

PHILOSOPHICAL WRITING

How to write a contemporary philosophy paper

Today

- Announcements
 - Short Paper
 - Due 5pm, Sunday, Feb 12
 - Philosophical writing
 - Helpful literature
 - Preparatory questions
 - General advice
 - Examples, good and bad
 - Discuss Aristotle's function argument

Helpful literature

- Where can I find advice about writing papers?
 - Writing handouts (Canvas):
 - Writing rubrics
 - Writing rubrics: examples of scoring areas
 - Two short pieces on how to write philosophy papers (internet):
 - Jim Pryor, “Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper”
 - Shelly Kagan, “How to Write a Philosophy Paper”
 - More detailed advice on writing:
 - Steven Pinker’s *The Sense of Style*

Preparatory questions

- A paper plan
 - Here are some preparatory questions you might try to answer before you start writing your paper
 1. What do you aim to achieve in your paper?
 2. What jargon terms are you including in your paper? List them and explain what they mean.
 3. Explain the argument that you will present/reconstruct in your paper
 4. How might the argument be misunderstood, and how will you steer your reader away from such misunderstandings?
 5. Are there any important assumptions in your paper (i.e. claims you will not be arguing for but taking for granted? If so, list them.
 6. What objection will you be considering and explaining?
 7. How might the objection be responded to?
 - Write a draft. Wait. Rewrite the paper. Wait. Proof-read the paper.
 - You'll have to start early to be able to do this

General advice

- Here are some general tips:
 - Who is your target audience?
 - *Not* the professor or grader. (Not me)
 - “*he knows what I’m trying to say*”, “*he’s smart, he can figure this out*”, “*he taught me these terms, so he knows what they mean*”, etc.
 - ”Just as you said in lecture, Aristotle argues that...”
 - Rather, to an intelligent but unacquainted person
 - Someone you don’t know and hasn’t read any of the material you’re writing about
 - What is your aim in writing to this target audience?
 - To *teach* the reader
 - So, you must constantly *explain* the meaning of terms, the lines of reasoning or thought, the views, positions, arguments, etc.
 - It is ***not*** okay to merely summarize, paraphrase, or report what a philosopher writes.

General advice

- Here are some general tips:
 - Clarity in structure
 - “The argument has five central premises. I will look at these premises in turn. Then I will explain how my conclusion is derived from the premises. Finally, I will present an objection to the third premise.”
 - The first premise is ...
 - The second premise is ...
 - The conclusion seems to follow from the premises because ...
 - A possible objection to premise three is that”
 - Clarity in writing, not elegance
 - Write simple prose. Write short sentences.
 - There should be lots of foreshadowing. Be very explicit
 - Present examples that illustrate the point at hand
 - Avoid sentences such as, “From the dawn of time, mankind has pondered the problem of ... ”

General advice

- Here are some general tips:
 - Vocabulary
 - Stick to simple ordinary words. If the average middle school student wouldn't understand a word, it's usually best avoided.
 - Jargon terms are okay, but explain what they mean.
 - If it is difficult to define a word, try to explain its meaning *via* examples.
 - Dictionaries are not good sources of philosophical information.
 - “Elegant variation” is usually to be avoided. Put away the thesaurus.
 - You may use the word “I” freely.
 - When to use quotation marks
 - “San Francisco” has 12 letters
 - San Francisco is in California and has a couple of universities
 - Notice the difference between saying that ergon means something and “ergon” means something

General advice

- Here are some general tips:
 - Critical analysis
 - Examine the philosopher's works, views, arguments, positions
 - She argues for the claim
 - She takes as an assumption
 - Her argument seems to be as follows
 - Do not examine the philosopher him/herself
 - He is crazy, stupid, a genius
 - He believes that...
 - The Principle of Charity
 - *Always* be charitable to whom you're reading/evaluating
 - If some part of her line of reasoning is unclear, try to explain what you take to be what the philosopher intends—something helpful
 - » We are evaluating the works of very smart or brilliant people, and perhaps a genius or two

General advice

- Here are some general tips:
 - Reference
 - When in doubt, cite!
 - If you read any secondary literature on the material, cite it
 - Do not (accidentally) plagiarize

“On the First Ground of the Distinction of Regions of Space”

The celebrated Leibniz enriched the sciences by many actual contributions; but he also entertained numerous greater projects, the execution of which the world has in vain awaited from him. I shall not here pronounce an opinion why this was so; whether his essays seemed to him still too incomplete — a scrupulousness peculiar to men of real worth, and one which has ever and again deprived learning of precious fragments — or whether it was with him as with the great chemists, of whom Boerhaave conjectures that they frequently announced performances as if they had them in their power, while actually they were only giving credence to their skill, believing that the execution could not miscarry if they once resolved to undertake it. At least it seems probable that a certain body of mathematical teaching, which Leibniz in anticipation entitled *Analysis Situs*,² never existed save in intention. Many writers, including Buffon (in dealing with the involution of Nature in germs), have lamented the loss which we thereby suffer.

