

## How to get an A on your philosophy paper and make your TA and Professor Emery extremely happy\*

Philosophy paper prompts come in all shapes and sizes. In this class, they will often look like this:

Author X believes Y. In your own words, what is X's argument for Y? Do you think this is a good argument? Why or why not?

In class and in the readings you've seen several arguments for thesis A. Chose the best argument from that group and reconstruct it here. What is the best objection to this argument? Why do you think that objection fails?

Looks pretty straightforward, right? Unfortunately, it isn't. Writing philosophy papers is hard. Really hard. That means you're going to need to work hard to do well. And that you're probably going to get frustrated at some point. That's okay. Take a deep breath. Go for a walk. Watch some youtube clips of puppies sneezing. Then get back to work!

### I Know your audience

You should write for an audience of philosophers, but philosophers who do not know very much about the topic you are writing about and have not read the papers that you have read.

Why? Well, you have to write for an audience of philosophers because this is a philosophy class. And you have to write for an audience of philosophers who don't know much about the topic and haven't read the relevant papers, because that allows us to evaluate what you know about the topic and whether you have read (and understood) the papers.

What does it mean to write for an audience of *philosophers*? It means that you should think of the audience for your paper as a very skeptical one. Philosophers always want to know the reasons for believing the theses placed before them. In other words, they ask "why?" a lot. They aren't going

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\*Seriously. We want you to do well, and nothing makes us happier than when you do. It is going to be hard to get an A on the papers for this class, but that's because writing a good philosophy paper is hard, not because we don't like you/enjoy making you feel bad/insist on making things more difficult than they need to be.

to take anything on faith, or on your authority. You'll need to very clearly explain not only *what* you think but also *why* you think it. And you'll need to make sure that there aren't multiple different ways of understanding what you've written.

If it helps, you can think of your audience as a bunch of jerks, looking for reasons to criticize or misinterpret you. But they aren't really jerks, they're just philosophers. They aren't being critical because they want to prove that they are smarter than you or make you feel bad. They are being critical because they are trying to investigate the world in the most rigorous manner possible.

What does it mean to write for an audience of philosophers *who don't know much about the topic and haven't read the relevant readings*? It means **you** need to explain any relevant background assumptions, examples, or arguments in the literature and define all technical terminology. If your roommate (i.e. a smart person who doesn't know very much philosophy) does not know a term that you are using, or uses it in a different way from the way that we've been using it in class, then it is a technical term. (If you're ever unsure, just ask us! It's not a secret, and we're happy to give you advice.)

## II Exposition versus analysis

Half to two-thirds of your paper will be exposition, in which you will be explaining other authors' theses or arguments. The other half to one-third of your paper will be your own analysis or evaluation of some thesis or the arguments for that thesis.

The reason why we require so much exposition is that the theses and arguments we will be looking at in this class are really difficult, and a large part of what we're evaluating you on is the extent to which you understand them. It is not because we aren't interested in your own original ideas. We're very interested. Bring them up in class or come visit us in office hours.

In the expository section you will often be asked to reconstruct an author's argument. Philosophers have a very specific procedure for this. See the handout on philosophical arguments that you received earlier in the semester for more details.

Note that the analysis section does not need to be critical (though it can be). Some things that you can do in the analysis section include:

- Provide a counterexample to a thesis or to a premise in an argument.
- Show that the conclusion of an argument does not follow from the premises.
- Show how a thesis or premise has some as yet undiscussed consequences and explain why

you think those consequences are important.

- Offer some further reasons to believe a thesis or premise.

The most common mistake that students make in the both parts of their papers is making claims without explaining the reasons for those claims. They attribute claims to an author without then going on and explaining *why* the author believes those claims, or they take some position themselves, without explaining *why* they take that position. Remember, you're writing for an audience of philosophers. They don't just want to know what someone say. They want to know what that author thinks. And they really want to know *why* she thinks it.

