

Paper Writing: Dimensions of Excellence*

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INTRODUCTION TO
PHILOSOPHY

1 Introduction — Philosophy Paper Writing

Philosophy papers have a point. Most of the papers you will write in college (and graduate school, should you pursue philosophy) will have a single, overarching point. This is your *Thesis*. Your paper should be concerned with exactly one goal, once you've fixed on your thesis: to support it in such a way that a reasonable, reasonably open-minded reader can see the reasons in its favor and perhaps even be persuaded by it. The paper as a whole should aim not to dazzle, but to illuminate.

Your writing and your reading skills will grow together. You become a good reader of philosophy texts by thinking hard about what questions an author is trying to address, what her reasons are for giving the answer she in fact gives and what her reasons are for not giving alternatives you could think of, etc. You become a good writer of philosophy texts by making the task of your readers as easy as possible. So when you write, think about what it would be like to be a reader of the text you're producing; when you read, think about what the author was doing from the author's perspective. You'll get better at both of these tasks the more you do them.

As a very rough guideline, write for the sort of reader you aspire to be: interested in the topic, sympathetic to the author, curious about arguments, and grateful for the work the author has put in.

This document is designed to give you far more specific guidelines to apply as you write your paper. It describes very specific virtues a paper can have. As you work on your paper, you can then ask whether your paper, in its present form, has these virtues. By breaking down the overall goal of writing a good paper into its component parts, these guidelines go from over-reaching programmatic suggestions to *actionable* criteria.

A note on workflow. These dimensions of excellence are most useful in *revising* a paper. Your first or even your first couple of drafts should just be attempts to get your thoughts down on paper. They will, in all likelihood, be muddled, all over the place, come out in the order in which they occur to you, and concern all sorts of different points. This is good. This is what first drafts are for: they are collections of the raw materials out of which you will fashion a proper paper. In fact, it may even make sense to not write your first draft in the format of a paper, with your name on it, etc., just to take the pressure of having to produce awesome prose on the first try.

Then, when you revise the paper, pick one or two of the virtues that a paper can have, and ask whether your draft currently has them. Writing a philosophy paper is a process of continuous adjustment, so it doesn't matter very much what you start with. Making the paper excel along any one dimension of excellence will often show you how it falls short along another, and thus suggest a natural next step to make the paper better.

You will often find that, as you try to improve your paper along these dimensions, you'll have to throw out some ideas completely and create whole new lines of thought. This is normal—revising and creating

*I've refined these dimensions over time, and I've benefitted from the feedback of many audiences; I want to thank Alison Simmons and Marc Gasser, as well as my past TFs, Lauren Kopajtic, Zeynep Soysal, Lauren Davidson, and Chandler Hatch. Thanks also to Sally Hasslanger.

are processes that go hand-in-hand, they are not sequential.

If this recipe sounds as if it'll lead to six, seven, eight, or more substantial revisions, that's exactly what it is designed to do. A huge amount of the work of writing a philosophy paper lies in the revising. I routinely write 20 or more drafts of the articles I produce for publication, and the 10th draft has very little of the first draft in it; the 20th little of the 10th; and so on. Your papers are shorter, and hence won't require as much revision. But if you've done one or two drafts, I can predict with almost complete certainty that your paper falls short along some of these dimensions.

When you meet with others to discuss your writing (such as the DWF, your Teaching Fellow, or the professor for your class), you'll have very productive meetings by focusing on specific dimensions.

One last note (and this is important): Please do not think of these criteria as completely separable. A paper may be excellent along several of these dimensions and yet still be unsuccessful because of some fundamental misstep. Our feedback, including the grade you receive on the paper, is a matter of how well your paper does overall.

2 Mechanics

There are certain straightforward requirements we place on your papers.

- They need to be spell checked (and not just by the spell-checker in your word processor, but by a human being).
- The sentences need to be grammatical. The best test is to read your paper out loud to yourself.
- Since the paper is a record of an argument you make, please write in the active voice and use "I."
- When you quote from another source, clearly indicate this, and cite the source material. We don't require any particular citation format. What matters to us is that we be able to find the source if need be. Since you'll almost exclusively write about the class readings, this should be simple.

3 On The Dimensions Below

The dimensions below assume a certain basic structure to your paper: your thesis is intended to address a philosophical problem—more on what I mean by *address* momentarily. It assumes that you'll discuss someone else's thoughts on the problem as a way of orienting yourself and the reader, to know what has gone before, and to help us understand your thesis. And you'll make some argument that touches on the interpretation of the other author's (or authors') work and that supports your thesis.

I mentioned that your thesis *addresses* a problem. I use that term to highlight that your thesis will, in most cases, not seek to solve a problem completely. Your thesis will rather show us how we can progress in our understanding of the problem, the possible solutions, and issues around it. That can be a matter of offering a new argument for an interesting claim (a new response to Glaucon, a response to the Cartesian skeptic, etc.). It can be a matter of arguing that someone else's argument, while initially persuasive, faces certain difficulties (this is what I did, for example, in discussing Mill's response to Glaucon in terms of intrinsic goods). It can be a matter of patching up an argument (perhaps my objection to Mill's response aren't very good, and your paper can explain why). There are many possibilities.

Above, I described your presentation of the author's work as an *interpretation*. It is not simply an exposition or presentation, if the latter terms suggest that it's completely clear what the author is saying, and what

her argument is. In reading Descartes, for example, it's real work to understand how the metaphor of foundations functions, or when Descartes is speaking in his own voice as opposed to the voice of an objector. In reading Kant, to take another example, it's real work to see which parts of the text are arguments in support of other parts; which parts of the text address this or that problem, etc. So when you talk about someone else's work, please keep in mind that what you're coming up with is an interpretation and should be treated as such: you should tell us which parts of the text you're talking about (by quoting it) and then explaining to us what you take the author to be doing in that part of the text.

