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Philosophy Writing Advice

There are numerous excellent guides online for writing a good philosophy paper. Here are some of my favorites, which I suggest you read through on your own time if you haven't yet:

- Jim Pryor's Gude: http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html
- Michael Huemer's Guide to Writing: http://spot.colorado.edu/~huemer/writing.htm
- Angela Mendelovici's Sample Paper: https://prezi.com/z4h1_fwilbxj/a-sample-philosophy-paper/

I won't replicate what has already been done in these guides, but instead tell you about some of the errors I most often encounter when reading undergraduate philosophy papers, and give you some advice to help you avoid these errors.

Content. Of course the most important errors pertain to content. Your arguments should be valid and sound. Ideally they'll also be interesting. You shouldn't mischaracterize any views you're discussing, and always present your opponents' views in a charitable light. Your writing should be clear and intelligible (just write in normal conversational prose, there's no benefit to using formal or literary prose). Don't use any words or jargon you wouldn't use if you were explaining your paper to an interested and intelligent friend of yours who isn't in the course. A philosophy paper should present *and argue for* some thesis. It's not enough to just summarize things we read in the course: your paper should *not* be purely exegetical. Nor should you ever simply state what you think without any argument or justification. Your reader wants to see you *defend* some thoughts of your own about the course material, not just state them with no rationale.

Introductions. It should be transparent early on in your paper what the goal of your paper is and how you plan to go about achieving that goal. Your words are too precious to waste on fluff, just cut to the chase, say what you're going to do in the paper, then get to work doing it. (E.g., a sentence like 'In this paper I'll argue that ___' is a great way to start.) If a friend of yours in the course asks you 'What are you arguing in your paper?' then you should have no trouble answering with a few sentences. If you can't then it probably means that you haven't gotten sufficiently clear on what you're planning to argue/do in your paper.

Presupposing too much. Your target audience is an interested and intelligent reader who has taken an intro philosophy course *but who isn't familiar with the texts/arguments you're discussing.* I.e., your paper should be self-contained and accessible to such a person. If you're going to criticize an argument, first summarize that argument in your own words. If you need to use some non-standard technical terms then first explain what you're understanding those terms to mean. A good heuristic is to write your paper as you would if you were trying to explain it to a clever friend of yours who has taken an intro philosophy course but is not at all familiar with the current course's material. And a good habit to get into is to read

your paper aloud when you're done to such a friend (a clever friend of yours who isn't in the course). At no point should your friend be thinking 'wait what does that fancy technical term mean?', 'am I already supposed to know what that argument is?', 'I have no idea what's going on!', …

Brain dump. If you're going to criticize some aspect of Author X's argument (e.g. it's invalid, one of its premises is false, etc.) then you should first summarize that argument in your own words. That *doesn't* mean you should say anything else about Author X, or Author X's views on unrelated issues that you're not discussing, or other arguments that Author X makes in the paper you're discussing, etc.. Students often just write down a bunch of things they've learnt in the course, with no eye to whether what they're writing is even relevant to what they're trying to do in their papers. Doing so only wastes your words and detracts from your argument (by leading your reader on needless detours).

What's happening?! At every point in your paper it should be clear to your reader why you're saying what you're saying: i.e. what you're trying to do in the paper, and and how what you're saying now contributes to your achieving that end. Before writing you should try to organize your thoughts: ask yourself what you want to argue in the paper, what you need to say in order to make that argument, and what's the optimal structure to make your line of reasoning transparent to your reader. Always imagine that you're explaining your paper in person to a reader, and ask yourself: what do I need to say first to give the reader the requisite background to understand my argument, how can I convey my interest in this issue and draw the reader in, what order should I say things in, what objections should I anticipate, and so on. It's always a good idea to read a draft of your paper aloud to yourself before editing: at no point should a listener be thinking 'Wait, why is this being said?', 'What's the point of this paragraph and why is it here?, 'Where are we going with this?', 'Am I supposed to already know what that argument/fancy jargon is?', …

