

SOME RULES OF THUMB FOR WRITING PAPERS

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Here are a few suggestions about writing papers. Please read through them before you write the first paper.

1. State the main thesis of your paper at (or near) the beginning: say, in the first paragraph. It is not bad to say something like: "I will argue that" If you do not have a thesis, get one.
2. Stay focused. Your papers should critically assess some important aspect of one of the theories we have been discussing: the thesis of your paper, stated near the beginning (see point 1 above) will say what that aspect is. Before you get to the evaluation you will need to describe the relevant aspect(s) of the theory you are assessing. But do not try to provide a comprehensive overview of the theory. Instead, guide your presentation by the particular problems that animate your paper. For example, if you are writing on John Rawls's "difference principle," you should not first try to sketch his theory of the original position and the argument for the principle within the original position. Confine yourself to the aspects of Rawls's view that are of immediate relevance to his account of fair distribution. Anything else will be a distraction (and in the short space available, will be done badly).
3. Do not lead with (or conclude with, or otherwise include) sweeping generalities: "Rawls's theory of justice is the most important recent contribution to the perennial human search for the ideal society." "Since Plato, philosophers have sought out the meaning of justice." "For thousands of years, human beings have searched for truth. "Philosophy is based on reason, not rhetoric." (What about: "Man is born free, but is everywhere in chains." If you are Rousseau, then you can break any rule that I have stated here.) Such remarks add nothing of substance; indeed, they subtract by distracting from the issues at hand. Moreover, they suggest that the writer is unsure what to say, and is looking for a way to fill some space. You do not want to create that suspicion. So just get right to the point.
4. Write clearly. That's easier said than done, and hard to make operational. But you can make a first step by writing short sentences, avoiding page-long paragraphs, and being careful to signal transitions. Operationally: If a sentence goes on for more than (say) 5 lines, find a way to divide it up; if a paragraph goes on for more than 20 lines, find a way to divide it up; if your paper falls into sections, make sure to include a sentence or two of connective tissue between the sections. Moreover, put things as simply as you can. Writing philosophy does not require elaborate formulations, esoteric words, purple prose, neologisms, or polysyllabophilia. In a poetry course, things would be different, but in this course,

your writing should focus readers' attention on the ideas you wish to express, not to the words you have chosen to express those ideas.

5. Do not make the writing boring and clumsy, even if it is clear. Introduce some stylistic variety. For example, do not start every sentence with the subject. Moreover, stay away from passive constructions: instead of "The wheel was invented by Joe," why not: "Joe invented the wheel." Do not have too many sentences that begin "It is..." or "There is..." Though such constructions are sometimes appropriate, overusing them slows things down. Avoid long strings of prepositional clauses. And try not to repeat the same words (unless, by repeating the same words, you are aiming at emphasis).

6. Support assertions. When you attribute views to the person whose ideas you are addressing, indicate the evidence for the attribution by noting relevant passages. But you need not include quotations. As a general rule, you should only quote a passage if the passage plays an important role in the paper (say, it is a passage that you will want to be able to refer back to at various points in the argument), or if you think that there is some controversy about whether the philosopher actually held the view that you are attributing to him or her. Do not submit a paper that strings together lots of quotations.

7. Take the views you are discussing seriously. The philosophers we are reading are not fools. If, as you describe the relevant parts of their views, you find yourself attributing foolish views to them, assume you have misinterpreted. (Perhaps you have not. But treat "misinterpretation" as the default setting.) One strategy for taking a view seriously is to "argue against yourself": ask yourself how the philosopher you are criticizing would respond to your criticism. Try to get "inside" the conception you are discussing; develop a sense of its internal integrity, and see if you are able to understand how someone (who is neither a moron nor a sociopath) might have come to hold the views in question. The books and articles we are reading are the product of sustained reflection, over a long period. The authors often distributed drafts of their manuscripts to other people, and then tried to incorporate responses to the objections they received. The result is not that their views are right, or genuinely coherent, or nice. But you can be sure that they have greater depth and coherence than you may suspect on first reading.

8. When you finish writing, read your paper out loud. Writing that does not sound right will not read right.

Applying these rules of thumb will require that you spend some time editing your papers after writing a first draft. But the additional time will be worth it. Your papers for this course will be better than they would otherwise be, and you will eventually start to edit as you write.

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