

TIPS ON WRITING A PHILOSOPHY PAPER

STRUCTURE AND FORM

Your paper should focus on an answer to a problem or question. A problem is a contentious issue that has no correct or incorrect or known answer. Most often this means that you will compose an argumentative essay in the course of which your position will be argued against other possible positions. Doing this implies that you are clear on exactly what your argument or thesis is and what points you will make in support of this position.

You should provide your answer in thesis form. A thesis is an arguable and debatable position which you attempt to support through the body of the paper. Stated in the first paragraph, the thesis should present a focused answer and provide at least the most important points which you will demonstrate in support of your case. A thesis could also simply be a statement of what you will be doing in the course of your paper, or even a basic statement of intention. In both these cases, the thesis should give some indication of what your argument will be.

The body of your paper provides explanation, exploration, support and development to the points you will use in support of your thesis or argument. Stylistically your paragraphs should be structured so that each point, as a generalization, serves as a topic sentence for a paragraph. This is the easiest way to proceed. Your paragraphs will ideally analyze each point and demonstrate how your thesis is supportable.

The body of your essay should also contend with objections another reader or an intelligent person might raise against your position, or even the thinker you are dealing with. You may confront these in a separate section 'of your paper or within the course of making and supporting your points. The idea here is that you at least recognize possible objections. Ideally, if possible, the goal is to refute the objections.

When you generalize, be sure to give evidence, textual or otherwise, for what leads you to such generalizations. In other words, everything stated should be argued for. Don't provide mere opinion but substantiated thoughts and ideas-justified opinions, one might say. If you think you have assumed something, state it and show what leads you to this assumption.

The conclusion of your essay should reiterate what you have done in the course of your paper and articulate what if anything you have accomplished. It should also explore possible implications of your results.

OTHER SUGGESTIONS

Be clear, concise, coherent and cogent. Always attempt to use language which captures what you intend to mean and say. Cut out all unnecessary words. Make sure transitions from one point to another are rather smooth and the steps in your paper follow in some basic way (coherence).

Deal only with information or material you can show is relevant to your problem or topic. Every statement in your paper should be shown to be clearly relevant to the problem or issue.

Avoid long and complex sentences. Stick with short ones. Avoid technical terms, complex words and jargon, colloquialisms, cliches, rhetorical questions and known fallacies of reasoning.

Avoid unnecessary description and paraphrasing. The point is not to re-word what an author says. Rather it is to analyze it. Analysis requires that you do several things: One, break down the concept or point into its formative parts. Two, draw out the meaning of the relevant material in the text. This could involve deduction but it could also be done with an attempt to find what the points in the text assume. Analysis entails showing up the assumptions of the author or thinker. Three, interpret the meaning and ideas in a way that demonstrates comprehension and integration. And lastly, attempt to give critical comments about the position, points, assumptions or the position in general of the thinker. Be careful, however, not to depict the position or any ideas unfaithfully. If you criticize an argument or position, give it flesh and blood first. Do not make it into a straw man, as we say, without any substance, a simplistic and empty vessel or shell, only so that it will more easily be criticized or refuted. Do as much justice possible to the position or argument that you are analyzing.

Do not let quoted passages speak for themselves. They never do. So, you must explain and explore what they mean, imply, suggest, in the context of supporting your position.

A premium is placed upon original, comprehensive, and critical thought. Philosophy essays demand that you present your thoughts on a given problem or question and not rely on those of another. They demand that you struggle with the meaning in the texts and show that you can make sense of it in your own words and for yourself.

Avoid oversimplification. Ready-made answers may show that you have tried to organize and manage the material, but they almost always obscure the matter. Do not dread going into fine detail. Take chances, and do not fear wrestling with the complex issues and concepts you find in the texts. The more seriously you attempt to understand the inner workings of an argument, concept or idea, the better your essay.

FINAL TIPS

Avoid the overuse of the expression "I think" or "I feel." When referring to textual passages and ideas, use a consistent and acceptable form of documentation. Outlines are helpful tools. Use them to specify the parts of your paper and the points for each part.

More important than outlines is the **writing process**. Begin by writing about the problem, your thoughts on the question or problem. Write down everything you think about the problem. You will not use everything you write, but you need to engage in the process of getting your thoughts and ideas down on paper. Write while you think about the problem and what the problem means to you. Engaging in the writing process means doing a lot of preliminary writing, sorting out the nature of the problem or question, articulating your thoughts and ideas and interpretation of the problem, referring to and interpreting the relevant textual material, getting a sense of the structure of the paper, and finally working out your thesis statement.