

Paper Structure

Introduction:

- state the issue/view/problem/dispute
- motivate the issue/problem: why is this interesting, why is it important, why is it a problem?
- assert a thesis, which includes at least a):
 - a) "In this paper I will argue that X"
 - b) "In order to show X, I will discuss a, b, c"
 - c) "If I can show ____, then X follows"

Body of the paper:

- get your definitions out of the way early: define any philosophical terminology.

"By X I understand Y, (as opposed to Z). This is important to the argument at hand because ..."

- re-introduce the issue/problem but this time go straight to the argument:

"Descartes thinks that we can identify rational principles of thought which are capable of yielding foundational knowledge claims. If successful, his argument will show that the fallibility of the senses is surmountable, and that certain or indubitable knowledge about the external world is possible."

- Get the argument you are considering up and running as quickly as possible.

"The first step towards showing that not all knowledge is derived from experience is to see what, if anything, remains once we abstract from all empirical knowledge. Descartes considers the example of the observable changes which a piece of wax undergoes as it is heated by the fire."

- lead your paragraphs into each other:

"Having shown that _____, Descartes next considers what implications this observation has on _____."

"The two preceding points, when taken together suggest _____. The last step of the argument is to show _____."

- once you have laid out the view(s) in question sufficiently, then re-situate the discussion.

"A logical outcome of this argument is that X. Thus, as an answer to the question Y, Descartes' claim that given X, Z must be true. However, it is not immediately

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obvious that Z follows from X. Consider the example _____. Therefore, we need to examine more closely what exactly is secured by Descartes' argument."

- launch immediately into your 'critical' points. There should be no ambiguity

about whether you are defending or objecting to the view, and, it should be clear from the preceding paragraph what line of argument you are now pursuing.

“Upon closer examination, Descartes’ argument only succeeds in securing the more limited conclusion X. Since his stated aim was to show Z, this represents a substantial loss for his overall project. To illustrate the distinction between X and Z, consider the following example.”

- In the course of your ‘critical’ section, take the time to remind the reader of why this line of thought is relevant, and where it is leading.

“While Descartes took the relation between X and Z to be obvious, the above example shows that we can have cases of X where Z does not follow. This puts pressure on Descartes’ original assertion that _____. We can press this issue further by considering the related point Y ...”

Conclusion:

- never end with an assertion that has not been introduced and defended in the paper. Note, this does not mean you cannot say anything new. This means only that you cannot introduce undefended claims. In fact, a good conclusion sometimes manages to take what has already been defended and point to some new way of understanding this in the context of the current discussion.

- sum up the structure of the paper as a whole:

“First we saw that in committing himself to X, Descartes was thereby insisting that a satisfactory explanation could be attained employing purely rational principles. In the course of his argument, the importance of X is diminished. Descartes shifts his focus to Y. The outcome of this, I have argued, is that ...”

- try to close with some mention of how the argument given affects the larger issue you allude to in the introduction

“While the argument I have offered against Descartes weakens his assertion that he employs a purely rational method, this does not amount to an outright refutation of the possibility of reliance on such principles. There may yet be a way of defending this view. However, I have shown that Descartes’ method is an unsuccessful candidate.”

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Some other good stock paper structures:

A. Object and respond

1. state position P
1. present objection Q
2. clarify objection Q
3. present response 1 against Q
4. argue response 1 fails, objection Q still holds
5. present response 2 against Q
6. argue that response 2 succeeds only if X is true
7. defend X

8. Therefore, objection Q does not hold and position P is coherent

B. Dialectical interpretation

1. we can interpret philosopher A's view as claiming either X or Y
2. here's why X makes sense
3. however, X entails Z, and philosopher A explicitly rejects Z
4. Therefore X cannot be right, so we should consider Y
5. Y does not entail Z, so this interpretation is consistent
6. Further, Y makes sense of A's view because ...
7. Therefore Y is the correct interpretation, and provides benefits Q and R

C. Dialectical Objection

1. the two strongest objections to view X, are objection Q and objection P.
2. Explain what issues P and Q address, and why this makes them the strongest
3. present and explain objection Q.
4. Defend X against Q
5. Sum up why Q does not adequately undermine X
6. present and explain objection P
7. Defend X against P
8. Sum up why P does not undermine X
9. Take stock: what is left of X after P and Q
10. Explain why X is reasonable