

# A Brief Guide to Philosophical Writing

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*Philosophical writing can be an intimidating prospect for students new to the discipline. This guide will offer advice on constructing a strong philosophical essay and explore how philosophical writing differs from other types of writing.*

## Structuring a Philosophical Essay

### Thesis

- ❖ A strong thesis statement is incredibly important because it lets your reader know what you will be arguing.
- ❖ Your thesis should be stated clearly and precisely.
- ❖ It should probably appear at the end of your first paragraph because that's where the reader expects to find it. Try to avoid excessive set-up. Get into the meat of the paper quickly.
- ❖ Types of theses include: interpretive (arguing for a specific understanding of a text), comparative (making a claim about the relationship between two views), critical (assessing the merit of a stance or argument), responsive to criticism (defending an

argument or view against potential criticism), internally critical (arguing that certain conflicting parts of a philosopher's work are superior to others), and clarificatory (making explicit the assumptions necessary for defending a philosopher's claim).

**Note:** A descriptive title is also a useful tool for telling the reader what you will be arguing.

### Making An Argument

- ❖ The primary work of your paper is to provide support for your thesis and/or criticize objections to your thesis.
- ❖ Your arguments should be clearly stated and easily understandable by anyone with comparable background knowledge.
- ❖ Address potential counterarguments! Anticipate

and rebut possible objections to your thesis. These could be objections discussed in class or ones you formulate yourself.

### Additional Considerations

- ❖ While you want to explain your reasoning fully, you must also be wary of including extraneous information. Do not summarize everything the philosopher said on your topic. Instead, be discerning about what information is relevant to your thesis.
- ❖ Making an outline is an incredibly useful strategy to make sure that your line of argument is clear, coherent, and adequate. It's also a good way to check for unnecessary information and paragraphs or sections that don't advance your paper.

## Make Sure Your Thesis is Consistent

When you finish a paper, always check that the thesis restated in your final paragraph is the same as in your first paragraph (and is supported throughout).

When your thesis changes over the course of a paper, it is a success because it means that you've learned something. That said, make absolutely sure that you go back and edit the rest of your paper to reflect and support your new thesis.



## Commonly Misused Terms

**Thus/Therefore:** Use only after making a complete argument for what follows.

**Valid/Sound:** These are ways of formally evaluating an argument. In a valid argument, the premises logically ensure that the conclusion is true. In a sound argument, the premises are true.

**Tenets/Tenants:** Schools of thought have tenets, apartments have tenants!

**Logic/Logical:** Logic has special meaning in philosophy beyond its colloquial usage. Logic is a branch of philosophy concerning the application of formal logical forms and techniques to philosophical problems/arguments.

**Human Nature:** Often used as a “filler” word, perhaps because the student is unsure of the correct term to use. If you find yourself using this term, take a moment to check that human nature is really what’s being explored.

**Important Note:** Avoid using vague language! Imprecision is highly problematic for philosophical writing.



## Stylistic Conventions

- ❖ It’s okay to freely use first person pronouns in philosophical writing. You can make statements like, “I will argue that...” or “My second objection is...”
  - ❖ HOWEVER, you should not use personal pronouns to state your personal belief or opinion. That something is your opinion is usually irrelevant; what matters is that you have reasons.
  - ❖ Briefly define technical or ambiguous terms when necessary.
  - ❖ It’s okay to use the same word many times in a row if it’s a technical term.
- Sometimes students will try to come up with synonyms for technical philosophical terms to prevent repetition. Don’t do that.
- ❖ Rhetorical questions should be used very sparingly. Usually there is a way to transition more smoothly without using this method.
  - ❖ Keep your language clear and simple. Flourish and ornate language work well in certain writing contexts but usually do not belong in a philosophical paper.
  - ❖ Include examples when appropriate. Examples are generally not used enough and can clarify your argument.

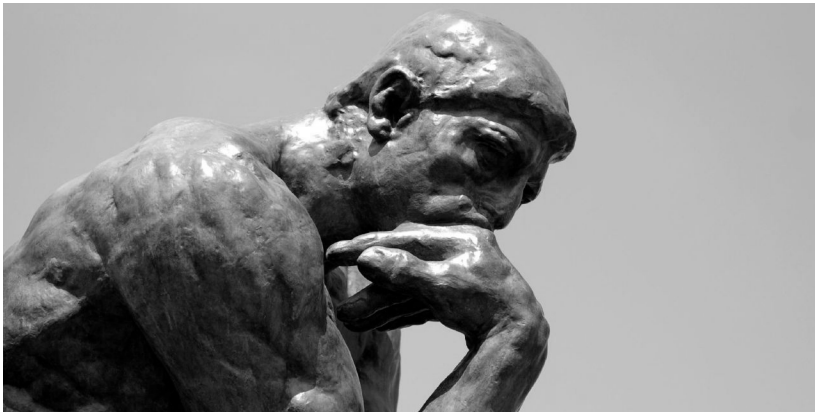
### “Clarity above all”

—Professor Steven Angle on philosophical writing

You could have the most original and well-formulated philosophical argument of all time but if you can’t explain it clearly in your paper, you haven’t communicated anything to your reader.

## Quotation Use

- ❖ When dealing with the history of philosophy, there's often an important interpretive element to the papers you'll be writing. If this is the case, then grounding your argument in the text is important.
- ❖ "A good rule of thumb is: quote it only if there's some point to this specific language, otherwise just paraphrase and footnote it" – Professor Steven Angle
- ❖ Do not over-quote. Ask yourself why you need to include a quote rather than just paraphrasing.
- ❖ Make your quotes as short as possible while still including the relevant information.
- ❖ Block quotes are okay if textual interpretation is a central part of the assignment.
- ❖ If you choose to include a quotation, make sure to analyze it. Do not merely rephrase what the quote says. Explain how it relates to your argument.



