Introduction to Philosophy: General Guide to Philosophical Writing
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This document illustrates general guidelines for good philosophical writing of any length. When constructing your essay responses for the take-home exams, refer to these guidelines. Use your judgment when determining which of these guidelines is most relevant for the particular assignment that you are working on. *The grading criteria for this class are based on this document.*

The Goal of Philosophical Writing:

The purpose of a philosophical piece of writing is to provide an argument for a central claim. Philosophical writing does not *merely* assert, explain or describe one's view. Rather, it *also* goes on to provide reasons to believe that view. Thus, don't just tell the reader *what* you think. Instead, also explain to your reader *why* your view is justified, by persuading your reader that your view is supported by strong reasons and evidence.

Moreover, your goal as a philosophical writer is to make the argumentative structure of your paper as clear and as easy to follow as possible. Avoid unnecessary stylistic flourishes; concentrate on simple, clear, precise, and direct language that helps make the structure of your argument as easy to follow as possible. If you must choose between style and logical substance, choose logical substance.

Ultimately, writing is the practice that best enables you to cement and test your growing understanding of philosophy. You will likely find that you don't understand a topic or theory until you write about it. You will also likely find that you don't understand a concept as well as you thought you did until you try to explain and define it. By writing, you forge a clear and detailed external representation of your thought, which enables you to notice any remaining gaps in your understanding, as well as any weaknesses in the structure of your thinking, both of which you can then go on to resolve. The writing process thereby allows you to deepen your understanding until you have achieved a clear and adequate grasp of whichever subject you're working on. Thus, by writing, you perfect the structure to your own thinking.

What is an Argument?

An argument is an inference, or movement of thought, from a collection of statements (the premises) to another statement (the conclusion). The *conclusion* is the statement for which

you are giving reasons. The statements that provide those reasons are the *premises*. The premises of the argument, if true, give us reason to believe that the conclusion of the argument is true.

A philosophical paper of any length can be thought of as a structure comprised of several intertwined, mutually-supporting arguments, which taken together support a central claim, or thesis. Each individual argument has its own conclusion, and the thesis is the overarching conclusion that the whole series of arguments is designed to support. Think of the individual arguments as the beams of a house, with the thesis as the ceiling: if any of the beams is weak, the ceiling collapses.

Constructing strong arguments takes consistent, repeated practice. Nobody is a natural when it comes to being a rigorous, thorough, critical thinker. Our default mode of expression is to simply assert our views (i.e. conclusions), *without* defending them and showing why these views are well-founded.

Ensure that your assignment does not merely state your conclusions, or the conclusions of the author you're discussing. Instead, be sure to provide some of the premises that support these conclusions, and that give your reader/s reasons to believe in your, or the author's, conclusions. For instance, don't just explain what Plato's theory of forms is. Rather, also explain some reasons that Plato gives us to believe that it is a good (i.e. rationally justified) theory to uphold.

How Do We Evaluate Philosophical Arguments?

In this course, we'll be evaluating many influential arguments. Lectures will provide you with the tools you need to begin evaluating philosophical works for yourself by flagging some of the strengths and weaknesses of the different views we'll discuss. Here are some things to look for when evaluating different any given philosopher's arguments:

i) Are all the premises in the philosopher's arguments actually true?

If you *agree* with the philosopher's conclusion, then ask yourself:
- Can you think of additional confirming examples/evidence for their claims?
- Can you provide additional reasons to believe some important premise(s) they offer?
- Can you think of an effective way to disarm a possible objection that might be raised to this argument on behalf of the philosopher?

If you *disagree* with the philosopher's conclusion, then ask yourself:
- Are any of these premises built on costly and/or insufficiently justified assumptions? And if so, what are these assumptions and why should we reject them?
- Relatedly, does the author have any problematic buried premises, or hidden assumptions, such that the conclusion only follows if we take these on board?
- Can you find an exception to an important general claim made by the author? If so, give an example.

ii) Does the conclusion *really* follow from the premises the author gives? Or are these premises not enough to give you reason to accept the conclusion? Be sure to explain why.

iii) Can you spot any fallacies? Look especially for the common informal fallacies described in the Logical Toolkit included in the textbook (p. 20-23). Lectures will flag potential fallacies, but be watchful for any that we've missed in class!

iv) Always be watchful of the slippage from argument to rhetoric in the works we'll analyze!

