

## Writing a Philosophical Paper – Some Advice

### Planning

Finding the right subject for an essay is often difficult. Think carefully of the subject you want to write about. Make sure (eventually with the help of your professor) that you do not choose too large a question. Make sure that you raise a precise question relevant for the text you write about.

### Preparing

Get an overview over the literature you want to rely on and make sure that all the relevant literature is available. If you make copies: Remember to mark from which sources you take the copies (from which books or from where on the web). Read the texts carefully. Take notes while you are reading. If you copy a passage, write down exactly where you found the copied text (in which book, on which page).

### Starting to Write

Do not postpone writing for too long. Writing takes time, and the first text you write may well need further revisions.

### Aims (small essay, undergraduate level)

Typically, you write about what a certain philosopher or a certain group of philosophers has said about a certain subject. The aim of your essay is to present the main aspects of the subject and to describe the problems involved carefully. You may present your own view of the subject, but this should not be your main concern. And in the text you write, you have to begin by presenting the subject and the views of those philosophers on whose work you have decided to rely. Once you have done that, you can present your own view. Do not start by telling your reader what your own view is – as long as she or he does not know what the subject is, why the subject is interesting or controversial and who holds which view of it, your reader will not care about what you think.

### Audience

You do not write the essay for your professor – even though she or he may be the only person who will read it. Address a virtual audience of people, who are intelligent but non-experts of the subject you write about, think e.g. of your fellow students or philosophy students at the same level as you who are not taking your course. You have to tell your audience everything that is relevant for the subject. Do not expect them to fill in relevant pieces of information themselves. Also make sure that you are not filling your precious space with irrelevant information. In a paper about Kant, for example, do not start by telling that he was a German philosopher, who lived all his life in Königsberg, which was city . . . . In general, do not say things your intended audience can be assumed to know and do not tell them about things that they may not know unless they are directly relevant to the main points of your paper.

### Standard

Nobody expects you to submit a masterpiece of creative philosophical thought. What is expected is a clear presentation and analysis of the chosen subject. Such a presentation and analysis will be considered as very good.

### Structure

The essay has an author (yourself, give your name on the front page), a title, an introduction (explaining the subject and giving an overview of what you want to do in your essay), a main text (eventually divided into chapters), a conclusion, a bibliography (mentioning all the books you explicitly refer to in your text and those that you have read for your essay even though you do not mention them explicitly). For a short essay, you may not need a table of contents, but you may wish to include one (after the front page with the name of the author and the title, before the introduction).

A classical form of a philosophical paper is as follows (which does not mean that all good papers follow this form):

1. A brief introduction that leads to
2. A proposition that is to be considered in the paper
3. Arguments for the proposition, e.g the arguments of an author you are reading
4. Arguments that may be raised, and perhaps have been raised, against the proposition.
5. Your well-argued conclusion.

### **Paragraphs (avsnitt)**

Well organized paragraphs contribute much to make a paper legible. There are no absolute rules about the length of a paragraph but if many of your paragraphs are five lines or less, something is wrong. Similarly, if they continue for over half a single-spaced page (12 pt. *Times*, as in this document), you should consider if there isn't a natural shift somewhere in between. For a single-spaced (12 pt. *Times*) paper a natural, desirable length of a paragraph is somewhere between 8 lines and  $\frac{1}{4}$  of a page.

For a good paragraph organization, however, it is not enough to attend to desirable length. A paragraph should ideally present and develop a single thought. It should accomplish something with its thought so that some advance has taken place when the reader reaches the end of the paragraph. This advance should enable you to start a new thought in a new paragraph. The thought in this new paragraph is of course a continuation of the previous one (unless you are starting a new section) and in practice it is not always easy to say when one thought ends and another one begins. The vague idea about the development of a single thought may nevertheless provide a useful guideline.

In a scholarly paper it looks better to mark the separation of paragraphs by an indentation of the first line of a new paragraph than by clicking the return tab twice to make an extra spacing.

### **The well tempered sentence**

In philosophy, the content of the thought presented is often in itself difficult. If you wish to be understood (and fairly judged), it is very important that your presentation eases rather than hinders the readers' comprehension. Here the individual sentence is of crucial importance. When you have put it down, always ask yourself the following sort of questions: Is there a simpler and better way to say exactly this? Is my sentence ambiguous? Is it for instance quite clear what the pronouns in it (words like "this", "it" and "they") refer to? Are the key words I use the best ones available? Does my sentence contain anything superfluous to its main message that may lead the reader into irrelevant thoughts and to wonder about my main point? Am I really trying to say two things at once so that I better put a period and make two independent sentences out of this? Am I being too elliptic, relying too much on the readers' intuition, so that it is unrealistic to expect that they get my point? Then I should, if the point is important, spell out my thought and perhaps turn it into a whole paragraph. Have I put my sentence too strongly and categorically? Or have made it so qualified, weak or vague that it tells the reader practically nothing? And most generally and importantly: Does my sentence have a clear role and relation to the other things I am saying? For instance, if I claim that my sentence follows from what I have said before, does it really follow? And, even if no claims about implication from what has been said before are made, does my sentence explain, expand on or deepen what I have just said?

### **Formalia**

There are many and somewhat bewildering conventions about references, quotations, bibliography set-up and suchlike in scholarly writing. You can follow the example of the bibliographies in Peter Singer, ed.: *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991).

At least 90% of the students do not adhere correctly to the conventions about quotation: When quoting only 3-4 lines, the quoted text is simply enclosed by quotation marks (single or double, " or '). When quoting more, it is conventional to indent the whole quotation (not only the first line). It

may also be put in smaller script with lesser line space, but this is optional. There should, however, be **no quotation marks** to mark off the indented quotation.

### **Further reading**

The following books (all available at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)) that discuss in detail some aspects of the art of writing clearly have had great success and are very good. They are aimed at writing in English, of course, but much of the advice is transferable to writing in other languages.

Gordon, Karen Elizabeth: *The Deluxe Transitive Vampire: A Handbook of Grammar for the Innocent, the Eager and the Doomed* (Pantheon Books, 1993)

Gordon, Karen Elizabeth: *The New Well Tempered Sentence : A Punctuation Handbook for the Innocent, the Eager, and the Doomed* (Houghton Mifflin, 1993)

Hale, Constance: *Sin and Syntax: How to Craft Wickedly Effective Prose* (Broadway Books, 2001)

T. O'Conner, Patricia: *Woe Is I: The Grammarphobe's Guide to Better English in Plain English* (Riverhead Books, 2003)

**Check what there is of such material in and for Norwegian.**