

## WRITING PHILOSOPHY<sup>1</sup>

A philosophy paper is critical rather than reportive. A reportive paper is one which simply reports or presents the facts as someone understands them, either you or someone else.

- I. There are four primary rules you need to follow in writing a critical philosophy paper:
  - A. You should clarify key ideas: for example, are the philosophically troublesome ideas defined? Are the theories in question clearly stated and exemplified?
  - B. You must test the soundness of the arguments for or against the theories in question: Are the premises true?
  - C. You should evaluate the theories: Are the assumptions correct? Are the consequences plausible?
  - D. *Most importantly*, you must support what you assert with reasons: Are your claims backed with arguments? Do they follow from other claims already established?
- II. You should *not* support your case *merely* by:
  - A. Labeling the case as your own.
  - B. Asserting the case's superiority over the competition.
  - C. Using ad hominen arguments; that is, attacking a person's character or circumstances, rather than that person's arguments.
  - D. Citing an authority, whether philosophical or scientific.
- III. Your paper will be evaluated on the following sorts of criteria:
  - A. Is the paper clearly written?
  - B. Is your case supported with arguments?
  - C. Have you fairly and accurately presented others' views?
  - D. Is your paper well organized?
  - E. Have you tried to think for yourself?
- IV. Organizational strategy:
  - A. Formulating the problem:
    1. Focus the general topic you've decided to deal with into a specific question or statement which will be the topic of your paper.
    2. Clarify key terms.
    3. Think through any assumptions of the question or statement you are attempting to answer or discuss: How do these influence the kind of answers that might be given?
  - B. Deciding on the format; common formats are:
    1. Comparing and contrasting two or more theories in order to determine the most adequate one for the problem.
    2. Criticizing a single theory or argument.
    3. Defending another philosopher's view against a mistaken criticism.
    4. Supporting an original theory of your own.
  - C. Ways to incorporate another philosopher's view:
    1. Restating a philosopher's argument or theory in a clearer, more incisive way.
    2. Applying that argument or theory to areas not discussed by its original proponent.
    3. Admitting the view is mistaken in places but attempting to remedy those deficiencies and thus producing a modified view.

- D. Some features of a good introduction:
1. It should state the problem to which you will address yourself.
  2. It should state what you intend to show; for example, that a theory should be modified or that one is preferable to another.
  3. It should state how you propose to show what you've stated; for example, by showing that one theory rests on highly questionable assumptions.
- E. To achieve coherence ask yourself the following questions as you re-read your first draft sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph:
1. What is the relevance of this passage, and does it clearly fit here?
  2. Is the passage an essential link in my argument?
  3. Is it used to clarify something?
  4. Does it tell the reader where I am and where I'm going?
  5. If it is an argument, is it relevant to what I'm trying to show?
  6. Does this sentence add anything to the substance of my essay?
  7. Does my introduction really state my main point?
- F. Achieving clarity:
1. Some rules of thumb for presenting a clear statement of your ideas:
    - a. Avoid vagueness, particularly of key terms and sentences. A vague expression is one which fails to specify exactly to what objects or circumstances it should be applied—give definitions, use examples, restate things in different words, and so forth.
    - b. Avoid ambiguity. Ambiguity happens when the reader is unsure which among several possible meanings of an expression is intended.
    - c. Minimize your use of technical or profound-sounding expressions like 'reality', 'absolute', 'subjective', or 'cosmic'.
    - d. Do not rely heavily on metaphors and analogies. Metaphors can be used in addition to, never in place of, straight forward argumentation.
    - e. Make what you mean and what your words say harmonize. Make sure that your words actually say what you intend.
  2. Using examples:
    - a. Remember that examples are not arguments, but clarifying devices.
    - b. Think through carefully the relation between the example and what it is supposed to exemplify.
    - c. Be sure your examples are specific enough to what it is you wish to clarify.
  3. Writing well.<sup>2</sup>
    - a. Keep sentences short!
    - b. Use devices that tell your reader where you've been and where you expect to go; for example, "Let us now turn to our first argument" or "Following my presentation of theory X, I shall offer two criticisms of it."
    - c. Do not pad your paper with too many examples, restatements of the obvious, and extended quotations.
    - d. Use active voice rather than passive voice; for example, instead of writing "Theory X was earlier shown by me to be false", write "I have demonstrated X to be false."

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<sup>1</sup> This is adapted from Mark B. Woodhouse, *A Preface to Philosophy* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1975), Chapter V, by Steven Sanders.

<sup>2</sup> A helpful text devoted to elementary rules of style and grammar is William Strunk, Jr., and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style* (New York: Macmillan, 1959).