# Graduate School Writing Samples

Bernhard Nickel · bnickel@fas.harvard.edu

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## 1 The Goal of the Writing Sample

Over the course of your career, you'll write philosophical texts that serve various different purposes, some quite specific. The graduate school writing sample is one of these pieces—various bits of writing you'll do for the job market including your writing sample and research statement, belong in this genre, as well.

A writing sample for graduate school primarily serves an *evidential* function: its purpose is to give evidence of your qualifications to enter graduate school at the program you're applying to. Of course the central way it does so is by being a good piece of philosophical writing, and we'll spend a bunch of time on that below. But in every philosophical paper, you need to make choices large and small, and it's good to keep in mind what the writing sample is supposed to accomplish.

Graduate programs in the US (the UK is different in this regard) have a common structure.

- Students complete several years of course work—usually two or three.
- Students pass some sort of qualifying exam in order to be admitted to the thesis stage, usually at the end of course work, i.e., the end of year 2 or 3.
- Students write a dissertation.

Here's the crucial part for our purposes: graduate schools expect, and many explicitly desire, to train their students in philosophy. They are not looking for students who are, or who consider themselves, fully formed philosophers, just looking for an academic home to execute their already conceived and planned dissertation. This is the crucial difference between the US and the UK—that's exactly what UK programs are for, having a place to sit and execute. But that's also why, in the UK, you first apply to a Master's program.

Instead, graduate school admissions committees in the US will look for students who can take advantage of the training and other resources the school can offer them in order to grow and mature as a philosopher while in grad school.

### 1.1 *A partial list of qualifications*

(1) Background in the tradition that all philosophy departments lay claim to.

(2) Background in the tradition that the department you're applying to lays claim to.

(3) The ability to succeed in a semi-structured academic environment.

(4) The ability to work with texts, considered singly: interpret them charitably, achieve critical distance from them, emancipate yourself from the terms of the debate that others set out.

(5) The ability to work with texts, considered in concert: say what several texts agree on, what they disagree on.

(6) The ability to make arguments, both in thought and on the page.

(7) The ability to follow a dialectic through several steps: claim, response, rebuttal/modification, further critical development.

(8) The ability to separate issues according to relevance.

(9) Creativity in making arguments.

None of these is absolutely required—we all have strengths and weaknesses—but the more of these your dossier credibly shows you to have or be able to do, the better.

Different parts of your dossier will speak to different elements on this list. The writing sample is most important in giving evidence for (4)–(9).

For this reason, a writing sample that is more likely to lead to success is one that has in mind (4)–(9), **in addition to** what makes a philosophy paper good on its own terms.

## *1.2 Scope and Subject Matter of the Sample*

Putting together the observation that graduate schools aren't looking for fully formed scholars, and that a writing sample should show that you're in a position to succeed in graduate school, here is the first batch of suggestions.

- Do not treat the writing sample as a research proposal. The writing sample does not need to show that you're ready to write a dissertation on a particular topic. It doesn't even need to be in the area that you want to focus on. Graduate schools fully expect your interests to evolve over the course of your time there.
- Relatedly: a research proposal is a promissory note that you can fill out the big picture presented in the proposal with detailed arguments, an understanding of the intellectual situation you're entering, etc. In a way, the point of a good research proposal is to not show the arguments. If you already had them, it wouldn't be a research proposal, it'd be a finished paper. The writing sample has the opposite purpose: it's a sample of what happens when you've done all of the work of argument, framing, cutting your thesis to size, etc. (more on all of this below).
- If you end up producing an honors thesis that is significantly longer than a writing sample, don't submit excerpts of your thesis if you can at all help it. Excerpts that are cut and pasted together just don't show off your ability to write a single, coherent piece of philosophical prose where the philosophical ambition and judgment matches the constraints of the format.
- Your writing sample need not make a novel contribution to the existing literature. In practice, that means that you don't need to know every piece of writing that's been done on whatever topic you're addressing. What matters *far more* is that you show that you are on the road to being able to do philosophy. Novel research can come later.
- Relatedly: don't be afraid of writing about a topic that has been around for a long time and hence spawned a huge literature. You can write a paper about a famous historical figure and be very successful, even if the paper ends up saying something that other people have said before. Your choice of topic should only be constrained by where you think you can do your best work.
- As you'll see as we go along, your writing sample is going to require a lot of work. Your choice of topic should be informed in no small part by whether you can see yourself spending a lot of time on it.

