

# How to Write a Philosophy Paper

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# Outline

- 1 What You're Supposed to be Doing
- 2 The Structure of a Philosophy Paper
  - The Introduction
  - The Exposition
  - Thesis Defense
  - Objections and Replies
  - The Summary

# What You're Supposed to be Doing

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- You must also *engage* with the author.
- You must tell me why you think that they are *wrong*. They've provided powerful arguments for their views. Where do those arguments go wrong?

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- Formulate a rough and working *thesis statement* about where the author has gone wrong — which premise of their argument is false (and why), or why the argument is invalid.



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- Try to think about *why* you disagree with them. They provide reasons in favor of their views. What's wrong with those reasons?
- Formulate a rough and working *thesis statement* about where the author has gone wrong — which premise of their argument is false (and why), or why the argument is invalid.
- You should feel free to change this thesis statement later on, but having one in mind will guide your progress writing the paper.

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- Good thesis:

*Michael Levin argues that homosexuality is abnormal and likely to lead to unhappiness because it is a misuse of body parts—it is using bodily parts contrary to their natural function. However, given Levin's definition of 'natural function', this argument overgeneralizes. It entails that it is abnormal and likely to lead to unhappiness to use our fingers to play instruments or our ears to listen to music. I conclude that Levin's argument is invalid.*

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*If rape is sex without consent, and somebody who is severely intoxicated is incapable of giving their consent, then sex with that person is rape.*

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- Good thesis:

Dixon, drawing upon the 'communicative sexuality' model of Lois Pineau, argues that people have an obligation to make sure that their sexual partners consent; and that for this reason, the case of 'impaired sex' he discusses constitutes rape. However, even if the 'communicative sexuality' model is correct that we have an obligation to make sure that our sexual partners consent, this does not get Dixon the conclusion that the case of 'impaired sex' he discusses constitutes rape; since, in that case, the woman is described as "willingly respond[ing] to...sexual advances." We must assume that such responses don't constitute sufficient evidence of consent in order to get the conclusion that the case of 'impaired sex' is a case of rape. I will conclude that the 'communicative sexuality' model misses the mark: what is really at stake in Dixon's case of impaired sex is whether the putative rapist is in a position to know whether their sexual partners are in a position to consent.



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- A paper missing one of these sections **WILL NOT** receive an A or a B.

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  - **If you don't tell me your thesis in your introduction, you will not receive an A.**
  - Give the reader a road-map for the rest of the paper. Let them know what kind of exposition you'll be providing. Let them know what thesis you'll be defending and how you'll be defending it. Let them know which objections you'll be considering and how you'll be responding to those objections.

## A Good Introduction

“Alan Soble contests that it is sometimes permissible to coerce somebody into having sex with you by making threats such as “If you don’t have sex with me, I’ll find another boyfriend,” so long as you have the *right* to make such threats. In this paper, I will review the Kantian position of Thomas Mappes, according to which making such threats is always impermissible, and I will review Soble’s objections to this Kantian sexual ethics. I will then argue for my central thesis: that Soble’s position overgeneralizes. For instance, his position entails that it is permissible for a landlord to threaten a raise in rent if his tenants don’t have sex with him; this provides a *reductio ad absurdum* of Soble’s view. After defending this thesis, I will consider the potential objection that the landlord does not actually have the right to threaten a raise in rent unless he is sexually placated, since the tenants have a right to not be exploited in this way. I will respond by showing that claiming that, even though it is surely true, Soble is not entitled to claim that the landlord’s treatment of the tenants constitutes exploitation, so this line of response is not available to him. I will conclude that Soble’s position is untenable.”

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## A Bad Introduction

“People have always wondered “is it permissible to demand sex?” Since the beginning of time, cavemen have faced this difficult ethical quandary. Soble says it’s ok to threaten your loved ones; but everyone knows you don’t threaten the people you love. Mappes has the right position here, and we need to respect other people’s wishes and treat them the way we would want to be treated. Soble is wrong, and therefore Mappes is right.”

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- The tone is not professional and respectful.

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- The paper presupposes a familiarity with the subject matter. You should suppose that your author has not heard about the debate you’ll be discussing.
- Merely showing that Soble’s position is wrong doesn’t show that Mappes is right. You shouldn’t claim to have shown any more than you actually argue for.

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- Don't suppose that your reader is already familiar with the position or the argument. Tell them everything they will need to know in order to understand your thesis defense.
- You don't want to set up a *straw man* to argue against. Your exposition should paint your dialectical opponent in their best light. The stronger the argument looks in the exposition, the more impressive you will look when you knock it down with your thesis defense in the next section.

# The Exposition

- A easy and all-too-common way to have a paper fall flat is to attribute a view or argument to an author that they don't actually hold. For that reason, the exposition is one of the most important sections of the paper. Spend a good amount of time making absolutely sure that you've understood what the author you're engaged with actually says.

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- Don't lean upon quotations from the author. Explain their position in your own words, using your own examples. I know that the *author* understands their argument. What I want to see is that *you* understand their argument.

