

# HOW TO WRITE (NOT TERRIBLE) PHILOSOPHY PAPERS

Manuel Vargas  
UC San Diego Philosophy  
Last updated 02.10.21



*Summary:* This handout covers information that can prevent you from writing an especially bad philosophy paper. Yes, this handout is long, but that's just how much I care, and anyway, philosophy papers aren't like most papers you have been taught to write. Section one of the handout covers the general principles for writing philosophy papers. In section two, the handout makes explicit the six elements needed for any paper you will submit in this course (this is a particularly important section, especially if you haven't written a philosophy paper before). The third section discusses issues of style and tone. The fourth and final section gives you some sense of how I evaluate papers.

## I. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

**Understand the nature of a philosophy paper.** This is a paper about arguments. It is not a biographical paper, exploring your feelings or personal experiences as you see them pertaining to the topic. It is not a record of your stream of consciousness, detailing whatever thought happened to float through your head the evening before the paper was due. It is not an exercise in poetic writing. It is definitely not an invitation to make declarations about your religious convictions or your favorite divinely inspired text. It is a paper about only one thing: arguments.

Your goal is to provide excellent arguments in favor of your view, to consider the strongest potential criticisms of your view, and to provide a thoughtful response to those criticisms. If you can do all that with clarity of language, your paper is unlikely to suck.

**What should you assume about your reader?** Assume your reader is someone who doesn't know much about philosophy but is pretty smart and a generally reasonable person. She hasn't read the articles you will be assigned for this class. However, she won't need to because you will explain to her in clear and concise sentences what she needs to know in order to understand the issue you are addressing. Here's the thing to keep in mind, though: because your target reader is pretty smart, she is likely to make good observations or criticisms to obvious weaknesses in the paper. So be precise, cautious, and thorough—because that's what your grader will be striving for, too.

**You are going to have to unlearn some things.** Your high school English teacher worked really hard to teach you how to write in a particular way. Unfortunately, philosophy papers have their own rules that differ from what may have been drilled into you back then. So, you may have to have to unlearn some things. Here are some things to know. First, you can use "I" (i.e., first person) in your writing. Seriously. Second, it is okay and almost certainly preferable to make your thesis painfully explicit ("In this paper I argue that . . .") Third, simple and direct sentences are waaaay better than long, complicated, or indirect sentences. Fourth, it is okay to refer to prior sections of your paper ("in section 1, I argued that . . ."). Fifth, there are no strict rules about how many sentences have to be in a paragraph. Shorter paragraphs are better than long paragraphs, and you generally want one main idea per paragraph, but these are rules of thumb.

Really.

### Avoid rookie mistakes!

- In papers of the size you will be writing, the narrower the topic, the better. It is a red flag if you think that in a short paper you have to take on all aspects of an argument that a professional philosopher spent 40 pages developing. You are probably not focusing narrowly enough on the topic.
- Make sure you have read the whole text of what you are writing about. Students sometimes think they can get away with reading only one section and then get confused when they get a bad grade on the paper, unaware of the fact that they never got to the part where the author explains his or her more complicated views on the subject. Similarly, if we read several articles on the subject matter, make sure you have read all the relevant articles. Which, of course, you do anyway.
- Avoid coming up with interesting synonyms for philosophy terminology. You wouldn't try to think of coming up with a synonym for 'enzyme' or 'molecule' in a science class. Don't try to come up with a synonym for 'freedom of the will' or 'substance dualism' in this class.
- Never say something like "since the dawn of time, humans have wondered about . . ." Trust me. For starters, humans weren't at the dawn of time on any reasonable construal of that idea.

. . . and **ABSOLUTELY required**: Any paper you turn in for this class will need **an explicitly stated thesis claim somewhere in the first paragraph**. If you don't know what that means, you should come talk to me immediately. Regardless of its other virtues, without a clearly stated thesis, your paper cannot move out of the B range— and that is only if I am feeling generous and everything else is pretty much on point.

These are general pieces of advice. The real work, the mechanics of non-sucky philosophy papers, is the subject of the next section.