Kim's paraphrase:

“Leibniz was epic. Too bad he didn't carry out some of the projects he planned on. Maybe it was because he was a perfectionist. It's hard to say.”

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This is a *terrible* opening paragraph

- There’s no thesis statement. We have no idea what he’ll be arguing and how
- The second sentence is incredibly long (9 lines long)
- And what’s with the profuse namedropping?

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– And what does *any of this* have to do with *space*?

DO NOT WRITE PHILOSOPHY PAPERS LIKE THIS

denisdutton.com/bad_writing.htm

- Indeed dialectical critical realism may be seen under the aspect of Foucauldian strategic reversal — of the unholy trinity of Parmenidean/Platonic/Aristotelean provenance; of the Cartesian-Lockean-Humean-Kantian paradigm, of foundationalisms (in practice, fideistic foundationalisms) and irrationalisms (in practice, capricious exercises of the will-to-power or some other ideologically and/or psychosomatically buried source) new and old alike; of the primordial failing of Western philosophy, ontological monovalence, and its close ally, the epistemic fallacy with its ontic dual; of the analytic problematic laid down by Plato, which Hegel served only to replicate in his actualist monovalent analytic reinstatement in transfigurative reconciling dialectical connection, while in his hubristic claims for absolute idealism he inaugurated the Comtean, Kierkegaardian and Nietzschean eclipses of reason, replicating the fundamentals of positivism through its transmutation route to the superidealism of a Baudrillard.

A recipe: line by line detail and instruction

- Recipes are much better, closer to what we should produce
 - Pre-heat the oven to 150C/300F/Gas Mark 2. Warm the ramekins in the oven, so they are warm when the caramel is poured in.
 - First make the caramel. Pour the sugar and six tablespoons of water into a clean stainless steel pan.
 - Dissolve the sugar slowly, stirring with a wooden spoon over a low heat.
 - When there are no sugar granules left, stop stirring and boil until the sugar turns a dark copper colour.
 - Remove the caramel immediately from the heat to ensure that it does not burn. Quickly pour the caramel into the warmed ramekins.
 - Set the ramekins aside to cool and become hard. (Do not put them in the fridge because the sugar will absorb moisture and go soft and tacky).
 - Once the caramel is hard, butter the sides of the ramekins above the level of the caramel.
 - For the custard ...

A recipe: instructions for potatoes au gratin

- But some recipes are too general to guarantee good and consistent results:
 - Preheat oven to 350°. In a large saucepan, melt butter over low heat. Stir in flour, salt and pepper until smooth. Gradually add milk. Bring to a boil; cook and stir 2 minutes or until thickened. Remove from heat; stir in cheese until melted. Add potatoes and onion.
 - Transfer to a greased 2-qt. baking dish. Cover and bake 1 hour. Uncover; bake 30-40 minutes or until the potatoes are tender. **Yield:** 6-8 servings.

Voters' pamphlet: proposition 63

Requires background check and Department of Justice authorization to purchase ammunition. Prohibits possession of large-capacity ammunition magazines. Establishes procedures for enforcing laws prohibiting firearm possession by specified persons. Requires Department of Justice's participation in federal National Instant Criminal Background Check System. Fiscal Impact: Increased state and local court and law enforcement costs, potentially in the tens of millions of dollars annually, related to a new court process for removing firearms from prohibited persons after they are convicted.

WHAT YOUR VOTE MEANS

YES A YES vote on this measure means: A new court process would be created for the removal of firearms from individuals upon conviction of certain crimes. New requirements related to the selling or purchasing of ammunition would be implemented.

NO A NO vote on this measure means: No new firearm- or ammunition-related requirements would be implemented.

ARGUMENTS

PRO Proposition 63 will improve public safety by keeping guns and ammunition out of the wrong hands. Law enforcement and public safety leaders support Prop. 63 because it will reduce gun violence by preventing violent felons, domestic abusers, and the dangerously mentally ill from obtaining and using deadly weapons and ammo.

CON Law enforcement, anti-terrorism experts, and civil liberties groups overwhelmingly oppose Prop. 63. It was written by a politician seeking to make a name for himself, not the public safety community. It imposes costly burdens on law enforcement and the taxpayer and only affects the law-abiding.

Short paper assignment

- Review the writing handouts
 - Carefully read and reread them, making sure you are adhering to the guidelines, strategies, and rules about what not to do.
- Aristotle's Function Argument (~750 words, 3 pages max)
 - (1) Provide a reconstruction of Aristotle's function argument (along the lines of the interpretation of the argument given in our lectures).
 - Make clear what you take to be the conclusion of the argument and carefully explain the line of reasoning in support of the conclusion.
 - This requires making clear what the argument is intended to clarify, and what it is supposed to teach us about the good life.
 - (2) Briefly present and explain a strong objection to the argument.