## Good Exposition

“...Mappes believes that sex is impermissible when it takes place without the *voluntary* and *informed* consent of both parties. In order for consent to be voluntary, the consenting party must not be *coerced*. On Mappes' view, there are two types of coercion: *occurrent* coercion and *dispositional* coercion. In the case of *occurrent* coercion, consent is simply bypassed altogether. For instance, if I want your laffy taffy, then I *occurrently* coerce you into giving it to me if I simply grab it from your hand when you're not paying attention. In this case, I did not even require your consent in order to get the laffy taffy. On the other hand, I *dispositionally* coerce you into giving me your laffy taffy if I tell you that I'm not going to pay you back the \$5 I owe you unless you give me your laffy taffy. In this case, you consensually give me your laffy taffy; however, the consent is obtained under conditions of duress; and so the consent does not count as *voluntary*...”

## Bad Exposition

“...Mappes says that non-consensual sex is bad. That means you can't lie or rape anybody. But Mappes ignores reality, where people lie to each other—*it happens*; and it's a day-to-day part of our lives. Get used to it. Because he doesn't pay attention to reality, he thinks that not revealing the fact that I fooled around with another girl at camp once in 5th grade makes me Hitler or something...”

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- The exposition slips into criticism. You shouldn't criticize the author in the exposition. Save that for the thesis defense.
- Several aspects of Mappes' argument are either unclear or inaccurate. What does it mean to say that “you can't lie or rape anybody”? Why does Mappes think that there's something wrong with not revealing past homosexual experiences, and under what circumstances does he think that it's wrong? The exposition doesn't make it clear.

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  - Just assert your thesis as if it were obvious, or justify it using only reasons that your dialectical opponent is incredibly unlikely to accept.

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- Do:
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- Don't:
  - Insult the author or call them stupid. Besides being bad philosophy — such *ad hominem* attacks don't give me any reason to think that the author's argument is bad — it is just bad intellectual hygiene. You're unlikely to ever learn very much if you treat everyone who disagrees with you as though they were idiots.

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- Don't:
  - Focus on the *empirical questions*. Whether the author's empirical claims are true is a matter to be decided in other departments. Here, we're interested in whether or not their conclusion follows from the empirical claims they have made.

## Good Thesis Defense

“...We have seen that, according to Soble, it is permissible to make a threat of the form “Have sex with me or else I will X” so long as one has the *right* to X. However, this criterion leads to trouble when we consider more complicated cases. For instance, consider a landlord whose rent is the lowest in town, and whose tenants are too poor to afford many other houses. This landlord has the right to make next year’s rent whatever he likes. However, it would be impermissible for this landlord to tell his tenants “Have sex with me or I will raise next year’s rent \$300.” This is as clear a case of sexual exploitation as we are likely to find. However, on Soble’s criterion, it comes out as permissible. This constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum* of Soble’s view...”

## Bad Thesis Defense

“ Soble says that it's ok to threaten loved ones, but it's pretty plainly not ok to say to your girlfriend 'have sex with me or I'll find another girlfriend.' If Soble thinks this, then I guess that explains why he's still single at the age of 43. I wouldn't want to date somebody who thought it was ok to say things like that to me. Nobody has the right to threaten anybody else, ever, period. Case closed. End of story. Ok? Have we all got that? Is it that hard? Since Soble's obviously wrong, Mappes is correct.”



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- This argument appeals to premises that Soble would obviously not accept. Soble *does* think that it's ok to make certain threats.
- The defense does not treat Soble with the respect that he deserves. It resorts to *ad hominem* attacks rather than dealing with Soble's ideas.

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- The defense assumes that, simply because Soble's position is incorrect, Mappes' position is correct. This does not follow. Both Mappes and Soble could be wrong. Do not overstate what you have shown.

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- And then, you want to tell the author why this response of theirs ultimately fails. [The ‘Reply’ part]

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- Your responses should *fully address* the concerns raised by the objections.

## Good Objections and Replies

“Soble might want to respond that the landlord actually *doesn't* have the right to make this threat, since his tenants have a right to not be affronted with such sexual exploitation. However, whether the landlord's threat constitutes sexual exploitation comes down to the question of whether it was a permissible or an impermissible threat. If it is a permissible threat, like the threat “have sex with me, or I'll find another girlfriend”, then it *wouldn't* constitute sexual exploitation. And whether a threat “Have sex with me or I will X” is permissible or not was supposed to be settled by Soble's criterion of whether the speaker has the right to X. So Soble is not entitled to say that the tenants were sexually *exploited*. That's something that his criterion of impermissible threats is supposed to earn him. And, given his criterion, the landlord's threat does not constitute sexual exploitation. So much the worse, I say, for Soble's criterion.

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- The objections are not dealt with. There is no reply.

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- The Summary gives the reader a chance to step back from the nitty-gritty of your paper and reflect on its large-scale argumentative structure. It gives them a chance to see in the forest after having inspected the trees.