### 1.3 *Finding The Right-Size Topic*

Perhaps the writing sample is the first longer paper you have to write. So how do you go about doing it? My advice: don't worry about finding a topic that is the right size for a writing sample at the outset. Instead, start with a topic that interests you. As you learn more about it, you can make a decision about whether to expand or limit, and you will most likely have to revisit that decision.[1]

Depending on your thinking style, your proclivities, and the particular project, you may have a really big picture idea, in which case the challenge will be to find some aspect of the big picture idea to drill down on. Alternatively, you might find something very small that strikes you as interesting and that you want to understand better. Perhaps it's a puzzling paragraph, a confusing concept, or an astounding argument. As you think more about it, you'll come to see connections to other topics, you'll see the depth of the problem, and your thesis will expand to fill up a whole writing sample.[2]

### 1.4 *The Setting of the Reader*

Admissions Committees routinely see several hundred applications per application cycle. Your reader(s) will be tired and pressed for time, both of which make them less ideal readers than we might hope for. Tired and rushed readers are sloppy readers.

Write with that kind of readership in mind. Don't be afraid of writing with flair, once you've nailed down the philosophy, to capture their attention. Don't be afraid of being extremely obvious about what you're doing.

## 2 Who To Ask For Help

As many people as possible. A couple of points.

- Yes, your professors are busy people, but *it is not your job to protect your professors' time*.[3] Your job is to ask for help. It's your professors' job to do what they can to give that help to you within the constraints the rest of their lives impose, and many of them will. In fact, for many of us, helping students is one of the most rewarding parts of the job since there's some concrete good we can do.

  If a professor turns you down without offering a timeframe that works for them, it's totally appropriate to follow up: "Do you think you'll have time in a week or two?"

- Asking for help from many people is not looking for an unfair advantage, or somehow an indication that you cannot do it on your own. Philosophy is a cooperative enterprise, and it's a desirable feature of how we work that we talk to each other and learn from our interactions with each other. This is what you're signing up for. Might as well get started right now.

- If you're at a school that doesn't have an expert in whatever area you're writing about (for whatever reason), ask your professors to make an introduction to philosophers at other schools. They probably won't be in a position to read your whole writing sample, but they can answer questions. Since you don't have as much of a claim on their time and attention as you do the professors at your school, don't expect a reply. But it's definitely not bad to ask for help.

[1] There's a general methodological point here: I don't believe in outlining papers early on in the writing process, since how an argument or paper actually goes depends on the details, and you can't work out the details without actually trying to write the paper. Once you've spent a lot of time writing the paper, you'll be in a position to outline. (See also the section on Workflow below.)

[2] Neither of these strategies is totally fool-proof. You might find that you're not getting anywhere. That's OK. The work you did in finding out that this very particular idea didn't pan out is going to be valuable when you look for a related idea that will.

[3] This goes for all of your interactions in school, by the way.

# 3 How To Ask For Help

With teachers you trust, give them the paper and see what they have to say. But don't just rely on them to identify everything that's relevant or important.

It's often a good idea to ask for very specific kinds of help. If you identify a problem in the paper, your thinking, or your writing, ask specifically about that. That's fine, and a lot of your teachers appreciate that kind of guidance.

This handout, and especially the Dimensions of Excellence I'm giving you below, are intended to prompt very specific questions you can ask of your paper, and which you can ask your readers to keep in mind as they read your paper.

Finally, when you get feedback, spend a lot of time listening to the problems your readers see. Spend less time on their suggestions for how to fix things, since they haven't thought about the paper, your overall goals, and the trade-offs you need to make, nearly as much as you have.

# 4 Logistics of the Writing Sample

- Most Writing Samples should be 20–25 pages.
- Double-spaced for ease of reading and annotating.
- Don't worry about citation formats or anything like that; so long as an interested reader can figure out what sources you're working with, you're fine.
- The writing sample can be a developed version of a paper you wrote for one of your classes, but it need not be.
- Write as formally or informally as you feel comfortable (well—no swearing).

