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Writing Your Philosophy Paper:
Common Problems to Avoid

1. Don't think of yourself as responding to a "prompt". (That's an ed school concept, whose home is K–12 education, and that has somehow infiltrated colleges and universities.) You're being asked to write a paper, and (in my classes) you have a great deal of freedom when it comes to developing a topic for your paper.

   You will be graded on the argument, so your incentive structure is this: shape your topic around the argument you come up with. That means: don't passively respond to an item on a list of paper topics. In my classes, these are meant as orientation (as in, 'here's what a paper topic looks like') and as fallbacks (in case you don't think of a topic on your own).

2. Make sure you're not spreading yourself too thin by trying to make too many unconnected points. If you try to make too many points, you won't have time to develop any of them—to argue for any of them— properly. To focus the paper, pick *one* point, and take the time you need to explain it clearly, and to produce the structured argument you need to support it.

3. The backbone of a philosophy paper is an argument, and a frequent problem is a paper's simply not having one. Make sure you've got an argument!

   When you think argument, you should think of the things I outline on in-class handouts. An argument is something that starts with premises that you expect your reader to believe, and shows him why, given that he believes the premises, he *has to* believe your conclusion. You should be clear and explicit about what your premises (assumptions) are, what your conclusion is, what the intermediate steps are, and how each step (and ultimately the conclusion) follows from already stated steps (ultimately, premises).

   Your paper should be an argument clothed in text. Make sure you have one before you start writing: a good way to make sure is to produce an outline that displays its logical structure *first*. Bear in mind that an outline of an argument and an outline of a paper are two different

things. You want to have the former before you start to think about the latter.

4. Once you've picked the one point you want to make, and picked the one argument you want to make for it, use your argument as an inclusion criterion. If you can't say why a paragraph or point is necessary for your argument, throw it out. (If you *can* say why it's necessary, then *say* why it is.)

   This goes for the introduction, too. Keep your intro terse. Don't bother with "Ever since the dawn of civilization, philosophers have been puzzled by the problem of..." Cut to the chase.

5. You'll often be discussing someone else's argument. A common problem is that of filling up the paper with unnecessary exposition of the views of the person you're discussing, and having no space for developing, and arguing for, your own views. Make sure you allow enough room in your paper to lay out your argument. You need *only* as much explanation of other people's views as you require to get *your own* argument going. (But you *do* need *that* much.)

   Bear in mind that in philosophy, you can't cite an authority for support. (No arguments from authority!) You can give someone credit for an idea or an argument, but then the agreement or disagreement with it has to be independently registered, as your responsibility.

   To make sure you understand what you need to say (and so, what you don't), *before* starting to write your paper, outline *two* arguments: the argument you'll be discussing, and your own argument. Check that you're clear about precisely where your argument bears on the argument you're examining.

   Once more: you do *not* get credit for rehearsing what's in the readings or what was said in class. You will probably have to do some of this anyway, in order to set up your own argument (for which you do get credit). But it should be kept to the minimum necessary for that purpose. Many of the readings are good models, and worth imitating. But that means: do what they *do*. *Don't* repeat what they *say*.

6. Blurriness is often the reason one doesn't notice that an argument is defective—or simply missing. I don't have a magic formula for eliminating blurriness, but the first step is to become aware that it's there, and one way to do that is to try to explain what you're arguing for and how you're going to get there. You have to have an audience

in mind, and you can think of me: I'm *real* slow, and if you don't spoon-feed me the idea, and your reasons for it, I just don't get it. Imagine me saying, at *every* step, "Hold on, I didn't get that—what does that mean? Why does this follow from that? Why do you think this?"

Give a map of the argument at the outset, and put up road signs as you traverse the map. Here's an example of a map:

> In this paper I will show that Korsgaard's Two Front Argument fails because it ignores a property of persons that I will call Impudence. I will first briefly outline Korsgaard's argument, and highlight the inference that I will show to be flawed. Then I will explain what I mean by Impudence, and argue that any decision maker must have this property. I will argue that if an agent is Impudent, Korsgaard's argument does not go through. Finally, I will consider, and reject, a response that Korsgaard might make to my argument.

(Again, a short paper should be trying to make *one* point. Make sure, before you start writing the paper, that you can say, in a single short sentence, what that point is. Then, first thing you do, tell your reader what it is.)