## II. THE SIX FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENTS

**1. Get the exegesis right:** When you are doing the part of your paper that involves exposition of what the author allegedly says, make sure you get it right. Talk to other students. Talk to your TA (if you have one). Talk to your professor. Nothing is worse for your grader than getting an otherwise great paper that just misunderstands what the author(s) actually meant. One way of doing that is to be very clear on two things. First, make sure you understand what any particular article or chapter is intending to do. For instance, it is clear that Hume doesn't think induction is justified. But what is the relation of this idea to his criticism of causation or to the idea of uniformity in nature? Getting clear on what someone is claiming is absolutely essential.

**2. Make arguments:** It isn't enough to say that someone doesn't take into consideration something that occurred to you—you have to explain why that consideration is important. For example, it isn't enough to say that Frankfurt misunderstands the concept of freedom. That may be true. Even so, you need to give reasons for why I should think you are right, and why it matters. Simply saying it is so, even if you turn out to be right, is typically unacceptable in a philosophy paper.

Relatedly, a lot of philosophy is about issue for which empirical information is inadequate to resolving the issue, doesn't yet exist, or is broadly irrelevant to the core issue. So, don't be alarmed if your arguments don't end up systematically appealing to experimentally verifiable claims, but instead, something like principles that survive critical reflection by a community of disinterested reasoners. That said, when the argument does turn on an empirical matter, it is usually good to note this and to cite relevant evidence. However, paper topics in this class are ordinarily not designed to require you to engage with empirical

studies.

**3. Think about counterexamples, counterexamples, and also counterexamples:** This is one of the most important tools in your bag of philosophy tricks. When criticizing a paper, counterexamples can allow you to quickly show the implausibility of some claim. Of course, this cannot always be done so don't be disappointed if you can't come up with a compelling counterexample in every paper you write in this class. But it is an ideal to strive for.

Counterexamples are also important when you are defending your position, because one of the most important things to do is to consider possible counterexamples to your claim. For instance, if you think free will should be understood as any instance of reasoning about what to do, what do you say about potential counterexamples like addicts, people who are being manipulated without their knowledge or consent, and so on?

**4. Do self-critical work:** Something that you should really try to do when you have finished making your main argument is to consider how someone would reply. This is really just a broadening of the point made above about considering counterexamples and it is repeated a couple of paragraphs below in the comments about "the basic format of any philosophy paper." Work on trying to figure out how someone might object to what you have said and whether your position can overcome the response. As suggested above, one way of doing this is considering possible counterexamples. Doing this can make the difference between a good paper and a great paper. Of course, in papers of the size you are writing, this can be extremely difficult to do. Nevertheless, this is worth trying to work in, in any part of a paper topic where you are given an opportunity to get critical.

**5. Follow the basic format of any philosophy paper you will write as an undergraduate:**

- a. **Introduction:** short, to the point, and containing a **clearly presented thesis** (e.g., "In this paper I argue that van Inwagen's Consequence Argument is unsuccessful because it makes an unwarranted assumption about the definition of 'can'." Alternately: "Van Inwagen's Consequence Argument can be successfully defended against objections to a supposedly unwarranted assumption about the definition of 'can'.") [And yes, unlike many other academic papers, use of the first person is permissible in philosophy papers.]
- b. **Presentation of the argument** or claim you are going to analyze (e.g., "Van Inwagen claims that if determinism is true, that we cannot do otherwise . . .")
- c. **Analysis of the argument** (e.g., "The key claim is #4. Here, van Inwagen interprets 'can' in the following controversial way"). This is the part where you give reasons for thinking that the claim or argument you are analyzing is problematic. This section is typically the first place where you display your ingenuity.
- d. **Consider a response** to your analysis (e.g., "Van Inwagen could respond to the objection just raised in the following way . . ."). This is your second opportunity to display your creativity, knowledge, and philosophical power. In this part, you try to defend the argument as best as you can, in a way that is consistent with the account or the overall spirit of the original paper, argument, or philosopher.
- e. **Repeat.** You will need to repeat doing (C) and (D) as necessary, based on how far you can push the

argument, the amount of detail you are including, and the requirements of the paper. The more detailed you can make (C) and (D), the more original it is, and the more of it you do, the better your paper is likely to be. Of course, one or two really well-done criticisms are always better than 50 minor criticisms, even if the fifty are pursued through many levels. In fact, **in your typical undergraduate paper, you really ought to look at discussing only one or two arguments in any detail.** If you are pursuing more arguments than that, you are either biting off more than you can chew or else you are being too superficial.

