

Writing Philosophy



*A Student's Guide to
Writing Philosophy Essays*

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~~Based on this analysis, we can say that the author's argument is sound. The design argument in the form presented in our excerpt does not prove the existence of a God with traditional attributes. Our analysis, however, is not the final word on the topic. There are other arguments relevant to the issues raised that we have not considered.~~

QUICK REVIEW: Basic Definitions

- *Statement*: An assertion that something is or is not the case. A statement is either true or false.
- *Argument*: A combination of statements in which some of them are intended to support another of them. Statements supposedly providing the support are the *premises*; the statement being supported is the *conclusion*.
- *Deductive argument*: An argument that is supposed to offer logically conclusive support for its conclusion. Deductive arguments can be *valid* or *invalid*. A valid argument with true premises is said to be *sound*.
- ~~*Inductive argument*: An argument meant to offer probable support for its conclusion. Inductive arguments can be strong or weak. A strong argument with true premises is said to be cogent.~~

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Rules of Style and Content for Philosophical Writing

Fortunately, there is much in the craft of essay writing that is the same no matter what your subject or purpose. To a comforting degree, writing is writing. There are matters of composition, grammar, punctuation, and usage (topics covered in Chapters 7 and 8) that must be attended to in every kind of essay you write.

Philosophical writing is no exception to this norm. Nonetheless, in some ways it is distinctive—or, as you may be tempted to say, peculiar. Some features of philosophical writing are characteristic of the genre, and some just take on much more importance than they might in many other types of expression. These features concern both content (what is said) and form (how it is said), and you must know how to handle them all if you are to write good philosophy essays.

For guidance, consider the following rules—and through practice learn how to competently apply them.

Rule 3-1 Write to Your Audience

Almost everything you write—from college papers to love notes—is intended for a particular audience. Knowing who your audience is can make all the difference in what you say and how you say it. Unless things have gone terribly awry, you would not ordinarily

address members of the town council the same way you would your one true love, nor your one true love as you would readers of the *New England Journal of Medicine*. You may wonder, then, who is the intended audience of your philosophy paper?

Your instructor, of course, may specify your audience and thus settle the issue for you. Otherwise, you should assume that your audience consists of intelligent, curious readers who know little about philosophy but who are capable of understanding and appreciating a clearly written, well-made paper on many subjects, including philosophy. Unless you have instructions to the contrary, you should not assume that your audience consists of your instructor, professional philosophers generally, philosophy students who know more than you do, or readers who will either agree with everything you say or reject your thesis out of hand. Writing to your proper audience as defined here means that you will have to define unfamiliar terms, explain any points that may be misunderstood, and lay out your argument so that its structure and significance would be clear to any intelligent reader. This approach will both force you to attempt a better understanding of your subject and help you demonstrate this understanding through your writing.

If you know more about your readers than this general description would suggest, then you can tailor your essay to them even better. How much do your readers know about the issue? Are they adamantly opposed to your position? Are they mostly in agreement with you? How important is the issue to them? What common interests do you have with them? Can you expect your essay to change people's mind or just help them better appreciate or tolerate your view? Knowing the answers to any of these questions could change how you present your case.

Rule 3-2 Avoid Pretentiousness

Philosophy is profound, highbrow, and lofty; therefore, you should try to make your philosophy paper sound profound, highbrow, and lofty. Do you believe this? Some people who are new to philosophy do. They think that philosophical writing is supposed to sound grand, as if it were meant for God himself—or God's exalted servant, their instructor. This view is mistaken.

Good philosophy is often profound, but the profundity comes from the ideas or arguments expressed—not from fancy, overblown

writing. Writing that tries to merely *seem* grand is said to be pretentious, and pretentious writing is bad writing whether composed by philosophers or philosophy students. (Alas, some philosophical writing is indeed pretentious.)

Pretentious writing is bad, in part, because it is empty. Like a pastry punctured by a fork, pretentious writing collapses when closely examined, proving that the outside is puffy while the inside has little substance. Philosophy papers are supposed to offer real arguments in support of a worthwhile conclusion. Intelligent readers (especially instructors) are likely to get annoyed or impatient when they discover that pretentious language is covering up a lack of argument or insight. It is far better to concentrate on presenting a good argument in plain, clear language.

Consider this passage:

Indubitably, the question as to whether utilitarianism can, through the utilization of a consideration of parameters that effectuate the amplification of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all who live and breathe in this earthly realm, enhance human happiness is of paramount importance.

This is pretentiousness gone wild, the cause of which is in plain sight. First, we meet several fancy words (with three to five syllables) that can be eliminated or replaced with simpler terms—indubitably, utilization, parameters, effectuate, amplification, and paramount. Second, the passage contains some unnecessarily ornate or lengthy phrases (some of which are also clichés)—the question as to whether; life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; and all who live and breath in this earthly realm. Third, the passage as a whole is pointlessly complex, an annoying problem that partially conceals the ordinariness of the passage's meaning.