### III Writing clearly

The arguments and concepts and theses we'll be looking at in this class are difficult (have we made that point yet?!) You will be evaluated in part on how clearly you can write about them. Here is some advice on writing clearly:

Get rid of anything unnecessary. Part of writing clearly is writing concisely. All of the assignments will have length limitations in order to encourage this. What is unnecessary? Your ability to tell is part of what you're being evaluated on. But here's one tip: you don't need a wordy introduction or conclusion. If the first part of the prompt says, "What is thesis X" it's fine to start your paper like this: "Thesis X is...."

Make the structure of your paper obvious. Use lots of signposting, e.g. "In this paragraph I'm going to...." "I will now discuss..." (You may have been told that you should never write "I" or "me" in a paper. That is false. It depends on the conventions of the particular discipline you're writing in. In philosophy papers it is absolutely fine.)

Use examples! You'll often be dealing with very abstract principles or arguments. A concrete example can help the reader understand those principles or arguments.

Use simple vocabulary. We know you can use fancy words. That doesn't mean that you should. Remember, philosophers don't take anything on authority, so fancy vocabulary doesn't impress them. And fancy vocabulary often has the unintended side effect of obscuring your meaning.

Avoid metaphors. They can often be interpreted in many different ways.

#### IV The simple stuff

These things seem small but they absolutely matter. The bad news is, if you do them wrong, you'll lose credit. The good news is that it's easy to do them right:

- Include your name, the date, and the assignment title on the top of the first page.
- Write in a 12-point standard font (like Times New Roman), with at least 1-inch margins and 1.5 line spacing.
- Make sure you've provided citations for all direct and indirect quotation. I don't care what format you use but the reader needs to be able to quickly find the author, the title of the piece, and the page number.
- Try to avoid spelling, grammar, and other typographical errors. Admittedly, these happen to everyone. But they still make you look unprofessional and unintelligent. A very simple strategy: when you've finished your paper, read it out loud to yourself. Or buy your roommate an ice-cream cone in exchange for her reading it for you. You can also always go see the experts at the Writing Center.
- Don't forget to answer all parts of the prompt. Students make this mistake all the time!
- Obey length limitations. You will lose 2 points (out of 10) for going over the length limitation. Don't fudge the margins or use a smaller font. We can tell.
- Turn it in on time. You will lose 3 points (out of 10) for every day that your paper is late.

#### V Step-by-step advice

Everyone approaches writing differently. Here is one approach that I highly recommend:

1. Start early, i.e. a week before the paper is due. I know, I know. Almost none of you will do this. But it's the single biggest thing you can do to improve your paper.
2. Make sure that you understand the prompt. If you have questions, ask!
3. Write a first draft without worrying at all about the length. Put everything you have to say in there. Think there are two different ways of understanding the argument? Write down both. Have several objections to a premise? Explain them all in detail. Have a bunch of very thoughtful things to say in the introduction about the importance of the question you are writing about to the future of human kind. Have at it.
4. Let it sit. Close the draft and do not open it again for 48 hours. (Remember how you were supposed to start early? This is why.)

5. Go back through the draft. Note anything that is unnecessary (like that brilliant introduction), and cut it. Where you've put forward more than one argument or objection or interpretation, decide which one is most convincing and get rid of the rest.
6. Remember your audience. Go back through the draft again, this time with your audience in mind. Make sure that you've given reasons for any claims that you've made. And make sure that you've defined any technical terminology that you've used.
7. Sweat the simple stuff. Make sure that you've answered all of the parts of the prompt. Check that your formatting is correct. And proofread. Twice!

## VI How grading works

Grading will be based on five criteria: the extent to which you have answered the question, the quality of your reasoning, your understanding and use of the reading, the clarity of your writing, and the originality of your ideas. Your TA be using the following sort of table in order to give you an easy, visual representation of what you're doing well, and what you need to improve on:

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ ASSIGNMENT: \_\_\_\_\_

	Less than satisfactory	Satisfactory	Good	Excellent
Answering the Question				
Quality of Reasoning				
Understanding & Use of Reading				
Clarity and Structure				
Originality				

COMMENTS:

GRADE: \_\_\_\_\_

He or she will also give you a grade out of 10 points, which is what we use to calculate your final grade. I will review and approve the grades before they are distributed. If you have questions about your grade you are welcome come talk to me or your TA during office hours. Good luck!