

## Tips and Rules for Writing Philosophy Papers<sup>1</sup>

1. **Avoid beginning your paper with a sweeping generalization.** (For example, “Since the dawn of time, people have contemplated the existence of God...” or “Beginning in ancient Greece, logic has been used to derive paradoxes...”) These beginnings waste precious space. Get right to it.
2. **Avoid using dictionary definitions of philosophical terms in your paper.** Looking up “valid” or “analytic” in the dictionary is going to be more of a hindrance than a help. A regular dictionary won’t help you when you are working with *technical terms*, which often have a different meaning in philosophy than in everyday life. For example, most people use the term “person” only to refer to a human. However, in certain philosophical contexts, we use “person” to mean any rational, conscious being, including non-human animals. In these contexts, we state up front what we mean by the term, so there is no confusion.
3. **Avoid stilted, flowery, or wordy language.** Don’t try to write like a famous philosopher; many of them are very unclear writers. Famous philosophers are often famous *in spite* of their writing, not *because* of it. Also, don’t use a thesaurus to come up with alternative ways of saying a phrase, just to avoid repeating yourself. Use the words that best express exactly what you mean. If this means using the same word or phrase several times, then go for it. It’s more important that you be *clear* than that you be poetic.
4. **Keep your sentences short.** The longer the sentence is, the more opportunities there are for making what was once a clear point completely incomprehensible. (The first sentence of Derek Parfit’s *Reasons and Persons*: “Like my cat, I often simply do what I want to do.” Short and simple!)
5. **Feel free to use “I”.** Ignore what your 8<sup>th</sup>-grade English teacher taught you. “I” is fine. (In fact, feel free to ignore most of what your 8<sup>th</sup>-grade English teacher taught you.)
6. **Assume that your reader is STUPID, LAZY, and MEAN.** Assume that your reader will not understand anything too complex, so you have to explain every step to her. Assume she will not bother to go back and re-read to figure out what you might have said, so you’ve got to get through to her the very first time. Assume she will not read you charitably, so she will take you to have said only what you’ve put down on paper, no matter whether you might have meant something else. (Of course, IN FACT your reader will try to be quite charitable; however, if you assume that she is stupid, lazy, and mean, you are more likely to write the clearest prose that you can manage.)
7. **Make sure your paper is well-organized.** Make the organization OBVIOUS to your reader. Beat her over the head with it. State at the beginning how your argument is going to be organized. Use “sign-posting” to remind your reader of the organization of your paper. For example, in your introduction you might say “In this paper I give a critical analysis of Descartes’ evil deceiver argument. The paper has **three** parts. **First**, I explain how Descartes formulates this

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<sup>1</sup> Some sections excerpted from Sanford Shieh’s “Guide for Writing a Philosophy Paper, Part II: Content and Style.”

argument in his *Meditations*. **Next**, I present a significant objection to his argument. **Finally**, I give a possible reply to this objection.” Other signposts you might use: “I will begin by...” “Before I say what is wrong with the argument, I want to...” “This passage suggests...” “I will now defend the claim that...” “Further support for this conclusion comes from...”, etc. Check the organization of your paper by asking what the point or purpose of each paragraph is, what it says, and why it is located where it is located in relation to the rest of the paper. Each paragraph should have a point, should say something not already said, and should be located where it is located *on purpose*, not because it just happened to be the next thought that occurred to you.

8. **Use quotations sparingly.** In short philosophy papers, long block-quotes are very rarely necessary. Use quotations only when they are especially necessary to explaining the author’s point. When possible, incorporate short quotations into your own sentences rather than quoting entire passages. Example: ‘Kant’s claim that “A hundred real thalers do not contain the least coin more than a hundred possible thalers” illustrates the principle that existence is not a property’ (504). When possible, put the author’s argument into your own words. But remember, even if you are paraphrasing part of the text rather than quoting it, you still need to cite the place in the text from which your paraphrasal comes.

9. **Read your paper out loud or to a friend.** Reading your paper out loud will help you to identify awkward or ungrammatical constructions. If it doesn’t sound good, change it. Reading your paper to a friend will help you to identify areas in which you have not provided a clear enough explanation. Although you are expected to be writing with a high degree of philosophical sophistication, you are still expected to be able to do so in a way that a reasonably educated person with no background in philosophy could understand. This is very difficult.

10. **Have a thesis and tell me what it is.** It’s very important that your paper *has* a thesis. Otherwise it is just a book report. It’s equally important that you *say* what your thesis is. Otherwise you leave the reader in the dark. Don’t horde your thesis until the end as a way of generating suspense. Get it off your chest right way. Then the reader knows what the point of all your arguing is.