Look at this version, with most of the pretentiousness and fuzzi-ness removed:

Whether utilitarian principles can enhance human happiness is an important question.

We have thus gone from a sprawling, bombastic passage to a single, plain sentence without a significant loss in meaning. The new version is better. It is clear, straightforward—and does not pretend to be something it's not. (See Chapter 7 for related discussions on writing effective sentences.)

Rule 3-3 Keep the Authority of Philosophers in Perspective

In Chapter 6 we delve into the documentation of philosophy papers. This rule, however, addresses a related but separate issue: how to use the authority of philosophers in your papers.

As we have seen, it is legitimate to use evidence, including the testimony of experts, to support premises or conclusions in arguments, including arguments put forth in philosophy papers. You must be careful, however, when you try to back up your arguments by citing a philosopher. Remember that in philosophy, the world turns on arguments. Propositions and positions are advanced and challenged, accepted and rejected, based on the worth of relevant arguments. In a philosophical essay, the argument matters most, and the essential questions are whether the conclusion follows from the premises and whether the premises are true. Thus, if a philosopher—even a famous one—carries any weight in your essay, it is only because of his or her arguments. The mere fact that the philosopher is recognized as an authority (or is famous, reputable, or popular) cannot, by itself, have any bearing on whether a proposition is worthy of acceptance. So if you want to prove that all persons have free will, merely showing that a noted philosopher believes that all persons do cannot bolster your case one bit. Citing a good argument devised by the philosopher, however, can strengthen your case—because the argument is good, not because the argument comes from a particular philosopher. (As explained in Chapter 6, the source of any such reference, of course, must be properly documented.)

Rule 3-4 Do Not Overstate Premises or Conclusions

Overstatement is the problem of exaggerating claims, of making an assertion sound stronger or more inclusive than it deserves. We are all guilty of overstatement, most often in everyday speech. We may say, “Everyone dislikes Professor Jones” or “Americans think the French are snobbish” when in fact only *some* students dislike Professor Jones and only *a few* of our American friends think that *some* French people are snobbish. In everyday conversation, such exaggerations are often understood as such and are used innocuously for emphasis. But too often the overstatements are simply distortions, assertions that claim too much and lead us into error or prejudice. To a disconcerting degree, assertions regarding opposing views in

religion, politics, and morality are overstatements. (See Chapter 5, especially discussions of the fallacies known as hasty generalization, slippery slope, and straw man.)

In philosophical essays, overstatement is never acceptable, and you must be on your guard against it. It can raise doubts in your readers about your judgment, your truthfulness, and your arguments. Even one overblown adjective or a single over-the-top phrase can undermine your credibility. Overstatement leads readers to think, “Here is an exaggeration; what else in this essay is exaggerated?”

In philosophical writing, overstatement arises in two ways. First, particular statements—including premises—can be exaggerated. You may be tempted to assert that whatever issue you are addressing in your essay is “the most important issue of our time.” You might declare that a premise is certainly or undoubtedly true (when in fact it is merely probable) or forego important qualifiers such as “some,” “perhaps,” and “many.” You may get carried away and say, for example, that killing another human being is *always* morally wrong, even though you would admit that killing in self-defense is morally permissible.

Second, the conclusions of arguments can be overstated; They can go beyond what logical inference would permit. As we saw in the previous chapter, a conclusion must follow from its premises. Because of your commitment to your conclusion, however, you may overstate it. The result is an invalid or weak argument.

Rule 3-5 Treat Opponents and Opposing Views Fairly

Sometimes it seems that most of what people know about arguing a position has been learned from the worst possible teachers—political debate-type television programs. In these forums, the standard procedure is to attack the character and motivations of opponents, distort or misrepresent opposing views, and dismiss opponents’ evidence and concerns out of hand. This approach is neither condoned nor tolerated in philosophical writing. As we have seen, the ideal in philosophical discourse is the disinterested and fair-minded search for truth among all parties. Abusive or unfair tactics are out of order. They are also ineffective. When readers encounter such heavy-handedness, they are likely to be suspicious of the writer’s motives, to wonder if the writer is close-minded, to question whether his or her assertions can be trusted, or to doubt the worth of arguments defended with such gratuitous zeal.

There are two ways that you can avoid most kinds of unfairness in your papers (both techniques are discussed in detail in Chapter 5):

1. Avoid the straw man fallacy.
2. Avoid the ad hominem fallacy.

The straw man fallacy consists of the distorting, weakening, or oversimplifying of someone's position so it can be more easily attacked or refuted. For example:

The ACLU is opposed to school prayer because they want to force their secular, atheistic worldview down everyone's throat. They want the Supreme Court to forbid even silent, personal prayers of children who happen to be religious.