All in all, then, we have four main headings: Thesis, Interpretation, Argument, Overall.

These dimensions of excellence are criteria an excellent paper clearly meets, a good paper meets somewhat, and a bad paper fails to meet.

For each of the topics, I've listed more specific components and ways for a paper to succeed in meeting its demands. In some cases, I've also mentioned some common pitfalls.

The "overall" heading is for aspects of the paper that don't fit naturally under the other three headings, or that concern how the three components fit together.

You'll see that there is one aspect of these dimensions specific to writing a paper for a course: the thesis should be responsive to the prompt. At some point, you won't write papers in response to a prompt anymore. But all of the other dimensions are excellences we all aspire to.

4 The Dimensions

Thesis

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Excellent Version</i>
Thesis is easily identifiable	You've marked the thesis ("I will argue...") Thesis is a single sentence.
Thesis is interesting	
Thesis is clear	You use words that exactly capture what you want to argue for. If you use qualifiers in your thesis, you explain why you qualify your thesis in these terms. If there are salient alternative claims one might make, the actual thesis is contrasted with, and differentiated from, these alternatives. If the thesis contains technical terms, these terms are explained somewhere in the paper (perhaps right at the start of the paper, perhaps later if that makes more sense).
Thesis addresses the prompt	If necessary, you explain how the thesis does this.
<i>Common Problems</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The thesis might be too ambitious (you might not have arguments for it, or if you do, you cannot present them without exceeding the page limit).• The thesis is vaguely qualified, perhaps with <i>a bit like, sort of, in a sense, arguably</i>. Usually that's a sign that you don't think that your argument supports the thesis without the qualification, but you haven't figured out what exactly the argument does support, so you're stuck with the wishy-washy qualifiers.

Interpretation

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Excellent Version</i>
Interpretation is selective	<p><i>Only</i> aspects of another's position that are relevant to the thesis are presented.</p> <p><i>All</i> aspects of another's position that are relevant to the thesis are presented. (no selective quoting or "cherrypicking")</p>
Interpretation is thorough	<p>You present enough material for your audience to understand the author's position, so that they can evaluate whether your responses have merit.</p> <p>The other's position is motivated (you explain why it's worth our time to talk and think about this position).</p>
Interpretation is sympathetic	<p>It's a presentation that would make the other author say "Yes, that's exactly what I was after. I'm glad you put it so well."</p>
Interpretation is clearly grounded in the text	<p>Where the author's position requires interpretation, the interpretation is connected to the text.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Quote the text in full.• Present your interpretation.• Argue for the appropriateness of that interpretation.

Argument

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Excellent Version</i>
Argument is relevant	The argument supports the thesis.
Argument is presented clearly	Premises in the argument are easily identifiable to the reader (possibly: "my first premise is...") All of the premises are mentioned
Argument is persuasive	The premises are plausible on their own, or supported with relevant considerations. Possibly: the argument is defended from possible objections. If the argument relies on a general principle, it is illustrated with a pithy example. The argument doesn't beg any important questions.
<i>Common Pitfalls</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This is the most common: general principles are only implied. In ordinary speech, we often just assume a general principle, as in: I can't meet you tonight, I'm at a study group. The implied principle is that the study group takes precedence over whatever other plans you're considering, and it'd be weird to say it in a conversation. Everybody knows that this is implied. In a philosophy paper, however, the principles are sometimes where all of the action is.• Premises are repeated, maybe with slight changes in wording. This is usually a sign that you feel as if the premise needs support, but you don't know how to support it; perhaps the premise just strikes you as so obvious that it seems like anything you can say in its support just muddies the water (I suspect that many of you were in that position when you wrote your first paper when it come to figuring out what an emotion is). In that case, you have two options: own your attitude, and just tell the reader that this premise seems obvious to you; or alternatively, ask what else someone who disagrees with you might be thinking, and address that.• <i>arguably</i>. This is a philosophy paper: this is where you make the actual arguments. Don't just say that it's possible to argue for a claim by saying "arguably."

Overall

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Excellent Version</i>
Paper is structured by the thesis	<p>The thesis states a clear objective for the paper to achieve</p> <p>Every component (thesis, interpretation, argument) of the paper contributes to that objective.</p> <p>No component of the paper contributes to some other objective.</p> <p>Every paragraph has a clearly describable job to play in reaching the objective (potentially described in a topic sentence).</p> <p>Every paragraph only has one such job.</p>
Paper is creative	<p>The paper advances the discussion of the central problem.</p>
Paper is well-proportioned	<p>The most interesting issues receive the most space and attention.</p>
Examples, examples, examples	<p>Philosophy can be very abstract, and it always helps to use examples to, e.g.,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Illustrate general principles.• Offer counter-examples.• Motivate a position.• Explain key terms.
<i>Common Pitfalls</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You miss opportunities to explain how ideas are related: instead of saying what the point of an idea or example is and how it relates to the• Your paper contains extra words. When you feel that you've got a draft that does well on all of these virtues (or as well as it's going to do before you turn it in), you should be able to cut between 20% and 30% of your words <i>without loss of philosophical content</i>. Perhaps your paper is poorly structured, and you end up having to explain something twice (a killer in a short paper). Perhaps you re-state certain points (cf. the common pitfall of arguing by repetition).• Your paper is a record of how your thinking developed. If things go well in the paper writing process, then your thinking at the end is significantly different from how it was at the start. As you read your paper, ask yourself whether everything in it is something you'd write down if you wrote the paper from scratch, given how much better you understand things now.
