

WRITING A PHILOSOPHY PAPER

Step One: Determine your central claim

In philosophy, you will write a range of assignments, from short examinations of a single philosopher's argument to longer papers where you develop an extended argument in defense of your central claim. When writing an argumentative paper, keep in mind that you are entering a discussion about a philosophical claim that has likely been going on for decades, if not centuries. Philosophical questions may have multiple defensible answers, and each answer will have stronger and weaker arguments in its defense. Your goal is to test the validity of the argument you are examining and to add your perspective to the discussion.

Your central claim may be:

- A flaw or limitation in an original argument or in an assumption it is based on
- A reason why the argument is original, illuminating, or otherwise effective
- Clarification of a claim that is unclear or underdeveloped
- A needed distinction in a term or a premise
- A defense of one philosopher's argument over another's
- A claim that canvasses an entire philosophical tradition
- Your own original claim

Whatever your claim, make sure you can support it with evidence and that it is defensible within the length of the paper.

Step Two: Provide background – “They say”

Because you're entering into an ongoing conversation, your readers need to know what others already have said. Even if your audience knows the conversation, your interpretation may be new. In this section, you provide the foundation to your argument. You set up your argument through the way you present the elements of the original argument to which you are responding. Include only what the reader needs to know in order to follow your argument, and avoid biography and history. If the original argument is long and complex, discuss only the premises that are necessary to your discussion.

Step Three: Defend your claim – “I say”

Now you add your response (your thesis) to the ongoing conversation. Your thesis is the position you are taking, with evidence to support its soundness. You want your reader to listen and respond to your claim, so be sure to explain its relevance in the ongoing discussion. (Note that Steps Two and Three may have multiple parts and you may need to intermix the steps. Be sure to distinguish your ideas from the original ideas.)

Step Four: The counterarguments – “They say”

The next step is to imagine opponents' responses to your argument. What might an intelligent person say in response? What are your argument's weaknesses and flaws? Be truthful; acknowledge your argument's limitations. You might cite an existing critique. Clarify with your professor how much time you should spend on addressing counterarguments.

Step Five: Your defense – “I say”

Now you defend your argument against the counterarguments. It's okay if you can't address every criticism, as long as you have picked an argument you can reasonably defend. You're not expected to solve every problem (especially since there may not be a correct answer). Acknowledging weaknesses in your argument and counterarguments raises your credibility; it shows that you've considered all sides of

the problem. The defense of your argument should show the reader why the position you picked is the most logical.

Other Advice

Structure

- Make your structure obvious; aim for a clear narrative thread. The parts of your argument should follow a logical order in defense of your thesis.
- Your topic sentences should clearly explain how each idea connects to the previous ideas. You should be able to line up the topic sentences in order and see the logical sequence of thought.
- Be mindful of the length of your sentences and paragraphs. Philosophy papers often grapple with complex ideas. Try to write as simply and clearly as possible. Linking too many ideas together can create confusion.
- You do not have to reveal the entire scope of your argument in your thesis sentence.

Argument

- Make your claims and assumptions explicit (e.g., “I will assume determinism and show that free will is still possible”).
- Remember, you don’t have to find a definitive answer to some large philosophical problem. It’s better to make a strong small claim than a weak broad claim.
- Explain the opposition’s argument fairly. If your reader knows you’re not being fair, you lose credibility.
- Support an argument because you think it’s logically sound.
- Do not claim to have proven or disproven an argument if you have only pointed out strengths or weaknesses in it.
- Avoid arguments that no one really holds and are easily refuted.
- Clear, real-life or hypothetical examples can be effective, especially for ethical arguments, but an obscure personal anecdote can weaken a claim.
- Conclude with a summary of what you intended to say in your paper, the implications of your argument, questions for further exploration, and/or limitations of your argument. Be modest; don’t over-claim.

Style

- Write confidently, and use simple, direct language. Be sure to define technical terms early (usually at first mention).
- Use of direct quotations will help you to accurately represent the views of other philosophers, but summary and paraphrases are effective when the exact wording is not needed. Ask your professor how much direct quotation is appropriate.
- Also ask your professor if the first person “I” is acceptable.
- As long as not overused, rhetorical questions can be helpful for foreshadowing your next point, pointing out flaws, and introducing your solution.

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