# 5 Dimensions of Excellence

I've split up the dimensions of excellence into subheadings. That's not because they're independent of each other, but just as a way of helping to make the task of evaluating your writing more manageable.

## 5.1 *Thesis*

Your thesis needs to be the center-piece of your paper. It gives the goal you're trying to reach, and it structures the rest of the paper insofar as every part of the paper somehow has to be there to contribute to your reaching that goal.

Key desiderata:

- The thesis must be easily identifiable as such.
- It should be a single sentence.
- It should be the most interesting thing you can say about the topic in the space allotted.
- Get the wording of the thesis right once and for all. One of the ways for a paper to be coherent and easy to follow is that you pick up the wording from your main thesis at various parts of your paper. An objection to your thesis, if you consider one, should be couched in the very same terms as the thesis so that your reader immediately sees how the objection goes.

Common Problems

- 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. As I'll discuss in a moment in the section on arguments, your argument will most likely fall short of being a valid argument, at least in its most interesting moments. That's OK. And it's important to be self-consciously aware of that fact. But don't let that affect how you write over-much. You'll still have a good argument, and only qualify exactly as your argument requires.

## 5.2 *Framing*

Framing concerns how you set up the discussion of your thesis. While your thesis gives the goal of your paper, the framing of your paper explains why that is a goal worth pursuing. What is the significance of the topic. This is partiucarly important for shorter papers like your writing sample, where the particular thesis is probably fairly circumscribed and specific. Such a thesis may be interesting in its own right, but it'll also bear on more general philosophical issues. Part, perhaps a large part, of the thesis' interest derives from this bearing. The framing of the paper explains this connection.

[Exercise] Try doing this for individual meetings of classes as you go along through your semester. Do it in less than 100 words. Actually write it down, edit and revise. Seriously, get a lot of practice.

As you think about answering that question, don't think about your interlocutor as one who is suspicious of your thesis and who you need to move off a fundamentally antagonistic attitude. Think of your audience as someone who doesn't know why the goal is important and wants to know.[4]

This is particularly important because of issues of scope: chances are that you'll address a fairly specific problem raised by a few texts (see the section on *engagement* below). One of the key things grad admissions committees look at is whether you can explain what's at stake in a debate in a direct way that allows non-specialists to get into the debate. This is easier for some topics than others, obviously.

Key desiderata:

- You motivate the problem you're addressing in terms that are independent of the philosophical texts you're discussing.[5]
- Don't state the problem in terms of philosophically charged terms if you can at all avoid it. Instead, introduce the key philosophical terms via your motivation of the problem.[6]
- You say exactly as much in framing the issues as is required to understand your thesis and the importance of that thesis.
- Examples are extremely helpful here to orient the reader.
- If relevant, you explain some nearby claims with which your thesis might be confused. This is where feedback from others can be really helpful. If you find yourself saying something like "No, No, that's not what I'm saying. What I'm interested in is rather *this*", then that's a contrast that belongs in your framing.

[4] There's a very general point here: when you write a philosophy paper—or any paper for that matter—you implicitly define your ideal reader. She's the person who has exactly the questions you answer in the paper, she has exactly the background knowledge to understand what's going on, and she doesn't yet know any of the things you explain. Actual readers will attempt to accommodate to your ideal, but you can't ask too much of them. The readers are, in the end, just who they are.

[5] As Judy Thomson once told me: the fact that [name redacted] wrote about the topic is insufficient reason to write about it. Judy is the best.

[6] This is a useful exercise since it lets you say explicitly what some of the presuppositions of a debate are—a nice skill to show off!

- Some papers explicitly discuss options in the relevant literature. If so, this review should be structured: what are the commonalities among different papers, and how do these commonalities relate to the problem you've identified? A very common strategy is to put the problem in terms of a puzzle or tension or inconsistency among claims, and suggest that different strategies in the literature respond to puzzle by rejecting different claims.

Common Problems:

- You say everything about a topic.
- You start in the middle.[7]
- In framing the issue, you give a sequential, unstructured report of what a bunch of people have said.

### 5.3 *Engagement with Others*

I said above that working with texts, both singly and considered in concert, is one of the key skills you can show off in your writing sample. So let's talk some more about scope.

