

Advice On Writing Philosophy Papers

Goal

Achieve a deep understanding of an author or authors' position; think about the arguments *for* and *against* this position; decide which group of arguments *you* find most persuasive; and report your findings to the reader in a compelling and clear manner.

Structure

I. Introduction

Give a brief statement of the position you will be examining, and express your satisfaction or dissatisfaction with this position. Be sure to provide some clues about the particular direction you'll be taking.

II. Body

There are two main tasks involved in writing a critical philosophy paper: *explication* and *critique*.

Explication is the presentation of an author's position as clearly and fairly as possible. Thus explication involves stating the *conclusion*, the *premises* used in the proof of the conclusion, and the *argument* (i.e. the relationship between the premises and the conclusion). Be sure to interpret the position so that it makes the most sense that it can. This is not to be nice. It is in your best interest: for if your interpretation is not the strongest possible, your criticisms might be easily avoided by a stronger interpretation.

Critique can be positive or negative; in either case, it involves the same sorts of skills. If you *agree* with the author, you might want to: (1) show how the author's argument can be strengthened; (2) discuss objections that have been or might be made against the position, and present solutions to these objections. If you *disagree* with the author, you might want to: (1) show that the author's premises are flawed; (2) demonstrate that the author's argument is not valid—i.e. that the conclusion does not follow from the premises; (3) argue that the consequences of the author's position are unacceptable. Whether you agree or disagree with the author, be sure to consider objections to *your own views*; for example, if you disagree with the author, say how she might respond to your objections, and attempt to answer her response.

III. Conclusion

If you haven't stated, developed and argued for your position by now, it's too late. But be sure to wrap up: remind the reader where you've been, and perhaps suggest where things might go from here. To keep things interesting, you might want to summarize from a fresh perspective, or emphasize a theme you haven't explicitly dealt with in the main body of your paper.

Style, Form, and Attitude

The audience of your paper should be your intelligent but philosophically uninformed roommate.

The most important aspect of philosophical style is *explicitness*. Explicitness is just *saying exactly what you mean*; and saying exactly what you mean involves thinking about what *every word* means. This sounds simple, but it is actually quite difficult. After you have finished your first draft, look for all the passages that might be misinterpreted and clarify them.

Organize. Discuss one thing at a time.

Don't be afraid to change your mind while writing—after all, it's a sign that you're doing some serious thinking about the issues. But if you are convinced by an argument against your intended conclusion, *it is infinitely better to change your conclusion than to try to cover up the argument*: chances are high that your reader will notice the objection whether you acknowledge its existence or not. If you change your conclusion—and even if you don't—it is a great idea to edit at least once for organization in light of your (new) conclusion.

Your reader will not be impressed by big words, so make your diction as simple as you can. When you must use technical vocabulary (e.g. 'sound', 'valid') let the reader know precisely what these terms mean. Once you define a word, stick with it—don't use synonyms, because this reduces clarity.

If you want, break some of the rules they taught us in high school: use "I" or "you" or whatever, feel free to use contractions, and don't think you have to write a five-paragraph essay. On the other hand, *don't* feel free to break basic rules of grammar and spelling.

When you do use the first person, use it to make it clear what your opinions are; for example, "Descartes thinks he has proven that we have knowledge of the external world. I think, however, that he has done no such thing." You **should not** use the first person in order to adopt a conversational tone: "I was waking up this morning and as I was eating breakfast I thought about skepticism. At first I thought it was a good argument but then I changed my mind, because I really feel like the world exists."

Don't stray from the topic in order to fill up space (or for any other reason). If you think that you've addressed the paper topic and you feel your paper is too short, odds are extremely good that you haven't addressed the topic in as much detail as you should.

Do not start your introduction with grand phrases like "Since time immemorial" or "Humans have always puzzled over . . ." Also, be wary of historical claims such as "Descartes was the first philosopher to present the argument 'I think, therefore I am'": they may be false (as is this one), and they do not add much to the philosophical substance of your paper.

HANDLING TEXTS RESPONSIBLY

Plagiarism is defined as “submitting a piece of work which in part or in whole is not entirely the student’s work without attributing those same portions to their correct source.” In other words, it consists of misrepresenting someone else’s work as your own. This can happen **even if you are explicitly discussing the author you are plagiarizing**. For example, say that you are presenting the following passage:

A naive reaction to the idea that everything we do is completely determined by a causal chain that extends backward beyond the times of our births involves thinking that in that case we would have no control over our behavior whatsoever. (Susan Wolf)

You **cannot** write:

Wolf says that determinism holds that everything we do is completely determined by a causal chain that extends backward beyond the time of our births. A naive reaction to this case is that we would have no control over our behavior whatsoever.

If you do, you are plagiarizing. If you do not put quotes around a phrase or sentence, you are telling the reader that that phrase is your own. Thus if you do not put quotes around words that are not your own, you are misrepresenting the author’s work as your own. Similarly, you cannot write:

Wolf examines a naive reaction to determinism, which is that we would have no control over our behavior.

Even if you only take portions of an author’s phrases, you are still plagiarizing.

There are severe penalties for plagiarism. A paper containing plagiarism fails automatically, and the violation is reported to the academic judiciary. The student is brought before the appropriate committee, and can be given sentences ranging from community service to graduation deferral; in addition, the violation may be posted on the student’s transcript.

There are other ways of mishandling a source. For example, you could write:

Wolf says that an immature reaction to determinism is that in that case we wouldn’t have control over our actions at all.

or:

Determinism holds that our whole lives are completely determined by a causal chain that began before we were born.

Here the existence of plagiarism is controversial: if you follow the sentence with a citation—“(Wolf 1988, 50)” —then it may not be in technical violation of the standards of academic conduct. It is, however, terribly inadequate scholarship. If you paraphrase an author’s words, substituting synonyms here and there and juggling the sentence order around, **you are not saying anything which the author isn’t saying**. Furthermore, you are not demonstrating any comprehension of the material. The point of writing a paper is to demonstrate comprehension by giving a fresh exposition of the author’s argument; changing “we would have no control over our behavior” to “people might not have control over their actions” is completely unacceptable. If you can’t think of a fresh paraphrase of a passage, you should just quote the passage.

Here is an acceptable way to summarize the above passage:

Determinism is the view that all events, including all of our actions, are entailed by past events and the laws of nature. Wolf first considers the view that determinism implies that “we would have no control over our behavior whatsoever” (1988, 50).