

## WRITING A PHILOSOPHY PAPER

**I. Reading for Writing Philosophy: The prep-work before you start your paper** ● *Annotate your readings!* As you read, note how a writer builds their argument and what objections you may have. Note the parts with which you agree. Ask yourself why you agree/disagree beyond mere intuition. You can find evidence from other readings to back up your ideas or generate your own arguments for or against their claims.

### II. The Groundwork: Determining your central claim

- Philosophy is an ongoing conversation to which your paper contributes. You don't have to definitively solve some large philosophical question, only try to justify the best *claim* for someone else to believe your take on it. *Your claim can take many forms, such as:*
  - A positive argument for why an argument is original, illuminating, or otherwise effective
  - A defense of one philosopher's argument over another's (e.g. Kant vs. Hume on the self)
  - Refuting someone else's argument by showing where it goes wrong (e.g. *invalid structure* or a false premise that makes it *unsound*)
  - Accepting an argument by clarifying or expanding an underdeveloped or unclear claim
  - Your own original claim about some philosophical problem
  - A claim that canvases a philosophical tradition (e.g. taking a stoic approach to virtue ethics)

### III. Arguments: The currency of a philosophy paper

- Your goal is to assess the merits and limitations of accepting your claim. Arguments provide your line of reasoning. When you make a claim, ask yourself how and why it is true and so what if it is. The 'so what' importantly answers what is at stake if a reader accepts your argument. Repeat this questioning process to deepen your analysis.
- Whatever your claim, make sure you can support it with evidence and that it is *defensible within the length of the paper*.
- Try to write as simply and clearly as possible. While technical vocabulary allows you to be specific and accurate, overuse can detract from your paper's clarity. Define technical terms early on and make sure you can explain the philosophical lingo you are employing before arguing with it (e.g. know and state that dualism is the belief that mind and body are not the same substance). Early on, also make your claims and assumptions explicit (e.g. "I will assume determinism and show that free will is still possible.").
- Since the discussion is always ongoing, use the **present tense** when referring to philosophical ideas.

### IV. Philosophy Essay Structure: Doing the business of philosophy

**A. Introduction & Background:** The introduction describes and motivates the philosophical question you'll address. Explaining the solution you want to defend comes next. Then briefly put your problem in context of the greater debate around it, what you intend to contribute, and why your contribution matters. Your thesis is the position you're defending. It

should come in your introduction, and your position should be obvious.

- B. Your Argument:** Each paragraph of this section should progress your argument by explaining and/or arguing for the premises that lead up to your claim. Topic sentences clearly explain the paragraph’s argument, which should connect to the previous ideas to build toward your thesis’ claim; their order should show a logical sequence of thought.
- C. Objections to your argument:** Imagine what opponents would respond. Your paper’s length determines how many objections your paper can address; you will likely not be able to address them all. Each paragraph should address only one objection. And remember the principle of *charitable reading*: Argue against the most cogent version of the objection. You lose credibility if you unfairly engage with your opposition.
- D. Counterarguments to objections:** The defense of your argument should show the reader why your position is the most logical.
- E. Conclusion:** Make it succinct. Restate your central claim and briefly touch on the points that led you to it (which you can derive from your topic sentences). Finish with a statement about the overarching themes your paper addresses and how the state of the discussion has changed; ask yourself, ‘Now what?’ ‘What can a reader walk away with?’

**V. Key Terms for Philosophy/A Logical Tool-Kit**

- **Validity** refers to an argument’s structure, whether or not its premises follow from each other; an argument does not have to be *true* to be *valid*.
- **Soundness:** An argument is *sound* if: (i) it is valid and (ii) it has true premises.
- **Premise:** The steps (propositions) of an argument’s logic that lead to its conclusion (noted by P1, P2).
- **Conclusion:** A claim reached by a process of reasoning. It is a logical result of the relationship between the premises.

<p><b>Valid but unsound</b>  P1. All mammals lay eggs.  P2. A whale is a mammal.  C. Therefore a whale lays eggs.</p> <p>The conclusion follows from the premises, but P1 is false.</p>	<p><b>Valid and sound</b>  P1. All humans are mortal.  P2. Campbell is a human.  C. Therefore, Campbell is mortal.</p> <p>The conclusion follows from the premises, and all premises are true.</p>	<p><b>Invalid</b>  P1. If it is raining, then the ground is wet.  P2. The ground is wet.  C. Therefore, it is raining.</p> <p>The premises are true, but the conclusion does not follow because the ground can be wet for multiple reasons.</p>
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