

Tips for Writing a Philosophy Paper  
Jack Lyons

Whatever topic you choose, the paper assignment requires that you produce an argument for your view. You will have to rehearse the relevant material, but do not merely reproduce the arguments and positions of others. In arguing for your view, make sure you anticipate potential objections and answer them. Consider your audience to be an intelligent reader who knows very little about philosophy. Use double spacing so comments can be written where appropriate.

You are not expected to do any outside reading, and you must document any outside sources you do use. Blindly consulting the Internet is not recommended, since any crank with an FTP client can post 'information' on it. You will be held responsible for all of the readings on the syllabus; even though most will not be relevant to any given topic, you'll need to look over them to make sure.

Below are some general tips for writing philosophy papers (or any other kind of paper, for that matter). Many of these have to do with being clear. If I can't tell what you're saying, then you may as well have not said anything.

Choose your words carefully. Don't say 'if p, then q' if what you mean is 'if q, then p'. Saying exactly what you mean is always important, but especially in philosophy, where the subject matter is abstract and where the competing views can often be formulated by sentences that differ only by a few words (e.g., the distinction between type materialism and token materialism).

State your thesis clearly, so that the reader can't miss it. *Have* a thesis (and not just a topic).

Be concise; don't bother with flowery language or statements that are supposed to sound "deep". Most such statements are just unclear.

Avoid rhetorical questions. Rhetorical questions don't mean or say anything at all; it is only the answer to them that does. Thus, you're better off leaving the question out altogether and just giving the answer instead. If you just can't resist, make sure you answer any such questions yourself immediately after asking them. The absolute worst rhetorical questions are those that begin, "Who is to say ...?". I have no idea what declarative sentence is ever supposed to translate that sort of question. *Never* use this phrase.

If none of this pleading gets through to you, and you find yourself just compelled to use rhetorical questions, please at least end them with question marks.

Make sure your arguments contain as few hidden or missing premises as possible.

Be careful in your use of illatives: words that indicate that an inference is being drawn (e.g., 'thus', 'therefore', 'because', 'so'). Only use them when you really mean that the one proposition follows from another. But do use them any time you have a conclusion, so the reader knows that a conclusion is coming.

Don't use 'it's' when you mean 'its', 'they're' when you mean 'their' or 'there', etc. These mistakes will really irritate many of your readers (including those grading your paper). Also, they really do make a paper harder to understand, and they sometimes result in meaningful, but unintended, sentences. You might accidentally say something stupid, which you knew was stupid and never meant to say. Since I'm not a mind-reader, I'll credit you with what you say.

If you're arguing against some view, make sure you exposit that view in detail and in the most charitable way; don't build up a straw version of the position and then knock that down.

When arguing for some position, begin with premises that a normal rational reader is likely to accept as true.

Don't just mention the views that you are discussing; clearly state what the views are.

This is not a composition class, but I'll expect proper grammar, complete, coherent sentences, and proper spelling and punctuation.

*Proofread!* Leaving a number of careless mistakes in the paper is like writing at the top, "I don't care what grade I get on this assignment."

**Be very careful about documenting your sources. Failure to do this properly counts as plagiarism. If you are using someone else's ideas, you *must* indicate whose ideas they are. This includes the assigned books for the class and material gotten off the Internet (provide the URL and the author's name, if available, in a footnote). For this paper, I will not require you to cite class notes from this class, though you'll have to cite them if you use them anywhere else, and you'll have to cite class notes from any other class. If you are using someone else's words, you *must* use quotation marks. Avoid close paraphrases: either quote the relevant passage or significantly reword it (though still cite the author). Use quotations only when the author's exact words are important. If you are unsure exactly what plagiarism is, find out; it is your responsibility to know.**