Sometimes, rationally sound views are presented in a rhetorically unappealing way, while rationally unjustified views are rendered persuasive through the addition of powerful aesthetic glosses and/or powerful rhetoric. So always ask yourself: are you persuaded by the power of the imagery and *rhetoric* that a philosopher uses to bolster their view? Or are the *arguments* presented what ultimately persuades you to defend a given philosopher's view?

As the course progresses, be mindful of the places at which various rhetorical tactics replace argument (esp. any tactics that paint the opposing side of a debate as being unworthy of serious rational consideration). Moreover, be sure to take these into account in your evaluation of the efficacy of different philosophers' responses to one another. Unfortunately, since philosophers are human beings, they, too, sometimes replace argument with rhetoric.

How Do We Construct an Argumentative Piece of Writing?

1) **Formulate a clear, well-focused thesis that identifies the central claim that you are arguing for.** If you don't know *exactly* what you're arguing for, neither will your reader. Your writing will lack focus and unity of structure.

Do the same if your assignment asks you to discuss and evaluate one or more philosophers' views. Generally, the take-home test essay questions will ask you to present and evaluate the arguments of various philosophers. So, start by identifying those philosophers' central claims, and your stance on those claims (I.e. Do you agree/disagree? Why/Why not? What do you take to be the strengths and limitations of these views? What is the central issue with their view, if any, that you wish to flag in your essay response?).

Your thesis statement for these essay-style responses should ultimately state, as clearly and as concisely as possible, the stance you take on the views discussed. You can do this by stating which view you think is correct, and why. Or you can do this by describing how *all* the views that we have discussed have serious limitations, such that we cannot at this moment decide which is correct (and why we cannot do so).

Moreover, state this thesis near the start of your assignment, as well as briefly summarizing some of the key argumentative moves you'll make to defend this thesis. Here's a good example of a thesis: "*I will argue that Descartes' dualist view of mind should be replaced with Hume's bundle theory of self, and I will do so by showing that the former violates the causal closure of the universe in a way that the latter does not.*"

2) **Make sure that your thesis is not too broad.** Don't attempt to argue for a claim that is too sweeping or ambitious such that your premises do not suffice to support it.

3) **Create an outline.** One powerful way to improve the structure of your paper is to *begin writing by creating an **outline**.* Think of your outline as a crisp, point-form summary of the main steps in your overall argument. A good outline gives you the structural backbone of your paper; once you have it written, you then only need to fill in supporting details and flesh out your explanations at each step. Ultimately, by starting with an outline of your basic argument, you can tighten the structure of your response, as well as clarifying your central focus, thereby bringing greater unity to your writing.

In your outline, place your thesis at the start. Then, **find premises to support your thesis.** Make sure that these premises *are* in fact relevant and *do* support your overarching conclusion. Prolonged engagement with course materials should give

you a sense of the areas that are potentially controversial and that require argumentative support, and those areas that probably do not.

Then, figure out which main claim or topic you need to discuss per paragraph. Finally, consider the best way to order each section of your paper.

4) **Good essay structure begins with good paragraph structure.** Ask yourself at each step: "Does this idea belong in this paragraph? Or is there a better place I can discuss this concept in order to make the logical structure of my paper clearer?" Note that, generally, it is easier to structure your writing if you keep each paragraph short. Use the first sentence of each paragraph to introduce the main claim that you intend to make in that paragraph. Then, you can use the last sentence of any given paragraph to explain the upshot of the discussion in that paragraph, as well as how the points you made in this section tie in to your larger, overall argument.

5) **Order matters.** Find the best way to organize i) your premises and conclusion within any given argument, and ii) your arguments within the larger structure of your paper. Jumbled premises and conclusions make it very hard for your reader to follow and to evaluate your reasoning, so make it very clear to your reader which are the premises and which is the conclusion. Use *premise and conclusion indicators* to indicate to your reader which ones are your premises and which ones are your conclusions:

    Premise Indicators:
    Because, Since, For, Given That, Moreover, This follows from…, On the grounds that…, Assuming that…, As shown by…

    Conclusion Indicators:
    Therefore, Thus, Hence, So, Consequently, Accordingly, As a result, Which proves/implies that…, It follows that…

6) **Avoid buried premises.** Explicitly state *all* of your premises so that the reader can follow the structure of your argument with ease. This includes your *key background assumptions*: which major claims are you assuming and adopting as your starting point in making your argument? Are these background assumptions at all problematic (i.e. have any of the theorists we've discussed presented objections which flag the potential limitations of these claims)? And if so, what do you think is the benefit in nonetheless adopting these assumptions?

