

# 7 Steps to a Better Philosophy Paper

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## 1 Begin your analysis

Philosophy is infectious, fun, and deep. Indulge in sumptuous amounts of time for thinking and taking notes. This will also save you time and stress when it comes to writing your ideas down.

**Step 1** *State the question precisely, and think about it. Then do it again.*

If you've been assigned a question, write it down on a napkin at lunch. Explain the question to a friend. Find equivalent ways to ask it. What are the possible answers? How might different answers be justified? Remember that to do the assignment correctly, you must answer the question you were assigned. If you were not assigned a question, pose an interesting question yourself. This will help keep you on track.

**Step 2** *Read (and re-read) the relevant scholarly texts with your question in mind.*

Your course readings may be relevant to the question, so think about your question while reading and re-reading. Summarize the arguments of these authors for yourself, and take note of their strengths and weaknesses. It may help to go over your class notes. Although you will be making your own argument, it may help your case to discuss the argument of another author as well.

You may search for other sources, as long as they are 'scholarly'. [Google Scholar](#) is a great resource. It may also help to look up papers from the bibliography of a class reading.

**Step 3** *Write down or revise your 1-2 sentence thesis statement.*

Write down a thesis statement: this, and *only* this, is what you will be arguing for. It's not set in stone at this point; you will revise it as you continue your analysis. But you should always keep in mind what you're arguing for. It should be precise, clear, and no more than two sentences. Your thesis might have two parts, such as a negative claim and a positive claim. But it should be short. Here is a sample thesis statement: *I will argue that Lauden's appeal to history does not justify the rejection of scientific realism, but that a slight modification of his argument does.*

**Step 4** *Organize the support for your thesis in argument form.*

This is the most important part of the process – give yourself plenty of time! Your thesis must be accompanied by an air-tight argument. If you can't provide one, go back and modify your thesis.

You might begin by brainstorming all the claims that you think justify your thesis. Then try to write down an argument in correct premise-conclusion form. For example, here is the premise-conclusion form of an argument suggested by Socrates, for the thesis that *holiness has nothing to do with god*.

PREMISE 1. Holiness has nothing to do with god unless either (a) things are holy because god loves them, or (b) god loves things because they are holy.

PREMISE 2. It is false that things are holy because god loves them.

PREMISE 3. It is false that god loves things because they are holy.

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CONCLUSION. Therefore, holiness has nothing to do with god.

If you have formulated your argument correctly, the premises will necessarily imply the conclusion. Your remaining task is then to provide as much support as possible for each premise. Make sure you jot down the best support you can think of for each of your premises. Now you're prepared to start writing.

## 2 Put it on paper

Writing a philosophical argument requires care and precision, but it is very rewarding when done right. You can forget most things you learned in a creative writing class. The aim of a philosophy paper should be to present the argument for your thesis in a clear and compelling way. Nothing more, nothing less.

**Step 5** *Sketch an outline of your paper that includes an introduction, a main body, and a conclusion as the primary sections.*

The *introduction* should contain a brief discussion of the issue and the question, a statement of your thesis, and a few comments about how you will argue for that thesis. The *main body* should contain a description of the relevant background information, together with the argument for your thesis. The *conclusion* should contain a restatement of your thesis, and (optionally) some brief comments on loose ends, such as what kind of future work remains to be done on this topic. Your outline should include any relevant quotes from the scholarly material you are reacting to. This document will help you write your paper more efficiently.

**Step 6** *Write the body of your paper, then the introduction, then the conclusion.*

Begin with the main body, because this is the most relevant and difficult part. You should make very clear what the premises of your conclusion are, and how they imply your thesis. Spend plenty of time explaining your support for each premise. Then, when you turn to write your introduction and conclusion, you will be able to more accurately summarize your argument. Follow your paper outline and your argument outline during this process. And don't forget to include a References section and cite every piece of information that is not utterly trivial common knowledge!

**Step 7** *Set the paper aside for a day or two, then revise.*

This is the difference between good papers and great papers. If you give yourself time to digest what you wrote down and then read it with fresh eyes, you will almost always find ways to improve your work.

## 3 Top 10 tips when writing philosophy

These tips are based on common mistakes. Just verifying that you have incorporated each of them into your work will put you well on your way to writing a better philosophy paper.

**Tip 1** *Get started early.*

Sometimes you can wait until the last minute and still do a decent job. This is rarely the case in philosophy. Philosophy requires time to *reflect*.

**Tip 2** *Take notes as you read.*

Write down what you think about the relevant scholarly material, jotting down your ideas as they come to you. Have these notes in front of you when you write your outline.

**Tip 3** *Focus on the question, focus on your answer.*

Everything that you write should be aimed at addressing the question. Your thesis is your answer to that question. Your argument supports that thesis. Almost everything else is irrelevant!

**Tip 4** *Assume your audience is extremely dull.*

You might think that your professors, having read a great deal of philosophy, will immediately pick up on your hints and suggestions. We aren't that smart. Write your paper as if you are explaining your point to an utter buffoon. Explain every point you make as completely as possible.

**Tip 5** *Don't try to cover too much.*

A great philosophy paper will state something simple and humble, and then argue well for it. Don't try to solve the biggest problems in philosophy in a 5 page paper!

**Tip 6** *Say what you are doing often.*

Keep the reader informed as to what part of your argument you are in. The purpose of every paragraph should be *insultingly obvious* to the reader. For example, you can say things like:

- My argument shall have the following form. First
- I shall be arguing for this thesis on the following grounds:
- Having argued for these first two premises, I will now show that my final premise is true.
- A good example of this point is...
- One response to this objection is that
- As a result of the above argument, it follows that

**Tip 7** *Use overly simple and concise language.*

Don't use language that is long or overly refined unless you absolutely have to. Slang is not appropriate; however, your sentences should be short and easy to read. You can refer to yourself using I freely in a philosophy paper, especially to explain where you are in your argument.

**Tip 8** *Don't say anything you can't support.*

Every sentence you write that isn't absurdly obvious should be supported, and *not* by just saying, "I believe that X." You must *persuade* your audience, by giving an argument, considering alternatives, giving examples, citing sources, etc. Avoid sentences like "Since the dawn of time, mankind has..." since it is rather unlikely that you will be able to adequately support a sentence like this.

**Tip 9** *Use only scholarly references.*

Terms in a philosophy class may have precise or technical meanings that are not the same as the ones you will find in other fields or in a dictionary. Stick to scholarly sources, and ask your professor if you're not sure what those are. Wikipedia is a fine place to start learning about something, but it is not an adequate reference for a philosophy paper.

**Tip 10** *Always cite your sources, but paraphrase, and quote sparingly.*

A few quotes in a five page paper is fine, but beyond that, stick to paraphrasing. But don't forget, you *must* cite you must cite every word or idea in your paper that is not your own.