

“Philosophical writing focuses on logic, since this is a primary method for evaluating the strength of reasons for a position.”

### ***What does it mean to write for Philosophy?***

Writing for Philosophy is not much different from writing for other disciplines in the humanities. It revolves around an argument or a claim and presents a clear discussion, defense, or critique of that claim using typical writing conventions. What sets Philosophy apart from other disciplines is the emphasis on **argument** and **clarity** above all else. Writing a philosophy paper is putting critical thinking into written words. It's different from factual reporting or merely summarizing what others have said (though it involves some that).

### ***What is an argument?***

“The thesis plus the reasons given in its support (or the premises from which it is alleged to follow) are called an argument.” (Feinberg 17) In other words, it is a thesis supported by reasons.

### ***A premise is...***

A proposition supporting or helping to support a conclusion

### ***Other key words:***

**Valid**—an argument is valid if and only if granting its premises requires the conclusion to be accepted

**Sound**—an argument is sound if and only if it is valid and has true premises.

### ***Basic argument forms and rules of inference:***

**Modus Ponens (M.P.)**—If P is true, Q is true. P is true. Therefore, Q is true.

**Modus Tollens (M.T.)**—If P is true, Q is true. Q is false. Therefore P is false.

**Hypothetical Syllogism (H.P.)**—If P is true, then Q is true. If Q is true, then R is true. Therefore, if P is true then R is true.

**Disjunctive Syllogism (D.S.)**—Either P or Q. Not P. Therefore Q.

### ***Typical Assignments:***

- Criticize that argument; or show that certain arguments for the thesis are no good
- Defend the argument against someone else's criticism
- Offer reasons to believe the argument
- Offer counter-examples to the argument
- Contrast the strengths and weaknesses of two opposing views about the argument
- Give examples that help explain the argument, or that help to make the argument more plausible
- Argue that certain philosophers are committed to the argument by their other views, though they do not come out and explicitly endorse the argument
- Discuss what consequences the argument would have, if it were true
- Revise the argument, in the light of some objection (Pryor)

### ***Tips for Philosophy Writing***

*Be as explicit as possible...*

- Make sure you have a strong introductory paragraph that states what you're setting out to do
- State your thesis clearly (My aim in this paper is to...)
- Make the structure obvious (These are my points...)
- Use examples and/or thought experiments to make claims more clear

*Avoid wordiness—be concise, but explain yourself fully...*

- Define your terms and use them consistently
- Use straightforward, direct language rather than trying to be sophisticated

*Keep in mind the audience...*

- Distinguish the argument up for discussion with special conventions: number and indent the premises and conclusion
- Different styles of writing are appropriate for different audiences. More generally, try to put yourself in the place of the reader. Make things as easy for the reader as possible. (This is especially important for academic papers, when the instructor may have a whole stack of papers to read.)
- Don't be afraid to deviate from the typical five-paragraph structure. Take as many paragraphs as needed to sufficiently explore your thesis.

### ***Some Common Problems:***

*From the perspective of the professor*

- Students sometimes are not able to organize their thoughts in an orderly way and present and defend positions adequately. "It's good to have at least a rudimentary understanding of what the argument is -- that is, a thesis that is supported by reasons."
- Students seem to find it difficult to tell when they're expressing themselves clearly and when they're not.
- Not enough time is devoted to fleshing out the thesis of the paper. "When the writer gets close to the time to turn in the paper their writing is superficial because they haven't given the problem [argument] the time it demands."

*From the perspective of the student*

- It is difficult to narrow the focus to something manageable. "It's hard to not write too much. You really only need to focus on one argument or one premise."
- Students have a hard time making the logic of the argument explicit. "I may think my train of thought makes sense, but sometimes it comes out all mixed up in the paper."

*Basically, this is what professors look for:*

→Clarity

→Understanding of the material

→Strength of reasoning.

#### Works Cited

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