- f. **Conclude.** Tell the reader how it all pans out and ultimately supports your thesis claim. If at the end of your paper, you realize that the argument got someplace you didn't expect, go back and change your thesis claim to reflect that. Then, make sure the rest of the paper makes sense in light of the new view you are articulating. There is nothing wrong with changing your mind in light of how the arguments work out. If you are doing philosophy properly, this sort of thing should happen with some frequency.

**6. Follow the formatting checklist:** The key here is to remember that your professor or grader is going to have to do a ton of grading, so anything you can do to make his or her life easier is going to be well-received. Here are some things you should verify about your paper before it is submitted.

- For papers submitted online:** if your paper is submitted online (Blackboard, Canvas, turnitin, etc.), you should not need any identifying information on the paper, but if you are concerned you can have a separate page at the END of the essay with identifying information. This way, it is more feasible for the grader to conduct anonymous grading.
- For papers that you are required to submit in hardcopy form:** You should have a **separate, tree-killing title page** with your name, paper title, word count, class name—and any other info useful for identifying you—listed on that page, and only that page. This is important: your name and other identifying information should not be anywhere else on the paper. This way, the person grading it can flip over the title page and grade your paper fully anonymously, thereby minimizing the possibility of bias in grading. Also, use a printer with sufficient ink. Be kind to your grader and s/he will have less reason to be unkind to you.
- Give me **page numbers**. dagnabbit! The absence of page numbers really chaps my hide because sometimes the grader will want to reference something on a specific page and then they have to waste time counting pages to do so. Forewarned is fair warned: I am always tempted to take out of your point total any numbers I have to put on your pages. Yes, this is a pet peeve.
- 1" margins, all the way around. Don't cheat—these things stand out when you grade a lot of papers.
- Footnotes are fine. Just make sure they are at the bottom of the page and not the end (i.e., footnotes and not endnotes), so I don't have to flip back and forth all the time.
- Citations: Do them properly, i.e., according to some standard format (which matters less than whether you are doing it consistently). The point is to let the reader know where any quotes are coming from. You shouldn't have to do too much quoting, but when you do, do it right.
- Article titles go in quotes; book titles are underlined, or better, italicized.
- Unless explicitly asked to, avoid quoting unpublished things, especially handouts by your instructor. Instead, go for the chunks of text that gave rise to the contents of these handouts.

### III. BEAUTY TIPS FOR THAT SPECIAL PAPER IN YOUR LIFE

- **MV's House of Style:** Anybody that tells you style doesn't ever matter in academia is either lying or clueless. Style matters in a lot of different things, and philosophy papers are no exception. The house style for the discipline of philosophy is writing that is BORING. That means "bare bones" sentences where you focus less on beauty and more on simplicity and clarity. If philosophy papers are going to be exciting, they should be exciting in virtue of the arguments and not in virtue of your use of adjectives. Basically, write something like nearly any philosophy article written after 1960. [And again, in philosophy, first person pronouns are okay!]
- **The secret to saying true things in philosophy papers:** Besides getting lucky or being right, the best way to say true things involves what may seem like a stylistic point: be cautious how you phrase things. Don't go for a claim like "The locked room example totally devastates the principle of alternate possibilities" or "Armstrong's position bastardizes the concept into absurdity" (actual quotes from undergrad papers I've seen). Both claims sound arrogant and less plausible than "The locked room example presents a compelling reason to reject the principle of alternate possibilities" or "If my objection works, Armstrong's position appears to face serious difficulty." A subtler conclusion is going to be far more convincing to a thoughtful reader and less likely to make you sound like someone who understands very little about what he or she is talking about. It also has the benefit of being more likely true. Bear in mind that these are smart people writing these articles and that they have thought longer and harder about them than most of us will ever get a chance to do. That means that they have probably heard all of our objections before and may well have some equally "devastating" responses to them. That doesn't mean that we can't generate new, compelling, or true observations about their views. But, some self-awareness that these issues are tough and difficult to sort out won't hurt the plausibility of your work.
- **Charity begins at home:** In contemporary philosophy, there is a lot of (at least stated) interest in reading other philosophers in a way that puts their claims in the best possible light. Good philosophy doesn't just attack what other people said. There are bad arguments everywhere, and it isn't very interesting to just go after someone for making a bad argument. The really interesting thing is whether or not you could beat the position if it were as well defended as possible. Sometimes, it means that you try to figure out the way the philosopher could have said the truest things and then you go after that. Other times, it means that you should be willing to entertain making a minor repair to a philosopher's position, in order to accommodate your criticism. Reading charitably is part of the spirit of cooperative problem solving that is the nature of this endeavor.

