relevant material carefully, with this question in mind.*

Your course material is chosen because it is relevant to the paper you are being asked to write. Read it carefully, and think about the question you want to answer. Figure out what your primary sources of information should be and read them, more than once. Don't forget to go over your class notes as you try to develop an opinion.

Searching for other scholarly sources on the topic is encouraged, either by searching databases like JSTOR or by digging up sources cited in other papers that you have read.

3. *Develop a thesis*

Write down some possible thesis statements – they should be precise, clear, and **no more than two sentences**. Your thesis might have as many as two parts, such as a *negative claim* and a *positive claim*. However, it should still be a concise claim that you can argue for forcefully. For example: *Six recent attempts to demarcate science have failed to do so adequately; however, a less rigid understanding of the notion of demarcation may still prove fruitful.*

4. *Organize the support for your thesis in premise form.*

You should be able to capture the main supporting claims for each part of the thesis in just a few sentences, called premises. Under each of these premises, write some notes on why you think it's true. When you are done, you should have an organized list of all the reasons why you believe your thesis.

Sketch your argument in outline form. This will form the main body of your paper.

Part II: Getting It On Paper

5. *Sketch an outline of your paper that includes an introduction, a main body, and a conclusion as the primary sections.*

The Introduction Should Contain: A sentence or two about the question or issue + an *explicit statement* of your thesis + a few sentences that outline your argument.

The Main Body Should Contain: description of the relevant background information + your argument.

The Conclusion Should Contain: A restatement of your thesis + (optional) a brief treatment of some loose ends. This would include statements like: “Some further implications of this argument could be that X,” or “Some further work might be done toward Y”, or “Questions about Z still might be asked, but that would exceed the scope of this paper”.

6. *Write the body of your paper, then the introduction, then the conclusion.*

Follow your paper outline and your argument outline closely while you do this. Don't forget to make a **References** section and cite *every piece of information that is not utterly trivial common knowledge* according to the proper standard.

7. *A few days later, revise your paper.*

Set your paper aside for a few days. In the meantime, try explaining your argument to someone who is not in the class. This will help you to think critically about your argument in language that is both clear and simple. Then, go back and revise. Don't forget to check that you have incorporated the **Top 10 Philosophy Writing Tips** at the end of this guide.

Part III: Top 10 Philosophy Writing Tips

1. Get started early.

You must reflect carefully on a philosophy paper. This is not possible if you wait until the last minute.

2. Take notes as you read.

Write down what you think about authors writing on the topic, and jot down your ideas as they come to you. Then, put these notes in front of you when you sit down to write your outline.

3. Focus on the question, focus on your answer.

Everything that you write should address the question. Your thesis is your answer to that question. Everything you write down should be about the question or in support of your thesis – everything else is irrelevant!

4. Use only scholarly sources.

Terms in a philosophy class may have precise or technical meanings that are not the same as the ones you will find in other fields or in a dictionary.

5. Don't try to cover to much.

A good philosophy paper will state something simple and humble, and then argue well for it. Don't try to solve the biggest problems in philosophy in a 5 page paper!

6. Do not say *anything* that you cannot support.

Every sentence you write that isn't absurdly obvious should be backed up by support, which goes beyond saying, "I believe that X." You must *persuade* your audience, by giving an argument, considering alternatives, giving examples, citing sources, etc. Avoid sentences like "Since the dawn of time, mankind has..." –It is unlikely that you will be able to adequately support a sentence like this.

7. Paraphrase, but quote sparingly.

A few quotes in a five page paper is fine, but beyond that, stick to paraphrasing. But don't forget, you must cite – you *must* cite—every word or idea in your paper that is not your own.

8. Use overly simple and concise language.

Don't use language that is technical, long, or overly refined unless you absolutely have to. Slang is not appropriate; however, your sentences should be short and easy to read. Also, you can say "I" freely in a philosophy paper, especially to explain where you are in your argument.

9. Say what you are doing often.

Keep the reader informed as to what part of your argument you are in. The purpose of every paragraph should be *insultingly obvious* to the reader. For example, you can say things like:

- *My argument shall have the following form. First...*
- *I shall be arguing for this thesis on the following grounds:*
- *Having argued for these first two premises, I will now show that the final premise is true.*
- *A good example of this point is...*
- *One response to this objection is that...*
- *As a result of the above argument, it follows that...*

10. Assume your audience is extremely dull.

You might think that your professor, having read a great deal of philosophy, will immediately pick up on your hints and suggestions. This is false. Write your paper as if you are explaining your point to an utter buffoon. Explain every point you make as completely as possible.