It's a great idea to talk about a single text as your focus, or about a debate between two or three texts, no more than that. Other texts may be helpful to draw on briefly for a distinction, a key concept, as part of framing, or as a pointer to something that you can't talk about because of space. But in most successful writing samples, one, two, or three texts are the center of gravity. These are the texts that you'll do some really detailed work interpreting, critically engaging with, etc.

These texts can be contemporary articles, they can be books, what have you. Just narrow your focus enough so that you have the space to quote, interpret, etc.

Also, this is where it makes sense to ask for help: there are often a few key writings that anybody writing on a topic is expected to have read. For better or worse, admissions committees look askance at papers that miss this sort of thing. The reasoning, I think, is that there's a difference between doing enough research to know the key works, and doing enough research to know whether anyone has said what you're saying. An applicant to grad school can be asked to do the former, but not the latter. Ask your professors about this.[8]

Key Desiderata:

- The interpretation of another's text is charitable. It's the kind of presentation that should make its author say: "Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying. I'm glad you put it so well."[9]
- The other's position is motivated: you explain the attraction and why it's worth taking seriously, especially if you end up critiquing it.
- The interpretation of the other's text is emancipated: you don't take their terminology and way of framing the issues for granted, but explain it in your own terms, and are aware of possible shortcomings.

  [Example] Let me give you an example from the history of philosophy. Hume in his writings on the mind just starts off the *Treatise concerning Human Understanding* by saying that all ideas—roughly, concepts—are derived from impressions—roughly, experience, and so the problem for

[7] Again: think about the ideal reader you're implicitly constructing. Who has exactly the amount of background knowledge that gives out where you begin?

[8] Reminder: it's totally reasonable to ask professors at other schools, especially with this sort of question which takes a few minutes to answer.

[9] I really do mean *should* in the point above. Actual, flawed human beings might well get defensive if their position is put very precisely and clearly, especially if in the course of doing so, you show that their position isn't great. Don't shy away from that if this is really the intellectually honest thing.

Hume is to explain where our most interesting ideas come from, such as causation. Hume then spends a great deal of time and ingenuity on this geneological question. But if you were to write about this, you shouldn't just dive right in and put the questions you're writing about in terms of impressions and ideas. You would have to explain the topic in as theory-neutral a way as possible, by explaining the underlying picture Hume is taking for granted.

- The interpretation is clearly grounded in the text.
- You present enough of the text so that your audience can judge for themselves whether you accurately present the other's views.
- If you are writing about a debate, you can formulate exactly what one side accepts while the other rejects, ideally in the form of a single sentence.

Common Problems

- Cherrypicking.
- Constant editorializing/sniping.

### 5.4 *Argument*

Strange thing: we make our students take logic, where they study valid arguments and we hold those up as paragons of argumentation, yet we basically never give valid arguments. And when we do give valid arguments in our papers, they are little more than the skeletons around which our papers are structured, and all of the interesting philosophy happens in arguing for (or "motivating") the premises.

OK, so the most interesting argumentative parts of your paper won't be valid arguments. They're somehow going to support your thesis, and it's a good idea to be self-consciously aware of how they do that. It might make sense for you to say how your argument goes, and how much it does and doesn't establish.[10]

Key Desiderata:

- It's completely obvious what your main premises are.
- The most controversial and important premise gets the most discussion.
- If you don't have a good argument for one of your premises, own it. Say something about why it makes philosophical sense to accept the premise, at least as a working hypothesis. Then move on.
- You take a single dialectic and pursue it: argument, objection, clarification/rebuttal/development/revision.
- In that dialectic, it's completely obvious what part of your argument is being discussed, and how each step of the dialectic connects to that part. For example, if you're considering an objection to one of your premises, you need to
  - identify the premise,
  - really connect the objection to that premise, ideally by stating the objection in the very same terms as the premise.

Being able to write in such a way that your audience doesn't get lost in the turns is a challenge.[11]

[10]This isn't necessarily something you'd do in all philosophical writing, but showing an awareness of this kind of thing can go some way with a graduate admissions committee.

[11]This is a good thing to ask your readers about quite specificallly.