Here are examples of road signs:

> Now that we've seen Korsgaard's argument, and now that I've indicated where I think the problem lies, let me describe the property of Impudence.
> ⋮
> We've just seen what Impudence is. It's not obvious that all persons have this property; I will now demonstrate that they do.
> ⋮
> Impudence, I have just shown, is a property of all persons. But, I will now argue, if Impudence is a property of all persons, then Korsgaard's inference from (4) to (5) fails.
> ⋮
> Korsgaard's argument, then, seems to be invalid. But before we accept this conclusion, we need to consider what I take

to be the most plausible response available to her: what I
will call the Appeal to Temporal Infirmity. Let me explain.

7. A second way to eliminate blurriness is to practice Orwellian Newspeak.
In the novel *1984*, Newspeak, a form of English from which whole cat-
egories of words have been deleted, is presented as a tool of political
oppression. The idea is that if you can't *say* subversive thoughts, you
can't think them either; Orwell takes it that deleting words from your
vocabulary is a way of preventing you from thinking.

Orwell was wrong. Deleting words from your vocabulary is a way of
making sure that you *are* thinking. Whenever you're tempted to use
a very abstract term, or a bit of philosophical jargon, make sure that
you can say what you want to say without it. If you can't, you need
to consider the possibility that what you had was only the *appearance*
of a thought. (Think of the test this way: can you say it so that your
garage mechanic will understand it?) If you can, go ahead and say it
without the jargon. See the appendix for the beginnings of a list of
words to avoid.

8. A third way to eliminate blurriness is to make sure that you can give
a couple of very low-key, very concrete examples of the kind of thing
you have in mind. The ability to come up with such examples is a
reality check; if you can't do it, you should be worried that you don't
understand what you're trying to think about.

9. Before you turn them in, reread your papers for style. It's important
to control the textual surface of your paper. You should make sure
that the grammar is correct, and that you've gotten rid of stylistic
infelicities such as using the wrong word for what you're trying to say,
using words that sound bloated and puffy, or shifting from written into
spoken register.[1] Getting a friend to edit and proofread your papers
is a really good idea. Don't forget to turn on the spell checker. Check
the punctuation.

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[1]Here's what that means. 'Wittgenstein and I agree that it is important to pay at-
tention to how our words are actually used" is written register; "Ludwig and me agree
that how our words are actually used is key" is spoken register. "Just because he said
so, it doesn't mean it's true" is spoken register; "That he said it doesn't make it true" is
written. "Kant says precisely the same thing in the *Groundwork*" is written; "Kant says
the exact same thing" is spoken. In philosophy writing can be more talky than some other
disciplines, but there's still a difference, and you need to pay close attention to what is
which.

Cleaning up your paper will help you avoid mistaking content-related problems for surface sloppiness. Even if you think of surface sloppiness as a venial crime, it's worth getting rid of so you can get to the other problems it often masks.

You can improve your writing enormously by the following admittedly painful expedient. Finish a first draft of the paper. Then shorten each sentence by one-third. This will tighten up your writing, force you to figure out what's essential and what's not, and force you to figure out what each sentence is actually supposed to say.

10. Mechanics:

    Make sure to give full citation information first time through, like this.[2] When available, please use citation conventions that are standard across editions.[3] Want the official rules? You should have a style manual (such as the *Merriam Webster's Standard American Style Manual* or the *Chicago Manual of Style*) on your bookshelf.

    Don't cite ephemeral web pages, if there's any way around it. (No blogs, no *doi* cites, no URLs for manuscripts posted online, and here's a good rule of thumb: if it's a cite for which appending "Accessed on [date]" would be appropriate or informative, you should get rid of it.) You can track down a paper source and cite that, or use sources that come with stable URLs (like JSTOR or the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*); in the case of the SEP, notice that they tell you how to cite them on their own web site.[4] Or you can look for a book online whose publisher provides the traditional ingredients for a citation, and cite using those.

    Nowadays people get taught in high school that you put "Print" at the end of bibliography entries that aren't web pages. Grownups don't do this; like a lot of things they tell you in high school, you have to

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[2]Nerdly Dweeble, *How to Cite* (Salt Lake City: Academic Etiquette Press, 2007), p. 21. Further references to this volume will be given in the running text by HC and page number.

[3]In some cases, you'll have to be inventive. E.g., J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Nome, Alaska: Obscure Editions, 1931); cited by chapter and paragraph.

[4]But since we've mentioned the SEP, a generic caution: there's a tendency, carried over from other areas of study, to treat encyclopedia articles as authoritative repositories of facts. Remember, in philosophy, there are no arguments from authority. From your point of view, an encyclopedia entry is just another journal article (in a slightly unusual format), expressing someone's opinion; the responsibility for assessing its views, as you think through whatever your question is, is entirely yours!

unlearn this one. It marks you as unprofessional. Likewise, inserting a descriptor like "Essay," "Story," etc., into a bibliography entry marks you as an outsider. And likewise, "Accessed on [date]" also marks you as an outsider; don't do it.