Here the ACLU and its views on school prayer are mischaracterized to make them seem ridiculous and easy to argue against. It is doubtful that the ACLU (or any other organization) wants to force Americans to abandon their religious beliefs. Likewise, the description of the ACLU's views in the second sentence is inaccurate. Even most religious organizations would not characterize the ACLU's stand on prayer in such a misleading way.

The point is that opposing views and arguments should be described fairly and accurately, acknowledging any strengths they have. This approach is likely to result in (1) your readers viewing you as more honest and conscientious and (2) your trying to find ways to address any weaknesses exposed in your own argument.

The ad hominem fallacy (also known as *appeal to the person*) consists of rejecting a claim on the grounds that there is something wrong not with the claim but with the person who makes it. Consider:

You can't believe anything Jan says about the existence of souls. She's a philosophy major.

We should reject the arguments put forth by the so-called great thinkers who think that there is such a thing as the rights of persons. Who cares what they think?

These arguments are baseless because they try to refute or undermine a claim by appealing to a person's character or motives. But a person's character or motives almost never have any bearing on a claim's worth. Claims must be judged by the reasons they have, or do not have, in their favor.

Rule 3-6 Write Clearly

Being clear is a matter of ensuring that your meaning is understood by the reader. In most kinds of writing, clarity is almost always a supreme virtue, and philosophical writing is no different. In fact, clarity in philosophical prose is arguably more important than in most other types of nonfiction because philosophy deals with so many difficult and unfamiliar ideas.

Lack of clarity in your writing can occur in several ways. Inexperienced writers often produce some very murky papers because too often they assume that because they know what they mean, others will know too. Typically, others do not know. The problem is that new writers have not yet developed the knack of viewing their own writing as others might. In other words, they fail to adopt an objective stance toward their own words. Good writers are their own best critics.

Trying to view your writing as others might takes practice. A trick that often helps is not to look at your writing for a day or two then go back to it and read it cold. You may discover after you take this little break that some passages that seemed clear to you earlier are mostly gibberish. Another technique is to use peer review. Ask a friend to read your paper and pinpoint any passages that seem unclear. Your friend doesn't have to know anything about philosophy. He or she just needs to be like your target audience—intelligent, curious, and able to appreciate what you're trying to do.

Ambiguity can also make writing less clear. A term or statement is ambiguous if it has more than one meaning (and the context doesn't help clear things up). Some ambiguities are *semantic*; they are the result of multiple meanings of a word or phrase. Consider the sentence, "Kids make nutritious snacks." The word *make* could mean *prepare* or *constitute*. If the former, the sentence says that kids can prepare food. If the latter, the sentence means that kids *are* food.

Some ambiguities are *syntactic*; they are the result of the way words are combined. Read this sentence straight through without stopping: "Maria saw the bird with binoculars." Who had the binoculars, Maria or the bird? We don't know because the sentence is poorly written; words are misplaced. If we want the sentence to say that Maria was the one holding the binoculars, we might rewrite it like this: "Using her binoculars, Maria saw the bird."

Often a lack of clarity comes not from ambiguous terms but from vague terms—words that fail to convey one definite meaning. This

failure can be the result of many kinds of sloppiness, but at the head of the list is the tendency to use words that are too general. General words refer to whole groups or classes of things, such as *soldiers*, *artists*, and *books*. Specific words, on the other hand, refer to more particular items, such as *Sgt. Morris*, *van Gogh*, and *The Sun Also Rises*.

There is nothing inherently wrong with using general words; in fact, we must employ them in many circumstances, especially in philosophy. Used to excess, however, they can easily muddy a philosophy paper. Consider these pairs of sentences:

1. According to Hobbes, all persons are capable of free actions.
According to Hobbes, all persons are capable of free actions. A free action is one that is caused by someone's will and that is not constrained by another person or some physical force or barrier.
2. In Kant's view of some aspects of human experience, there are conflicts between what moral considerations may lead us to conclude and acts in which one must aver a state of affairs that is contrary to fact.
Kant believes that lying is always immoral.

At first glance, the first sentence in pair 1 may seem like a straightforward statement, but it is so general that it is almost mysterious. What is a free action? The second passage of the pair is much more specific. It reiterates the first sentence but elaborates on it, stipulating two conditions that must be met before an action can be considered a free action. Notice that the general statement was made more specific by adding more information—information that narrowed down the countless possibilities.

In pair 2, the first sentence is packed with general terms, including *aspects of human experience*, *moral considerations*, and *acts in which one must aver a state of affairs that is contrary to fact*. This sentence is an attempt to say what the second sentence says. The second sentence avoids as many generalities as possible and gets right to the point. The notion that lying is always immoral is, of course, a general principle, but there is much clarity to be gained by expressing it in more specific terms. Notice that in contrast to the first pair, the second pair of sentences obtained greater specificity by using fewer words, not more.

Writing a philosophy paper will always involve using general terms. The key is to make your writing as specific as your subject and

purpose will allow. (See Chapters 7 and 8 for other ways to increase the clarity of your writing.)

[The rest of the chapter is omitted.]