

WRITING IN PHILOSOPHY

No. 51 in the Writing Center Handout Series

How do you explain Descartes' statement, "I think, therefore I am?" How do you write about Kant's categorical imperative? Philosophy papers can be daunting in terms of subject matter, approach, and style. Although there is no standard, sure-fire method for writing philosophy papers, here are some tips to keep in mind as you're tackling an assessment of a dialogue or treatise.

There are two basic strategies that apply when approaching any philosophy paper:

Read

One of the most important aspects of writing a philosophy paper is reading. Read the text, read it again, and read it again. Repeat as necessary, and take notes while you read – note key points and things you don't understand. Reading is essential; everyone has a hard time understanding the text the first time around, and you can't write about what you don't understand.

Talk to your instructor

Standards for philosophy papers vary from instructor to instructor, so your best bet is to make sure you understand what he or she expects in an essay for that particular class and that particular assignment.

Philosophy papers come in several formats. Here are the main types of papers you will write.

Summary

A summary is just that – a restatement of a philosopher's ideas or theories in your own words. This does not involve an abundance of quotations from the text – it is your opportunity to prove that you have read and understand the material. Think of your audience as someone who is not in your class and may not be familiar with philosophy, and focus your explanation so that person could understand. If you can explain the ideas *in your own words*, it's a pretty good sign that you understand it. Mere recitation does not equal comprehension.

Evaluation

An evaluation is your chance to be a philosopher. It is your analysis of the philosopher's ideas and the expression of your ideas – whether you agree or disagree with those ideas and why. Avoid explanations that restate information that has been covered in your summary. In addition to stating your point, you must develop an argument and defend it.

Position Paper

Sometimes you will be asked to adopt a position and defend it from a philosophical or ethical standpoint. You are responsible for providing an argument that defends that position, regardless of whether or not you agree with it. For example, you may be assigned a paper defending abortion; your feelings against abortion are not part of the assignment.

(See the back of this page for more information about philosophy papers.)

For more information on writing philosophy papers, see

The St. Martin's Handbook (5th ed), 899-900

<http://www.princeton.edu/~jumpryor/general/writing.html>

<http://www.cofc.edu/~portmord/tips.htm>

<http://www.williams.edu/acad-depts/philosophy/jcruz/writingtutor/>

<http://www.hamilton.edu/ACADEMIC/resource/wc/>

[WritingforPhilosophy.html](#)



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Other general tips:

- Philosophy papers differ from literature papers in that you are allowed to use the first person. It may seem awkward or wrong, but it is clearer to say, "I will argue that..." rather than "It will be argued in this paper that...."
- Make sure your argument is clear. Saying that you agree or disagree with Nietzsche is not enough – you must include and develop *why* you agree or *why* you think he is wrong. If you agree with a certain idea or theory, expand your explanation to include a defense of that idea that goes beyond merely restating what was stated in the text. Think about what someone would say against your argument, and address those counterarguments in your essay.
- Use examples to supplement your argument, not replace it. Beware of listing example after example after only a couple of sentences explaining your position.
- Define any key technical terms (for example, "justice" or "gender") as *you* use them in this particular paper.
- Organization is key. Try making an outline of your paper before you write so that you can better see the development of your argument.
- Be explicit. Think of your paper as a geometry proof. Assume nothing on the part of the reader. The reader should make no inferences; you should be doing all that work in your paper.
- Avoid throwing unrelated ideas into your paper, no matter how interesting they are. Follow your argument all the way through the paper.



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