Inequivalent glosses on a view. Think first about exactly what you want to say in some sentence/paragraph, then write precisely what you want to say *once*. Students often write numerous sentences back to back, which aren't quite synonymous, yet all gesture in some direction in slightly inequivalent ways. If you find yourself doing this then it means that you haven't gotten clear on exactly what you want to say. Stop writing. Step back and start *thinking*. Figure out exactly what you want to say, then write it down once. Delete all of the slightly inequivalent glosses that don't quite say what you're trying to say.

Trying to do too much. It's best to take on a manageable task (appropriate to the length of the paper) and to do it well. It's hard enough to have a modest aim and to actually accomplish it, making all of your reasoning totally clear, anticipating objections, and so on. Students often take on some huge task, and then end up glossing over lots of important details, at best vaguely gesturing towards some sketchy line of reasoning and failing to address obvious holes in their arguments. Don't do that! For this reason, the best term papers tend to be at least reasonably closely engaged with some aspect of the course readings. For instance, objecting to some specific argument from one of the readings. If you try to invent your own totally novel theory about some perennial philosophical topic

from the course, in a way that doesn't engage at all with any of the readings, the most likely outcome is a very sketchy hand-wavy paper that doesn't accomplish much of anything. Don't worry about making claims that seem grand and profound. It's hard enough to say something clear and precise that stands a chance of being true. Progress is rarely grand and profound: it's slow, happens incrementally, and only seems boring to someone not thinking very much about the issues at hand.

What do you think and why? The assigned readings for the course are rich enough on their own; don't feel any need to go read anything else or explore more literature. Instead you should spend your time *thinking*. Ask yourself, 'What do I actually think about this?'. Again, I want to see you present *and argue for* your own thoughts. It's not enough to just summarize things we read in the course, or say what you think without defending it. There's something comfortable and easy about just absorbing and regurgitating information. Part of what we do in philosophy is learn to adopt a more critical posture. Don't treat course readings like you would a science textbook. Instead, when reading you should constantly be asking yourself things like 'OK why is that true?', 'What's the argument for this?', 'Is this claim supposed to be an independent assumption or follow from that other one?', 'Is this argument compelling?', etc. etc.

Why do you care about this? Writing sucks if you don't care about what you're writing about. Moreover, if you find your topic boring and writing your paper a chore, then almost certainly your reader will feel the same way when reading your paper. You can't fake a genuine sense of excitement and passion about your topic. If you're not passionate about your term paper and excited to work on it, then you probably haven't picked the right topic. <u>*You all have interesting things to say.*</u> We'll see a large range of issues in our course; there will be something here that gets you excited. When you're passionate about your topic, working on your paper will be the opposite of a chore: you'll wake up excited to get to work on it, and actually be invested in doing a good job, rather than viewing it as a hoop to jump through in order to get a good grade on your transcript. And that genuine excitement will come out in your writing.

Starting too late. Writing takes time; *a lot* of time. It doesn't matter how clever you think you are: if you start your paper only a few days before the deadline then it won't be a good piece of work. Again, writing *always* takes longer than you think it will. Even after you think you have your ideas worked out in your head, once you try to write them down you'll see new issues arising, and realize that you haven't gotten clear on various components of your arguments. In this way writing helps us discipline our thoughts. Here's the ideal case: you finish a first draft, leave it for a few days, then come back to it with fresh eyes (and will likely see problems that you didn't see before). Once you do this, you then write up a new draft (not just tweak the old one). Ideally you can repeat this process a few times before the deadline. Of course this is an ideal case, and you have other courses and life to deal with, but to do this process even *once* you'll need to start thinking about your paper 2-3 weeks before the deadline. There's no substitute for leaving yourself time to write and for putting in hard work and many hours in order to get an excellent paper out at the end that you can be genuinely proud of.