### 5.5 *Holistic*

One of the hardest parts of putting together a writing sample is mainting the philosophic and dialectical discipline to make the full 20+-page undertaking hang together. Specifically:

- Paper is structured by the thesis, i.e., the thesis states a clear objective for the paper to achieve:
  - Every component (thesis, interpretation, argument) of the paper contributes to that objective.
  - No component of the paper contributes to some other objective.
  - Every paragraph has a clearly describable job to play in reaching the objective.
  - Every paragraph only has one such job.
- There are no extra words. You can always tighten your prose.
- There are no points that don't contribute to your thesis.
- The paper is well-proportioned: the most interesting part of your paper receives the most discussion.
- You close all the loops you open up in your paper.
  - If your thesis is qualified in various ways, each of the qualifications is explained at some point in your paper. Perhaps it reflects a limitation of your argument; perhaps it's needed to distinguish your thesis from other claims with which it might be confused.
  - Here's a really common structure to philosophy papers.
    (1) You present a problem.
    (2) You present someone else's solution.
    (3) You offer an objection or some other reason to be unhappy with that solution.
    (4) You offer an improvement.

    If that's what you do, you must explain how your improvement doesn't fall prey to the objection you urged to motivate further discussion of the problem beyond the other author's.
  - It often makes sense to postpone discussion of a point until the time is right—I've done that a lot in this document, it's a concession to the mismatch between the fact that text flows in a line while the philosophical ideas you want to discuss stand in all sorts of dependence relations. If you do, make sure that you actually follow through on your promises to discuss later, and that your reader isn't left totally at sea until you follow through on your promise.

Common Problems

- You have a really cool idea that doesn't really fit into the paper, but it's just so *cool*, and you leave it in. Don't do that.[12]

## 6 Workflow

(1) Start early, ideally over the summer before you're applying. Even if you're planning on taking classes that are relevant to your writing sample, start reading and writing early.

[12] Keep a file or folder or some other record of all of your philosophical ideas that you might want to pursue. Just because a cool idea didn't make it into this paper doesn't mean it won't ever see the light of day. You're in this for the long haul.

(2) Chances are good[13] that your thinking about the topic of your paper will evolve over the course of working on the paper. But the finished paper shouldn't be a record of how your thinking evolved. It should be a statement of the state your thinking has reached by the end of the process. To ensure that:[14]

   a. Take a copy of your paper, number the paragraphs.
   b. On a separate sheet of paper, write down what each paragraph does in the paper.
   c. Annotate each description with information about relationships between paragraphs: which paragraphs the reader needs to have read in order to understand this one.
   d. Annotate each with a description of the role it plays in accomplishing the overall goal of your paper. Having that information presented in a compact way will let you see structural infelicities much more clearly.
      - You might be addressing the same point in several places in the paper.
      - You might explain something more than once.
      - A paragraph takes something for granted that you don't explain anywhere in the paper.
      - A paragraph is still in the paper from back when you thought about the problem and the paper differently and doesn't actually connect to the paper as it is now.
   e. This structural re-engineering will likely allow you to cut a bunch of prose and thus allow you to deepen your most interesting discussion.
   f. Once you've done this big picture structural work, go through the paper picking one or two of the dimensions of excellence and focus on those. If you try to look at too many at once, you'll miss things.
   g. If your paper is coming together, making changes in one place will usually require changes in other places, as well. In other words, you'll most probably have to evaluate your paper according to the various dimensions of excellence more than once.

# 7 Closing Thoughts

(1) Philosophical writing requires lots of judgments calls. Be at peace with the calls you make.

(2) Make a point of finding something you really like about your writing. Try to understand why it works.

(3) Do the same with other people's writing you admire.[15]

(4) Even if something you read about, think about, or write about doesn't make it into the final draft, you haven't wasted your time.

(5) If it bugs you, fix it until it doesn't bug you anymore. Trust your philosophical sensibility. Don't let yourself off the hook.

[13] Read:I'm totally certain

[14] I fully appreciate that different people have different work styles. I also think it's really important to try out different practices, so I'd like you to give this one a try. It's helped a lot of my students when writing more complex papers, and it's been invaluable to me in my own work.

[15] Seriously. We spend way too little time thinking about what makes good philosophical writing work, and a huge amount of time being critical. It'll be worth your while. I promise.