## Content Resources

It's important to make sure that you have a strong understanding of the subject matter before you begin writing. Sometimes students will regurgitate phrases and concepts that they've heard emphasized in class. This is a good starting point but it's not enough. You have to understand how the central concepts relate to each other and *what they really mean*.

So you're worried you don't fully understand. What resources can help?

**Your Professor:** Go to your professor's office hours with a list of specific questions. Ask clarifying questions during or after class.

**Your Peers:** If meeting with the professor is too intimidating, get a group of students together to discuss the text.

**Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:** This is an incredible online resource with articles on a wide range of topics written by respected members of the field.  
<http://plato.stanford.edu/>

**Other Online Resources:**  
 Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy:  
<http://www.iep.utm.edu/>

Routledge Encyclopedia  
<https://www.rep.routledge.com/>

## Resources for Grammar and Plagiarism

As in any work of academic writing, it's important to be sure that you're using proper grammar. Mechanical errors can greatly detract from an otherwise strong philosophy paper. Additionally, it's important to be careful not to accidentally plagiarize. Below are some resources to help you identify errors in both of these areas.

**Addressing Common Grammar Errors:**  
<https://writing-speech.dartmouth.edu/learning/materials-first-year-writers/attending-grammar>

**Proper Citation:**  
<http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/documentation.html>

**Grammar for ESL Students:**  
<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/678/01/>

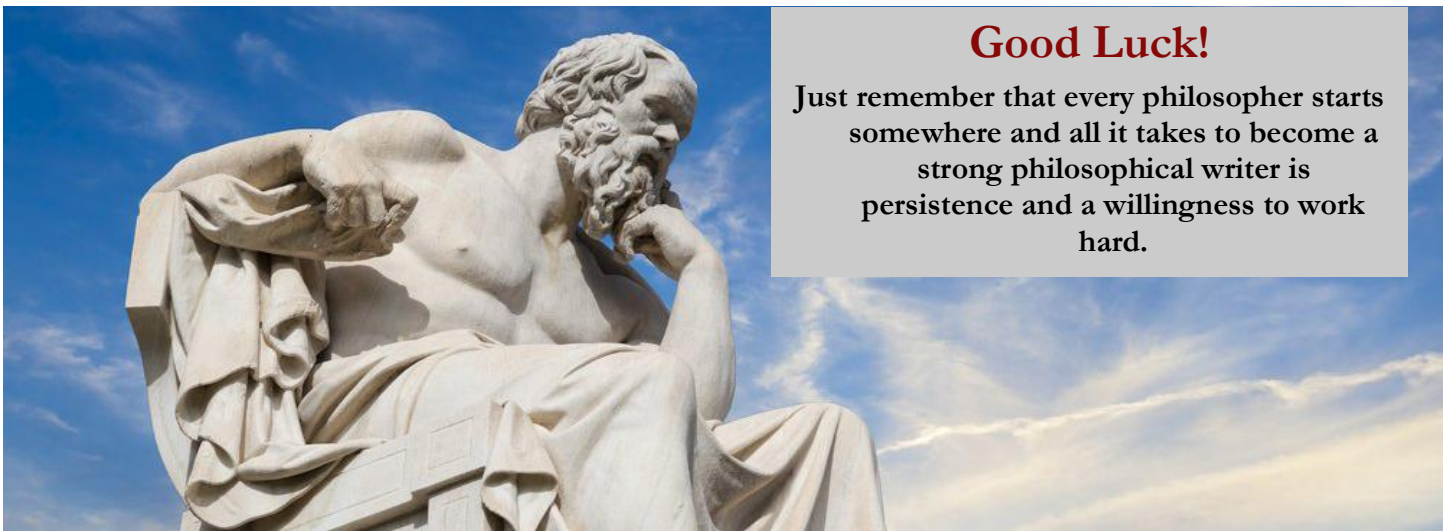


## Other Philosophical Writing Guides

- ❖ The Harvard Guide to Writing the Philosophical Paper:
  - [http://philosophy.fas.harvard.edu/files/phildept/files/brief\\_guide\\_to\\_writing\\_philosophy\\_paper.pdf?m=1392865522](http://philosophy.fas.harvard.edu/files/phildept/files/brief_guide_to_writing_philosophy_paper.pdf?m=1392865522)
- ❖ MIT Guidelines on Writing a Philosophical Paper:
  - <http://www.mit.edu/~yablo/writing.html>
- ❖ How to Write a Philosophical Essay by Amy Kind of Claremont McKenna College
  - <http://www1.cmc.edu/pages/faculty/AKind/Intro01s/writing.htm>
- ❖ Tips on Writing a Philosophy Paper by Douglas W. Portmore of American University
  - <https://www.american.edu/cas/philrel/pdf/upload/tips.pdf>

## Resources I Consulted in Making This Guide

- ❖ Interview with Professors Steve Angle of Wesleyan University
- ❖ A Guide to Writing Philosophical Papers assembled by Professor Joe Rouse of Wesleyan University
- ❖ The Harvard Guide to Writing the Philosophical Paper
- ❖ A handout on common mechanical writing issues written by Professor Angle
- ❖ Finally, I drew heavily upon my personal experiences as a writing tutor for an introductory level philosophy course



## Good Luck!

Just remember that every philosopher starts somewhere and all it takes to become a strong philosophical writer is persistence and a willingness to work hard.