7) **Before you begin to argue for your view, set the stage by presenting and explaining all the key claims of the theory/view that you will be arguing for.** Use this as the litmus test for identifying what a complete explanation of a philosophical concept/theory looks like: *"Am I presenting this concept/theory in a way that a moderately intelligent but philosophically-uninformed person in the street could understand it?"* Your goal is to learn to explain these concepts and theories from the ground up. Thus, imagining that you're explaining them to someone not trained in philosophy would help you achieve that.

8) **Make sure that your explanations are detailed enough, and include relevant details from class discussion, lectures, and readings**; BUT

9) **Sift out everything that is irrelevant and inessential.** Don't include material that doesn't directly answer the question. Moreover, don't let the reader guess why the material you include is relevant. Instead, *explain why* it's relevant. While the relevance of something may be perfectly clear to you, it may not be immediately apparent to your reader.

10) **Explain to your reader exactly how each point you're making supports your overall conclusion.** The reader should not have to guess what role any point that you're making plays in supporting your overall argument. Explain *each* main consideration you include so that your reader/s don't have a chance to miss your point. Be sure to guide your reader so that s/he can come to see what you see in any given topic, as well as grasp the connections that you're trying to draw between these ideas as easily as possible.

11) **Make precise claims, and avoid including vague filler** that plays no essential part in your argument. Filler (aka "fluff", or "stuffing") is any claim that does not play a clear function in your unfolding argument. Filler is any claim that <u>doesn't</u> do at least one of the following:

(i) define and/or explain a key concept/theory/view that directly supports your argument for the central claim, or thesis,
(ii) provide an example to illustrate a key concept/theory/view,
(iii) present a premise or conclusion in the argument,
(iv) support the premises by giving people reasons to believe those premises,
(v) explain how the premises lead to the conclusion,
(vi) present and respond to an objection,

(vii) explain the big-picture significance of a concept/theory/argument.

If any claim that you introduce does *none* of these 7 things, then it's likely filler that obscures the central line of your argument, and you should just remove it.

12) **Clearly define *all* technical words, as well as any central, load-bearing terms that your argument is based on.** For instance, precisely state how you define terms like "universals," "essence," "form," "qualia," and "substance." As you will notice in this class, oftentimes, philosophers attach slightly different meanings to these terms. Thus, by carefully defining all key terms, you help your reader know that they are on the same page as you in their understanding of these terms. If your readers are not sure how their understanding of these terms maps onto yours, they cannot evaluate the strength of the arguments you base on these terms.

13) **Use concrete examples to illustrate abstract concepts.** As Blanshard points out, concreteness is clarity. Writing that operates at a high level of abstraction tends to seem unclear. Accordingly, when you define, for instance, the notion of a universal, be sure to also give a concrete example of a universal (e.g. a universal is the quality of "Spiralness" that all particular spiral objects have in common, whether these be galaxies, snail shells, curling fiddlehead ferns, hurricanes or water vortices in a bathtub). This helps put some flesh on the bare bones of these abstract concepts, as well as adding greater clarity to writing that deals with even the most abstract topics.

14) **Examples can also be used to support your argument**, by pointing to specific instances of the general claims you're making.

For instance, it makes for good reasoning to point out that, according to Descartes, material substance is infinitely divisible, while mental substance is indivisible, since the latter appears to lack parts organized in space. But it makes for *even better* reasoning if you can give a ***specific example*** that illustrates the precise nature of the distinction between these two kinds of substance. For example, "According to Descartes, any material substance, like a piece of bread, can in principle be divided into an infinite number of ever smaller pieces (i.e. by dividing its crumbs down to their atoms, and beyond), while those parts can in turn be further divided. In contrast, a mental state, like the experience of understanding a geometrical proof or of seeing blue, appears to be a unified whole that lacks parts, and so is indivisible." Note how the use of a concrete example here makes it easier for the reader to understand the precise point that is being made in Descartes' argument,

thereby making the line of reasoning much clearer, easier to follow and more precise.

