

# Guidelines for Writing Philosophy Papers

## I. Introductory Remarks

Writing is an essential aspect of skillful philosophical inquiry. Writing helps one gain new insights, clarify one's thinking, and understand key issues more deeply. When done thoughtfully and creatively, philosophical writing is exciting and fulfilling. When done consistently, philosophical writing strengthens habits of thought that help one live a deeply satisfying life.

## II. Specific Suggestions

### A. Originality

Your paper should include passages that show creativity and independent thinking. Types of originality include original claims, arguments, examples, illustrations, and comparisons. If you discuss the ideas of others, convey your own, original insights concerning those ideas.

### B. Evidence

Back up controversial claims with evidence. If you make a claim that is not obvious and it plays a significant role in your paper, provide one or more arguments for it. Of course, your defense of a given claim should rest on plausible assumptions. In arguing for a claim, reflect on each of your premises and consider giving additional evidence for any questionable premises.

### C. Fair, Accurate Descriptions

If you summarize someone else's ideas (for example, an argument, essay, theory, position, etc.), your summary should be clear, accurate, and sufficiently detailed. Be careful to avoid misrepresenting what you are summarizing. It may be tempting to commit the "straw man" fallacy, the mistake of characterizing a position unfairly so that it's easier to criticize; resist the temptation. When describing a position, do so as charitably as possible, especially if you plan to argue against it.

### D. Clarity and Style

Make sure that your paper is well organized and easy to follow. Paragraphs should form natural units and be organized in a logical, coherent fashion. Similarly, the sentences that make up a given paragraph should lead into one another so that readers would never wonder why a certain sentence is where it is. Each sentence should be as clear as possible. Aim for sentences that are concise and well structured (rather than complicated or awkward).

Whenever possible, do multiple drafts of the paper. In editing, make sure that sentences are grammatical, unambiguous, and easy to understand. Be sure to proofread carefully.

A helpful tip: after completing a draft, set it aside for a day, and then return to it with a fresh mind. Do your best to read the draft as if you were a classmate reading the paper for the first time. Highlight any sentence that seems clunky and/or unclear. Then, go back and revise the highlighted sentences. Reading a paper aloud is another helpful way to detect problematic sentences.

A final comment concerning style: do not be afraid to use the pronoun "I". For example, rather than writing, "In this paper, it will be argued that ...", write "In this paper, I will argue that ...".

## E. Academic Integrity

If you use ideas or passages that are not your own, cite your sources. If you use a passage from a book, article, website, etc., be sure to enclose the passage in quotation marks and cite the source. It is extremely important to avoid academic dishonesty.

Here are some excerpts from the current RRCC Academic Catalog concerning plagiarism and, more generally, academic dishonesty. Passage (1) is from the Catalog's section entitled "Guide to Catalog Terms" (see the entry under "Plagiarism" at <http://www.rrcc.edu/catalogs/14-15/guide-to-catalog-terms.htm>). Passage (2) is from the section entitled "Academic Integrity," which falls under the part of the catalog called "Academic Standards" (see <http://www.rrcc.edu/catalogs/14-15/academic-integrity.htm>).

**Passage (1):** "Plagiarism: When an individual claims credit or fails to give credit for another person's or source's words and/or ideas, he or she has committed a serious academic offense, listed in the *RRCC Catalog* as academic dishonesty: "Those committing academic dishonesty will be subject to disciplinary action, such as failing the assignment or course and/or expulsion from the course or college." Work closely with your instructors and tutors to avoid plagiarism."

**Passage (2):** "Academic dishonesty is the intentional act of fraud when an individual claims credit for the work of another, uses unauthorized materials, or fabricates information in any scholarly exercise. Academic dishonesty also includes, but is not limited to:

- forging educational documents
- damaging or destroying the works of another; or
- assisting others in acts of academic deception.

If you are aware of an incident of academic dishonesty, please report the occurrence to a faculty member, department chair, or administrator. Those committing academic dishonesty will be subject to disciplinary action, such as failing the assignment or course and/or expulsion from the course or college."

## III. Resources

**A. The RRCC Writing Center** (see <http://www.rrcc.edu/writing-center>)

### B. Books

*Writing Philosophy Papers*, by Zachary Seech (Cengage, 2008)

*Writing Philosophy: A Student's Guide to Writing Philosophy Essays*, by Lewis Vaughn (Oxford University Press, 2005)

*A Rulebook for Arguments*, Fourth Edition, by Anthony Weston (Hackett, 2009)

*Doing Philosophy*, Fifth Edition, by Joel Feinberg, (Cengage, 2013)

*Philosophical Writing: An Introduction*, Third Edition, by A.P. Martinich (Blackwell, 2005)

*Writing to Learn: An Introduction to Writing Philosophical Essays*, by Anne Edwards (McGraw Hill, 1999)

*On Philosophical Style*, by Brand Blanshard (St. Augustine's Press, 2009)

*The Elements of Style*, Fourth Edition, by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White (Longman, 1999)

### **C. Web Resources**

<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

[http://philosophy.fas.harvard.edu/files/phildept/files/brief\\_guide\\_to\\_writing\\_philosophy\\_paper.pdf](http://philosophy.fas.harvard.edu/files/phildept/files/brief_guide_to_writing_philosophy_paper.pdf)

<http://www.sfu.ca/philosophy/resources/writing.html>

<http://www.public.asu.edu/~dportmor/tips.pdf>

<http://widstudio.wordpress.com/wid-writing-handbook-project/a-guide-to-writing-philosophy-papers/>

### **IV. A Final Piece of Advice**

Have fun! Enjoy the process of deepening your understanding, clarifying your thinking, and generating new insights. Congratulate yourself for your solid effort and your new ideas. If you run into obstacles, think creatively about how to address them. Dive into the writing project and embrace both its challenges and rewards.