

The primary aim of a philosophy paper is to defend a thesis using rational argument.

## You will (mostly) be graded on:

- Demonstrated understanding of the course content.
- The quality of your argument, including clarity, persuasiveness, and sound reasoning.

## Your thesis should be:

- Relevant (Related to something from the course, like a specific reading)
- Clear (Avoid vague, fence-sitting, poorly-defined thesis statements)
- Focused (“Jones is completely wrong” vs “Jones' second claim is ambiguous”)
- Not obvious or trivial (“I will argue that, if  $A = 1$ , then  $A + A = 2$ ”)

## Do:

- Use the first person when talking about *your* argument.
- Use examples to illustrate points and clarify terms.
- Tell your reader what you will do, and then do it.
- Favour depth over range. A few, strong lines of argument are better than many weaker ones.
- Maintain a dignified, academic tone.
- Make the logical connections between your points clear.
- Pay close attention to word use. Some common terms have a different meaning in philosophy.

## Don't:

- Use imprecise, vague or ambiguous language. (“Nice individuals are rarely suspicious”)
- Provide unnecessary background information. (“René Descartes was born in 1596...”)
- Ignore strong objections to your arguments and claims.
- Use what you “personally believe” or “strongly feel” as premises.
- Treat the paper as a showcase for your personal writing style or wide vocabulary.
- Use direct-quotes as filler or as premises.

## Dealing with sources and course content:

Philosophical arguments need not be antagonistic or competitive. Your aim is to advocate for your thesis, but try to see yourself as engaging in a cooperative conversation – even with those you disagree with. So...

Do some work for the authors that you're engaging with:

- Identify missing premises, required clarifications, or ambiguities in their argument.
- Try to present their work clearly, concisely, charitably, and carefully – even if they don't!
- If you quote directly: motivate, frame and explain the quotation.

Be open minded:

- Be willing to consider, or even defend, ideas or viewpoints which you disagree with.
- Be open to changing your mind.
- Be modest, acknowledge your limitations. Consider your own false beliefs and biases.

And finally:

- Think! Give yourself time to sit and think about the course content and your paper topic.

## **Basic argumentative-paper outline:**

### **Introduction:**

Introduce the topic and issue being discussed. State your thesis, say how you will argue for it (a summary of the paper's structure). Say something about your conclusion. (Tip: Write your intro last)

### **Exegesis/definitions:**

Explain important terms, ideas or theories; summarize the relevant arguments and points of other authors; and clarify the specific problem that you will be addressing.

### **Argument:**

There is no single way to effectively present an argument. Use as many paragraphs as necessary to keep your points clear. Each paragraph should cover one sub-topic or reason in direct support of your thesis. Guide the reader through your argument.

### **Objections:**

Acknowledge and address strong objections to your argument. Admit their effectiveness (where appropriate) and adjust or qualify your thesis accordingly.

### **Response:**

Give your reply to the objections. You may not be able to effectively reply to every foreseeable concern or objection – try to say something about them anyway.

### **Conclusion:**

Provide a brief summary of your argument and a restatement of your thesis. A suggestion regarding what further work could be done, what other questions remain to be answered, or the limitations/scope of what has been established, are all acceptable ways to end a paper.

## **Being clear without saying too much, or too little:**

To achieve clarity, you often have to balance being concise with being explicit:

### **Concise, but not explicit:**

“I don't have my wallet. I can't buy beer”

### **Explicit, but not concise:**

“Wallets are traditionally used to store and protect money, a medium of exchange for purchasing goods and services, and mine is currently missing. This fact entails the current situation wherein I cannot access the money which I was planning to use to purchase beer. It follows from the aforementioned facts that, due to the lack of funds, I currently cannot purchase the beer that I wanted to buy.

**Concise AND explicit:**

“I do not have my wallet. My wallet has my money, and I need money to buy beer. Therefore, I cannot buy beer.”

**How to think of your reader:**

Imagine that your reader has limited time, has trouble following complex or abstract lines of thought, and is inclined to disagree with you. As you are reviewing your work, at each significant point, try to imagine this reader asking questions like: “Why should I accept this?” or “What does this mean?”

**Types of assignments:**

Assignments in philosophy will ask you to explain ideas or the views of others, critically analyze their arguments, or advance arguments of your own. In larger term papers, you will probably be required to do all three. Here are some types of assignments which you might encounter:

**Quote and comment:**

- Choose a sentence or short passage from a piece of writing (preferably one of some importance or significance), present it at the beginning of your paper and write about it.
- You can explain and analyze the meaning of the quote, or just your understanding of it. If it's confusing, write about that (and why it is confusing, possible interpretations etc.).
- These are intended to make you read and critically engage with the course material.
- They are almost always pass/fail.

**Explain and discuss:**

- Explain the required material (an article, a theory, an author's views or arguments) as if you're speaking (in an academic tone) to an interested person who is unfamiliar with the content.
- Discussion should raise some important objections and replies from other authors. You may have to advance your own views concerning how you interpret the work you're dealing with, however, you are (usually) not expected to advance an original thesis or argument.
- These assignments are mostly expository.

**Question / Position paper:**

- You will need to answer a specific question and/or defend a position.  
Ex: “Is vegetarianism justified?”, “Is Singer correct in his evaluation of capital punishment?”
- Make sure to draw on the content presented in class (you will probably get explicit instructions to do so).
- Be clear on which arguments/points are yours, and which come from other sources.
- Follow the general outline on the previous page.

**Citation style:** There is no standard citation style for philosophy. Choose MLA or Chicago if you are unsure, otherwise use the system you're familiar with and be consistent.

## References:

Horban, Peter (1993) *Writing A Philosophy Paper*. Simon Fraser University.  
URL: <http://www.sfu.ca/philosophy/resources/writing.html>

Rippon, Simon (2008) *Writing Center Brief Guide Series: A Brief Guide to Writing the Philosophy Paper*. Harvard College Writing Center. URL:  
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Pryor, Jim (2012) *Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper*.  
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