However, ensure that you analyze and explain your examples, and show how they help clarify, illustrate, or support the claim you're making. Tell your reader how you want them to interpret the example you give, since (i) an example can support multiple interpretations, and (ii) it may not be obvious to your reader what insight you'd like them to draw from the example you provide.

15) **When explaining philosophers' views, also explain their *reasons* for those views.** Don't just *report* what a philosopher, like Plato, has to say about the nature of knowledge. You're not creating a documentary report on the opinions of philosophers; you're creating an argumentative essay aimed at evaluating the strengths and limitations of the arguments they provide for their views. So say *why* any given philosopher's view is supported by strong reasons, and also say something about the limitations/blindspots of their arguments.

16) **Explain how you interpret all quotes you include.** When explaining a philosopher's view, it helps to include a few brief quotes from important passages from his/her work, in order to show that you are not distorting their view. However, after every quote you introduce, be sure to explain how you interpret that quote, as well as the overall significance of the passage cited, as you understand it. This is because different people often interpret the same chunk of text in different ways. Accordingly, you want to ensure that the reader knows how you want to use that quote in order to further your discussion.

17) **Avoid subjective reports of your opinions: defend/argue for your views.** Don't just say, "I believe X," and leave it at that. Instead, say, "I believe X, and here are the two main reasons I will provide for this claim."

18) **Avoid an overreliance on rhetoric, metaphor, persuasion through poetic flourishes and appeals to emotion:** the argument you provide should be the key bearer of persuasive force in your essay. Strong arguments are based on well-defined, precise, clear, literal meanings. Arguments based on anything else are very hard to evaluate. Philosophical writing can be (and ideally, probably should be) beautiful and moving, but argumentative rigour, precision, thoroughness and clarity must come first.

Responding to Others and Handling Objections:

19) **After explaining your view and presenting arguments for it, consider and briefly reply to one *strong* objection to your view.** An objection is an argument against the conclusion you defend. Replying to an obviously implausible or weak objection doesn't help persuade the reader that your view is rationally defensible. Instead, charitably reconstruct the strongest and most plausible objection to a possible weakness in your argument, and respond to it.

   Your ability to engage with strong objections to your view shows your reader that you can see any given issue from several angles, and that you can recognize the limitations of your view (after all, you're not a perfect rational subject, since you're not God, and that's ok!). It also shows that you have the humility to recognize that the other side has potentially strong reasons for its views, too.

20) **Make sure that your responses to others (i.e. to peers and to philosophers) follow the principle of charity**. That is, make sure that before responding to and critiquing anyone's view, you first state the fairest, strongest, and most powerful version of that view, as you understand it, and *only then* respond to it by mounting a counterargument. Much time is wasted by arguing against a *strawman*, or a distorted, simplified, diluted, and caricatured version of others' views. Instead, "steel-man" others' arguments by presenting them in as strong a form as you possibly can. ***Internalize others' perspectives before responding to them.***

   One can think of this as an exercise in building ***rational empathy***: by following the principle of charity, you can come to understand the rationality of others' perspective from within, as well as grasp what motivates their disagreement with you (if there even *is* genuine disagreement - often, others agree with you more than you may initially realize!).

21) **Cite *all* external sources – *including online sources*.** Academic honesty aside, it helps show your reader that you're engaging with existing debates and taking a clear and well-defined stance on them.

22) **Always edit before submitting.** The first draft of philosophical writing is *always* terrible - my first drafts are no exception! It is not easy for anyone to write a well-structured argument; it doesn't just come naturally, since humans are pretty irrational creatures. Constructing a strong argument requires much more mental focus than we are used to in our everyday thinking and writing. As a result, the only way to produce well-structured arguments is through substantial editing which

removes anything non-essential to the central line of thought being developed. Through editing, you can also move the parts of the paper around so that the structure of your argument is presented as clearly as possible.

References:

In constructing the writing guide for this class, I relied on these two excellent guides. I strongly encourage people who wish to perfect their argumentative writing skills in the future to look at these. However, for the purposes of this class, I will rely only on the guidelines presented above when evaluating assignments.

Jim Pryor's "Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper": http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html

Weston, Anthony. *A Rulebook for Arguments*, 4th Ed. Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, Indianapolis/Cambridge, 2009.

As always, if you have any questions or require clarification on any of these points, the sooner you contact me, the better. ***Happy writing!***