

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING PAPERS

The following is a list of things that you should consider when writing papers for this course. In a course like this, where the point is for you to analyze and evaluate writings by others, and to offer your own arguments to answer open questions, it is not always easy to explain what it takes to write an effective paper. Still, there are a few things that I (and the T.A.'s, if there are any for the course) tend to look for in a good philosophy paper, and they are listed below. If you have any questions about any of this, please ask one of us.

Categories used for marking papers

These are the areas we tend to look at when marking papers. The first three categories are the most important, though doing poorly in the last category can harm your essay grade.

Organization—How well is your paper organized? Is there an introduction with a clear thesis statement? Are your paragraphs organized in a logical fashion, each focused on one topic? Are the main points of each paragraph linked to each other and ultimately to the thesis, or do some of the paragraphs make arguments that are unnecessary or unrelated to the overall claim you're trying to support (the thesis)?

Strength of your argument—

- a. Defense of thesis:* How well have you argued for your thesis? Have you provided good reasons to support it through the paragraphs in the body of the paper, or are there major parts of the thesis that are left without adequate support? Are there obvious objections to any part of your argument that should be addressed?
- b. Use and explanation of texts as evidence:* How accurate is your discussion of the arguments in the texts, and how well have you explained these (considering the audience you are to assume—see below)? Have you provided textual evidence for your claims about the texts? Have you provided textual evidence for interpretations that could be controversial?

Insight—What is the level of original thought you seem to have put into your paper? Does your paper appear to reflect careful thought about the issues, or have you covered them only superficially? Have you come up with a possibly contentious thesis that needs support (and is supported successfully), or is the argument of the paper fairly easy to justify b/c it remains on the surface of the texts, already largely acceptable to an audience that has read the texts?

Style & Mechanics—Includes language (clarity, style, grammar, punctuation, spelling), citation (sources cited correctly), and topic (all parts of topic covered – may not apply if the assignment allows writing on your own topic). It is not the case that points are taken off for every mistake, but numerous mistakes in this category can lower your mark.

Specifics on the above categories

1. Organization

a. Each paper should provide an overall argument

Each paper you write for this course should be devoted to trying to prove a point, to make a claim (or a group of related claims) for which you will provide support in the body of your paper. The thesis of your paper is the claim or set of claims you are trying to support, and it should be stated clearly in the introduction. The rest of your essay ought to be directed to supporting this point -- you should have one main argument running throughout, with all of your points focused on justifying the main claim(s) in the thesis.

b. Clarity of organizational structure

Be sure the paper has: (i). an introduction with a clear thesis statement; (ii). a body made up of points given to support the thesis, presented in a logical order with clear transitions between; (iii). a conclusion that wraps the paper up into a coherent whole. Be sure each paragraph coheres around one topic, and that the main points in the paragraph follow one another in a logical order (as working together to support the thesis) that the reader can easily follow. Transition phrases and clear topic sentences are extremely helpful in this regard. The most important thing to think about in terms of style is clarity, making sure each point is explained carefully and the reader can follow how the main points of the argument together support the thesis. A good philosophy paper need not have a creative style (though that's not a bad thing!) so much as be clear.

Don't be concerned about the paper sounding "dry"—so long as the main conclusion is argued for with clear reasons that work well to support it, the paper has done what it should do.

c. Suggestion: make an outline

Some people find it easiest to ensure that their papers follow the recommended structure if they outline them, before and/or after writing. I recommend that after the paper is written, you at least look it over with the above in mind, and consider whether or not your points in the body of the paper are presented in a clear, logical order.

2. Strength of your argument

a. Defense of your thesis—Think about whether or not you've provided good reasons to support your thesis, whether or not you have left out anything crucial. Be sure that everything you discuss in the paper ultimately works, implicitly or explicitly, to support your thesis (otherwise the "stray" points seem disconnected, and this can weaken your argument). Make sure you are consistent throughout – that you do not at some point provide a claim that goes against something you say elsewhere in the paper. This is true even if you discuss objections to your view – ultimately, your inclusion of such objections and response to them should provide support for your thesis. It is a good idea to include a discussion of possible objection(s), if you can think of some that might be sparked in the reader by your arguments. It's better to discuss this/these and offer rebuttal(s) than to ignore them and hope no one thinks of them

b. "Right" answers? And differing interpretations of texts—For many of the paper topics (or exam questions) given in class (or topics you create yourself), there may not be a clear "right" answer. I try to give topics that are somewhat open-ended, open to interpretation; and I am quite happy to receive original interpretations of texts that differ from my own (provided they are justified in the essay). Still, there are interpretations that seem pretty clearly "wrong," and that will result in lowered points if you don't provide a very strong justification for them.

c. Use and explanation of texts as evidence—In arguing for your thesis you should provide textual evidence for claims that are fairly specific, meaning things that readers may not be likely to remember even if they have read the texts—things that may not be familiar to people who haven't studied that aspect of the text as carefully as you have done. You can either provide quotes or paraphrases with page citations in parentheses. Also, be sure to explain the claims and arguments from the texts that you cite, if they are not obvious; not only may your readers not remember the passage(s) you're discussing, they may not be able to tell just what is going on there without some explanation. State what you take the passage(s) to be saying.

d. Audience – To gauge the level of explanation you should give for the texts and your own arguments, try to write your papers as if you are addressing an audience of other students who are not in the course. You should not assume that your audience is familiar with the texts or issues under discussion in the class. You do not need to explain an entire text just for the sake of summary – explain only those parts of the text that are important to understand for your argument. Pay particular attention to explaining arguments and interpretations that were not covered in class, or that reflect mainly your own ideas.

3. Insight

Showing insight may boost your mark on essays (though not if your argument is deeply problematic in some way). This basically means that your essay shows that you have thought about the texts/topics in some depth, and have come up with some original thoughts on your own. The point in writing papers for this course is not to reproduce texts/lectures/discussions from class, but to make an argument about them that reflects your own ideas. The best way to accomplish this in your writing is to actually spend time with the texts and issues under discussion, giving yourself time to reflect before and during the writing process. An insightful thesis for a paper is not that simply repeats basic ideas from class. Try to come up with an argument for your paper that reflects your own ideas about the texts as much as possible, one that would give a reason to be interested in your essay because it gives them something that might be new to them or that addresses a problem that readers may not recognize in the text. This may not always be possible, but it's something to strive for by spending time thinking about the texts on your own.