Philosophy

Writing Philosophy Papers

The purpose of a philosophy paper is to make an argument. Although arguments can vary in their level of formality, a more formal argument can be broken down into a series of bullet points and not lose any credibility. The basic structure of the argument is a series of "premises," statements that the author either takes for granted or proves to the reader, followed by a "conclusion" that results from the premises. A simple argument might look something like this:

1. No bear can fly.
2. Pooh is a bear.
3. Therefore, Pooh cannot fly.

In this argument, steps 1 and 2 are premises (in this case, we take them for granted). Step 3 is the conclusion that we have proven from the premises.

Philosophical arguments are judged by two qualifiers: validity and soundness. A valid argument is one in which the conclusion logically follows from the premises. A sound argument is a valid argument with premises that are actually *true*. The argument above is a sound argument. However, we might conceive of an argument which is valid, but not sound:

1. If it is raining, I am made of wood.
2. It is raining.
3. Therefore, I am made of wood.

In this argument, the conclusion would logically follow *if the premises were true*. However, they are not true, so it is valid, but not sound. It's important to understand this distinction to ensure that one's arguments are logical (valid) and actually deal with the truth (sound). Otherwise, who cares?

More complicated arguments may require that the writer prove some of the premises with smaller, embedded arguments (for example, we might ask for a proof that "If it is raining, I am made of wood"). These should all follow the same guidelines above, except that the premise in question becomes the conclusion of the new argument. The most important thing here is to make sure that one does not get lost in the fray; always keep the conclusion in mind.

Structure & Style

Philosophy papers differ based on their prompts and intention, although all papers should ATFQ (Answer The Freakin' Question).

A review of an article should effectively outline the relevant parts of the original author's argument, keeping in mind what is important about argument structure. This means explaining (often in fewer words) all of the premises and how they relate to the conclusion. Never assume the reader agrees; if a premise is important, make an argument for it. Most sentences that begin with "It is obvious that" or "It should be clear to see" contain weak points. If the argument relies on an assumption (or if arguments in its favor are unnecessary/impossible), the writer should explicitly say so.

Students in higher level philosophy classes will be asked to formulate original arguments, often in response to another article. Papers like these often follow a similar structure. First, the writer gives the argument's background (what the original article states, who else has made what arguments, etc.) and its structure, including key assumptions and terms (if any term is mildly important, DEFINE IT). The writer then has some options, depending on their intention. They might find a weak point in the argument, object to it, then either provide a solution or an alternative argument. Otherwise, they may build upon the original argument with their own steps to come to another conclusion (without disrupting the original argument).

In any paper in which the writer proposes an argument, **the writer should consider possible objections.** The process for this is much like the process for finding objections to someone else's work; it requires that the writer be able to read their own arguments critically and find weak spots. They should mention these objections, and try to refute them in some way by showing that they are irrelevant, misguided, or otherwise fail to discredit the paper's argument.

Vocabulary and phrasing must be consistent, clear, and concise. Because the definitions of words *really* matter, writers should define every relevant term in a paper. They should use the same words for the same ideas, as using different words can confuse the reader or leave their argument vulnerable to refutation. For example, in literature we might readily substitute "person" for "human." In philosophy, though, these two words might mean very different things (Could artificial intelligence be a person? Are all humans persons?). The same applies to how the important concepts are phrased. If this means that a paper uses the same phrases and terms over and over again, so be it. It is better to be dry than unclear. Finally, writers should strive to "get to the point." Philosophy papers are arguments, not expositions or narratives, and anything extraneous simply gets in the way. Consider each paragraph to be the "next step" in the argument, with every sentence contributing something important to build up a premise or explain a connection. A philosophy paper is not the place for tangents or "fluff." If at any point the reader wonders why something was included, that something should probably be removed.

All in all, one might think of philosophical writing as the writing out of a mathematical proof in prose. The goal is to make an argument strong enough that a reader is convinced that your conclusion holds. Every paragraph, sentence, and word should contribute to that goal. Finally, it is vital that the author establish clear definitions such that the reader has no cause to misconstrue an important word or phrase. The reader should be able to take a philosophical paper and write out the argument in a series of bullet points.

Intro to Course Assignments

Guide to Evaluation Philosophical Arguments

Writing in academic philosophy has a distinct style that differs greatly from most other disciplines. An important aspect of philosophical writing is the structure of the essay. The following gives a general idea of how to organize a paper that evaluates a philosophical argument.

Begin by stating what argument you are going to evaluate.

- Clarity is highly valued in philosophical writing. Thus, writers should get right to the point rather than writing an elaborate introduction.

- Example: "In this paper I will be evaluating Philippa Foot's argument in "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives" that moral judgments are only hypothetical imperatives.

Provide a roadmap.

- In this segment, you should basically give an outline of how your paper is going to unfold. Again, philosophers like to get right to the point by giving the reader a general understanding of the structure of the paper at the beginning.

- Example: "In this paper I will first explain Foot's argument. Next, I will highlight some problems for her position. Then I will proceed to offer a possible fix for her view."

Thoroughly explain the argument in question.

- You should spend a significant amount of time describing exactly the argument that you're evaluating.

- The explanation should be thorough enough that someone who has never read a philosophy paper before should be able to understand the argument without any confusion.

Explain the potential problems for the argument.

- Here you should go over any potential issues with the argument that you have been evaluating.

- You should be evaluating whether or not these possible problems weaken the philosopher's argument.

Conclude by restating what you have shown in the paper.

- After all of the arguments and objections you have considered, again state what you have tried to prove about the argument in question.

<u>Online Resources</u>

"Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper" by Professor Jim Pryor, Associate Professor of Philosophy, New York University:
http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html
Several professors at UVM refer students who have questions about writing philosophy papers to this document.

Claremont McKenna College:
http://www.claremontmckenna.edu/pages/faculty/AKind/Intro01s/writing.htm
- Fairly brief, but can be a good first step in developing an understanding of how to write a philosophy paper.
- Great resource for the steps before the actual writing begins.
- Great advice on how to start outlining and planning.

Arizona State University:
http://www.public.asu.edu/~dportmor/tips.pdf
- Very detailed examination of key components of philosophy papers.
- Fills in some of the more minor points along the way.
- A detailed guide on how to formulate a proper thesis.
- A paragraph-by-paragraph breakdown of common philosophy paper organization.
- Many good tips on how to write clearly and concisely, which is crucial in a philosophical essay.

Stanford University:
http://web.stanford.edu/~bobonich/index.html
- Information and advice regarding how to reconstruct the argument of an article.
- A list of important philosophical terminology.

Purdue OWL:
https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/659/01/
- Focuses on logic in argumentative writing.
- Comprehensive list of logical fallacies.
- Detailed explanations and examples of how "valid" and "sound" arguments are constructed.

Sample Papers

Former tutor, Max Deleon has shared some examples of papers he has written for philosophy classes, with an explanation for each of (a) the type of paper, (b) what the paper does right, and (c) what problems there are with the paper. (Note: the footnotes in these papers have been removed.)

Sample 1:
a précis (summary of an article)

Sample 2:
a paper that defends an "original" positive philosophical claim (not drawing from sources) and explores the consequences of that claim

Sample 3:
a paper that calls a philosopher's argument into question by undermining several premises

Sample 4:
a paper that amends the argument of a philosopher

Sample 5:
a paper that explains an existing theory and responds to several counterarguments

Sample 6:
a paper that explains a philosopher's argument, poses two counterarguments, and explores possibilities for amending the argument