### IV. GRADING AND EVALUATION

#### I. Overview

What I mean by a C range grade is what it meant in olden times: it signifies that you have a satisfactory command of the material. Roughly, a C range paper gets most things right, only minor things wrong, and demonstrates an adequate grasp of the issues. The conventional "repeat the stuff in class or the text or what the professor says" is a reliable way to get a 'C' grade. I'm okay with that if you are. If you want something in the B range, you have to do some that takes your paper beyond the material we read and discussed in class. After reading your paper your grader should have a clear idea about what your unique and good contribution to the issue is. For an A range paper, I have to have a clear idea about what your unique and excellent contribution to the issue is.

My goal is for you to improve, and to become a better writer and thinker than you were when you started the class.

## **2. Comments on the papers**

What you get back in the way of comments depends on lots of factors (if I'm grading, if there is a TA and so on). However, if there is only one paper assigned in this course, or it is the last assignment of the course, and you want to receive comments on your paper, then indicate this at the top of the first page of the paper. I'm happy to put comments on any paper if you plan on reading them, so if that is you, don't hesitate to ask. Much less cool is asking for comments you don't intend to look at.

If there are 2 or more paper writing assignments in this class, the presumption is that comments are designed to help your philosophical work get better. **READ THE COMMENTS CAREFULLY; THINK ABOUT THEM, AND PAY ATTENTION TO THEM!!!!** Here's why: if you don't, your grader is less likely to be generous on your next draft, paper, or piece of work. That is, your grader is going to be irritated if she or he evidently put more work into thinking about your paper than you put in to thinking about how to learn from my comments. The whole point of the comments—besides trying to, you know, teach you something—is to get any difficulties or problems addressed right away, before they have a chance to do real damage to your GPA. And again, for any final paper, I will not put comments on it unless you indicate an interest in receiving comments on the first page of the paper.

Here are some things for which you can be penalized:

- Being off-topic or failing to fully complete the assignment
- Not defending the claims you are making.
- Ignoring stylistic and formatting requirements.

## **3. So you don't like the grade you got . . .**

If this is your first paper in a class with multiple assignments, then hey, this is just the grade on the very first paper of this class. This is not that large a portion of your final grade, and it usually takes people a while before they learn to write respectable papers of the sort required by this course. By the end of the course, I expect that most people will be pretty successful at writing excellent humanities papers, so don't freak out if you got a lower grade than you are used to getting. You are undoubtedly very bright and will learn how to do this very quickly.

If this is the only paper grade for the class, it ain't the end of the world. A paper grade is merely a reflection of what you did on this particular paper at this particular time. Think of it as an important learning opportunity. You now know to talk to your professor or grader before you write your paper, to swap paper drafts with classmates to get help improving your paper, and to do multiple drafts of a paper if you want it to show your best work.

## **4. You are still unhappy**

If you do have serious objections about your grade, think the comments don't make sense, or still don't understand what you can do to improve, by all means come talk to your TA and/or professor. We can't help you solve anything unless we know you need and want help.