There are a variety of things a philosophy paper can aim to accomplish. It usually begins by putting some thesis or argument on the table for consideration. Then it goes on to do one or two of the following:

Criticize that argument; or show that certain arguments for the thesis are no good Defend the argument or thesis against someone else's criticism

Offer reasons to believe the thesis

Offer counter-examples to the thesis

Contrast the strengths and weaknesses of two opposing views about the thesis

Give examples which help explain the thesis, or which help to make the thesis more plausible Argue that certain philosophers are committed to the thesis by their other views, though they do not come out and explicitly endorse the thesis

## 1.

The early stages of writing a philosophy paper include everything you do *before* you sit down and write your first draft. These early stages will involve *writing*, but you won't yet be trying to write a complete paper. You should instead be taking notes on the readings, sketching out your ideas, trying to explain the main argument you want to advance, and composing an outline.

As I said above, your papers are supposed to demonstrate that you understand and can think critically about the material we discuss in class. One of the best ways to check how well you understand that material is to try to explain it to someone who isn't already familiar with it. I've discovered time and again while teaching philosophy that I couldn't really explain properly some article or argument I thought I understood. This was because it was really more problematic or complicated than I had realized. You will have this same experience. So it's good to discuss the issues we raise in class with each other, and with friends who aren't taking the class. This will help you understand the issues better, and it will make you recognize what things you still don't fully understand.

It's even more valuable to talk to each other about what you want to argue in your paper. When you have your ideas worked out well enough that you can explain them to someone else, verbally, then you're ready to sit down and start making an outline.

Before you begin writing any drafts, you need to think about the questions: In what order should you explain the various terms and positions you'll be discussing? At what point should you present your opponent's position or argument? In what order should you offer your criticisms of your opponent? Do any of the points you're making presuppose that you've already discussed some other point, first? And so on.

The overall clarity of your paper will greatly depend on its structure. That is why it is important to think about these questions before you begin to write.

I strongly recommend that you make an outline of your paper, and of the arguments you'll be presenting, before you begin to write. This lets you organize the points you want to make in your paper and get a sense for how they are going to fit together. It also helps ensure that you're in a position to say what your main argument or criticism is,

I will begin by...

Before I say what is wrong with this argument, I want to...

These passages suggest that...

I will now defend this daim...

Further support for this daim comes from...

For example...

These signposts really make a big difference. Consider the following two paper fragments:

or two points and develop them in depth than to try to cram in too much. One or two well-mapped paths are better than an impenetrable jungle.

Formulate the central problem or question you wish to address at the beginning of your paper, and keep it in mind at all times. Make it clear what the problem is, and why it is a problem. Be sure that everything you write is relevant to that central problem. In addition, be sure to say in the paper how it is relevant. Don't make your reader guess.

One thing I mean by "explain yourself fully" is that, when you have a good point, you shouldn't just toss it off in one sentence. Explain it; give an example; make it clear how the point helps your argument.

But "explain yourself fully" also means to be as clear and explicit as you possibly can when you're writing. It's no good to protest, after we've graded your paper, " ..." Say exactly what you mean, in the first place. Part of what you're being graded on is how well you can do that.

Pretend that your reader has not read the material you're discussing, and has not given the topic much thought in advance. This will of course not be true. But if you write as if it were true, it will force you to explain any technical terms, to illustrate strange or obscure distinctions, and to be as explicit as possible when you summarize what some other philosopher said.

In fact, you can profitably take this one step further and pretend that your reader is *lazy*, *stupid*, and *mean*. He's *lazy* in that he doesn't want to figure out what your convoluted sentences are supposed to mean, and he doesn't want to figure out what your argument is, if it's not already obvious. He's *stupid*, so you have to explain everything you say to him in simple, bite-sized pieces. And he's *mean*, so he's not going to read your paper charitably. (For example, if something you say admits of more than one interpretation, he's going to assume you meant the less plausible thing.) If you understand the material you're writing about, and if you aim your paper at such a reader, you'll probably get an A.

It is very important to use examples in a philosophy paper. Many of the claims philosophers make are very abstract and hard to understand, and examples are the best way to make those claims clearer.

Examples are also useful for explaining the notions that play a central role in your argument. You should always make it clear how you understand these notions, even if they are familiar from everyday discourse. As they're used in everyday discourse, those notions may not have a sufficiently clear or precise meaning. For instance, suppose you're writing a paper about abortion, and you want to assert the claim "A fetus is a person." What do you mean by "a person"? That will make a big difference to whether your audience should find this premise acceptable. It will also make a big difference to how persuasive the rest of your argument is. By itself, the following argument is pretty worthless:

whether it is simply based on a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of X's views. So tell the reader what it is you think X is saying.

Don't try to tell the reader everything you know about X's views, though. You have to go on to offer your own philosophical contribution, too.

Sometimes you'll need to argue for your interpretation of X's view, by citing passages which support your interpretation. It is permissible for you to discuss a view you think a philosopher might have held, or should have held, though you can't find any direct evidence of that view in the text. When you do this, though, you should explicitly say so. Say something like:

inadvertently change the meaning of the text. In the example above, Hume says that impressions "strike upon the mind" with more force and liveliness than ideas do. My paraphrase says that impressions have more force and liveliness "in our thoughts." It's not clear whether these are the same thing. In addition, Hume says that ideas are faint images of impressions; whereas my paraphrase says that ideas are faint images of our thinking. These are not the same. So the author of the paraphrase appears not to have understood what Hume was saying in the original passage.

A much better way of explaining what Hume says here would be the following:

## A

Try to anticipate objections to your view and respond to them. For instance, if you object to some philosopher's view, don't assume he would immediately admit defeat. I magine what his comeback might be. How would you handle that comeback?

Don't be afraid of mentioning objections to your own thesis. It is better to bring up an objection yourself than to hope your reader won't think of it. Explain how you think these objections can be countered or overcome. Of course, there's often no way to deal with all the objections someone might raise; so concentrate on the ones that seem strongest or most pressing.

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Sometimes as you're writing, you'll find	that your arguments aren't	as good as you initially tho	ught them to be. You

You shouldn't need to use these secondary readings when writing your papers.	The point of the papers is to teach

## A

I don't want to claim undue credit for this work. A lot of the suggestions here derive from writing handouts that friends and colleagues lent me. (Alison Simmons and Justin Broackes deserve special thanks.) Also, I've browsed some other writing guidelines on the web, and occasionally incorporated advice I thought my students would find useful. Peter Horban's site deserves special mention. Thanks to Professor Horban for allowing me to incorporate some of his suggestions here.

Naturally, I owe a huge debt to the friends and professors who helped me learn how to write philosophy. I'm sure they had a hard time of it.

If you're a teacher and you think your own students would find this web site useful, you are free to point them here (or to distribute printed copies). It's all in the public good.

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