

Writing a Philosophy Paper: General Tips and Guidelines¹

When you write a philosophy paper you need to cite from the book or articles that is covered by the paper. It is your responsibility to cite correctly using both in-line citations and a works cited page. You will not need to do any additional research; all sources have been provided for you.

If you are unclear on the material that we covered, such that you must use the internet to write a paper, then you need to see me before the assignment. We will work through the texts so that you should be clear on the material.

Philosophy papers are argumentative papers. They may also be position papers. The function is to argue in favor of a conclusion. That does *not* entail that the conclusion be a definitive conclusion. This process *does entail* taking up the position of others and playing devil's advocate—offering and responding to counterarguments.

Some General Guidelines

Make sure that you explain (in detail) any arguments used and not just state the conclusion of the argument. The same goes for any counterarguments. A one-sentence conclusion is not an explanation of any position.

Example of what *not* to do:

"Kant said that lying is wrong /is bad. He said don't do it."

Example of what to do:

"Kant showed that lying is morally wrong because the action contains a contradiction" (followed by a detailed explanation).

Additionally:

Spell the author's names right! You would be amazed at how many people misspell author's names in their papers. I am not too concerned with spelling and there are a lot of words that will not be in your computer's spellchecker, but please at least spell the author's names right.

Write your papers assuming that I do not know the theories or arguments you are using. A good rule of thumb; if you were to give your paper to a friend who is not in the class, would it make sense to him/her? If not, then keep working.

Examples can be a good thing, but they have to come with a word of warning. Feel free to create your own illustrations and examples for your papers, but do not go overboard. Illustrations and examples should be simple and short; long and complicated examples and illustrations are confusing and often don't get the point across that you wanted. Use examples and illustrations as a point in your paper, not the focus of your paper.

Do not put bullet points or numbered lists in your papers. If it is important enough to get a number, then it must

¹ Created by Trevor Smith

be important enough for you to explain in (at least) a few sentences.

Do not concern yourself with the dates the authors lived or other biographical information unless it is directly relevant to the arguments.

Do not include a cover page. Save the paper and the time.

You may use the word "I" in your papers. This is frowned on in many English papers, but in Philosophy this is sometimes very important to do. Seeing as how you *might* be explaining your point of view or differentiating your view from one of the authors we have read.

Don't worry about using the verb "is" or "to be" too much. In a philosophy paper, it's OK to use this verb as much as you need to.

Do not start your paper with a sentence like "Webster's Dictionary defines a soul as..." Dictionaries are not good philosophical authorities. They record the way words are used in everyday discourse. Many of the same words have different or specialized meanings in philosophy.

Under pain of water-boarding avoid flowery introduction paragraphs and conclusion paragraphs. Get right to the issue at hand. Do not start or end any paper with any of the following lines:

"Throughout the history of philosophy there have been many interesting writers?"

"From the dawn of time..."

"The issue of _____ (fill in the Blank) has been hotly contested and thought about by the world's greatest thinkers one of which was _____"

"There probably will never be agreement on the issue of _____"

Guidelines on how to use (and not use) quotations:

You must use MLA formatting! You should have learned this already in English Comp 101 and/or 102. An excellent on-line MLA guide may be found [here](#). For other formatting styles refer to [here](#). You may also [instant message](#) a librarian for quick assistance.

Keep your quotes concise. No quote should be longer than 1 (or possibly 2 sentences). Long quotes will hurt you in a paper. When a quote gets too long or excessive use of quotes it is clear that you do not understand the material and are merely re-typing the book. You are graded on the explanation not quotations.

All quotes three lines of text or longer must be single-spaced, blocked formatting.

Explain all quotes. Never just put a quote from the texts into your paper without prefacing it or explaining afterwards.

Do not put back-to-back quotes in your paper.

Quotes should be used to support your points, not to make the points for you. Use quotes as a supportive aid. They should work with you, not for you. I should be able to read your papers and skip over all the quotes and still

understand everything you are saying.

You **MUST** cite all quotes. If you put a passage (however small) in quotation marks, you must follow it up with a citation.

Remember, if you need help or are confused please contact me!