

Writing Philosophy Papers: Tips for Beginners

The main goal in writing your paper is to demonstrate your philosophical ability and your understanding of the course material. The better your philosophical points and the more clearly you present them, the higher your grade will be.

Here are some suggestions that should help you in writing your paper.

1. Do NOT write a research paper. You are certainly allowed to consider outside sources, but you are not required to. It is quite possible to write an excellent philosophical paper without using any sources other than the class readings, lecture notes, and your own strong mind.
2. Do NOT write a mere ‘opinion’ paper. You need to state more than your own views, brilliant as they may be. You need to clearly lay out the arguments of the authors you are discussing, and offer counterarguments of your own.
3. However, if you do make use of outside sources, do NOT plagiarize. You must be the author of your paper. You must place all direct quotations in quotation marks and give citations when paraphrasing the words or ideas of others. You may use footnotes, endnotes, or in-text, parenthetical citations. I expect a complete bibliography. Regarding format, you may follow whichever style manual you choose.
4. Do NOT waste time with flowery introductory paragraphs or grandiloquent claims about the importance of the issues. I do NOT want to read a single sentence beginning, “For hundreds of years, some of the greatest minds in the history of man have pondered the issue of...” Get right down to the issues at hand.
5. DO begin your paper with an introduction that contains a clear thesis or statement of purpose.
6. Do NOT make your reader read deep into the paper to find out exactly which issue you are addressing or what stand you are taking on the issue.
7. DO begin by explicating the view you wish to examine, defend, or criticize; the problem you wish to solve; or the dispute you wish to adjudicate.
8. Do NOT expect the reader to fill in the gaps for you, even if you know he/she has read the same things you have. Any intelligent reader ought to be able to understand your paper. Write as if you were trying your best to explain things to one of your friends who isn’t taking the class (you might even test this by having one of them read the first draft).
9. DO make sure that your thoughts flow easily and logically from the beginning of the paper to the end. The transitions from one sentence to the next, and from one paragraph to the next, should make sense to the average reader.
10. DO insert plenty of “road signs” *en route*. A sentence like, “Now that I have provided an

exposition of Hobart's view, I am going to examine potential objections," helps the reader follow your thoughts and arguments. You should say what you're going to say; say it; and then say what you've said.

11. Do NOT hesitate to use the first person singular. In spite of what some people may tell you, there's nothing wrong with saying "I think that Thomson should have considered..." or "In my view, this idea has the following objectionable consequences: ..." However, don't overdo it. Remember: philosophy papers are NOT mere opinion papers.
12. DO give any views you oppose their most convincing formulation. If your opponent is a fool, then you haven't done anything special by refuting him/her. If, on the other hand, you refute a smart person, you have achieved something more significant.
13. Do NOT panic if you discover that you don't understand the issues as well as you thought you did. Part of the point of writing the paper is to give you an opportunity to think things through, to organize your thoughts, and to try to present them in a form that might be helpful to others.
14. DO start writing early. Give yourself enough time to think about things. Don't wait until the night before. Try to sketch out arguments and responses before sitting down to write them up.
15. Do NOT play font tricks to get your paper to the appropriate length.
16. DO turn your paper in on time. Late papers will be penalized.
17. DO spell-check and proofread your paper thoroughly. A college-level paper should be free of typos, misspellings, and grammatical errors.

Good luck.