

## WRITING A PHILOSOPHY PAPER

### Step one: Determine your central claim

As a student of philosophy, you will write a range of assignments, from short examinations of a single philosopher's argument to longer, argumentative papers, where you develop an extended argument in defense of a central claim, your thesis. When writing an argumentative paper, keep in mind that you are entering a discussion on a philosophical claim that has likely been going on for decades, if not centuries. Philosophical questions may have various 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 then add your perspective to the discussion.

Your central claim may be:

- A persuasive reason why you agree or disagree with the original argument
- A reason why the argument is original, illuminating, or effective for other reasons
- A flaw or limitation in the original argument or in an assumption it is based on, including a subtle or implied assumption
- A question or factor that others have missed
- Clarification of a claim that is unclear or underdeveloped
- A defense of one philosopher's argument over that of another concerning a controversial thesis

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

### Step two: Provide background – “They say”

Because you're entering into an ongoing conversation, your readers first 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 what you focus on and how you present the arguments to which you are responding. To that end, include only what the reader needs to know in order to follow your argument; avoid biography or history. If the 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. This input 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.

### Step four: The counterarguments – “They say”

The next step is to imagine opponents' responses to your argument. How would they respond to your argument? What are your argument's weaknesses and flaws? What would the other side say? Be honest and truthful about your argument's limitations.

### Step five: Your defense – “I say”

Now you defend your argument against the counterarguments. It's okay if you can't completely do so, as long as you have picked an argument you can reasonably defend.

You're not expected to solve every problem in philosophy in this paper (especially since there may not be a correct answer). However, acknowledging the existence of weaknesses in your argument and counterarguments raises your credibility. Doing so indicates that you've considered all possible components of the issue. The defense of your argument should show the reader why the position you picked is best.

**Other advice:**

*Structure*

- Aim for a clear narrative thread through your paper. Think of a conversation: when you debate a claim with another person, you don't jump from idea to idea. Rather, each person's input is a response to what was said before.
- Your topic sentences should clearly explain how each new idea connects to the previous ideas. You should be able to line up your topic sentences in order and see the sequence of thought.
- The parts of your argument should follow a logical order in defense of your thesis.

*Argument*

- 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 straw arguments, arguments that no one really holds and are easily refuted.
- Explicitly state any assumptions you make (e.g. "I will assume that determinism is valid and show that free will is still possible").
- Clear, real-life or hypothetical illustrations 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 overclaim.

*Style/Other*

- Write confidently, and use simple, direct language. Be sure to define any technical terms early in your paper (usually at first mention).
- Check with your instructor to determine whether to use direct quotations. Summaries and paraphrases may be more appropriate.
- Ask if the use of the first person "I" is acceptable.
- Rhetorical questions can be useful for pointing out flaws in arguments and in introducing your solution to a problem, as long as they're not overused.
- Remember, usually your goal is to defend your thesis, not prove or explain the claims of others. Therefore, your words are more important than those of others.

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