Don't forget to title your paper.

Make sure your pages are numbered.

I shouldn't have to say this, but if necessary, change the printer cartridge: you're responsible for providing a legible copy of your paper. And you're responsible for providing a staple, or some equally good way of holding the pages together.

11. Start early. If you want to talk through your paper, I'm available. Bring the (typed, please) outline of your argument.

Appendix
Tabula verborum interdictorum

Words that prevent you from thinking:

- absolute
- abstract (as in "abstract truths")
- being/becoming
- constructivist
- context, context-dependent
- deconstruct (unless you can actually say what it means—see below)
- external, externalist
- extrinsic
- inherent
- innate
- instinctive
- internal, internalist
- intrinsic
- intuition[5]
- _____ itself (i.e., constructions along the lines of 'time itself')
- logical, illogical
- nature, naturalism, naturalist
- negate
- normative, normativity
- objective[6]
- physicalism, physicalist

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[5]Except as a technical term of Kant's.

[6]Except as a technical term introduced by someone you're discussing, e.g., Descartes, Kant or Nagel. In that case, make sure to provide their definition up front, and stick to it very closely. And, *even then*, you're better off writing your way around the term. Ruskin, in *Modern Painters* (London: George Allen, 1906; this is at vol. 3, p. 161) complains about "two of the most objectionable words that were ever coined by the troublesomeness of metaphysicians,—namely, 'Objective' and 'Subjective'": it's best to avoid the troublesomeness entirely.

- real, reality, realism, realist[7]
- reason (as the name of a mental faculty), rationality
- relative, relativity
- subjective
- valid, invalid[8]
- value (noun)

Undergraduatisms to avoid:

- advocate for (the verb, "advocate," takes a direct object)
- affect/effect (before you use either, make sure you understand what *both* words mean, as nouns and as verbs)
- based off of
- basically
- begs the question that... (i.e., using the phrase "begs the question" to mean, "invites the further question")

  (The concept 'question-begging' is an important philosophical tool to have—make sure you understand it before you use it! Here's a definition taken from Bentham: "Begging the question, or rather assuming the question, consists in making use of the very proposition in dispute, as though it were already proved."[9])
- building on (as in, "building on what so and so said...")
- core (as in, "is core to")
- counter (as in, "I would counter that...")
- create

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[7]On 'real', see J. L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, ed. G. J. Warnock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 73–77. There are occasional exceptions, that is, uses of words in this family that are nevertheless carefully introduced, and which have a precise meaning; for an example, see Dummett's 'realism'. And sometimes, as in the case of Descartes, "reality" is a technical term whose use you'll have to discuss.

[8]Except as a technical term, meaning, of an argument, necessarily having true conclusions when it has true premises.

[9]Jeremy Bentham, *The Theory of Legislation*, originally edited by Etienne Dumont from Bentham's manuscripts; translated into English by Richard Hildreth; edited by C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950), p. 78.

- deconstruct (*unless* you know what it means and can use it correctly[10])
- delve
- elaborate on, elaborate how
- essential, essentially, in essence;[11] also watch out for "fundamentally," "basically," "ultimately," and so on.
- the exact same
- exact (as an adjective, as in "the exact issue")
- expand upon
- expound on
- fall short [without an "of"], e.g., "So-and-so's presentation falls short."
- feel (as in "I feel that," "they feel that"—i.e., as a way of introducing a claim)
- from here, from there, from this (as in, "From here he says that. . . ," i.e., using the phase to mean "Next, he. . . ")
- gloss over (meaning, "skip")
- hypothetical, as a noun (e.g., "the hypothetical that," "the hypothetical of")
- illuminate
- illustrate that, illustrate why
- impact (verb)
- incredibly (as an intensifier: "he was incredibly convinced. . . ")
- inherent, inherently
- intricacies
- just because. . . doesn't mean
- key (adj., as in, "such-and-such is key", "what is key for him is. . . ")
- kid (instead of "child")

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[10]To a first approximation, the way an analytic philosopher would say that a text deconstructs itself is: the text exhibits a pragmatic contradiction. "Deconstruct" is *not* a synonym for "dismantle" or "take apart."

[11]Except as a technical term, in a metaphysics class.

- lack (as a verb without a direct object, as in, "Mill's position is lacking, and. . . ")
- lends to (meaning, "contributes to")
- nature (as in, "by nature")
- philosophy that, on (as in, "my philosophy is that. . . ", "it is a philosophy that. . . ", "their philosophy on such-and-such. . . , so-and-so's philosophy. . . ")
- posit, postulate (verb)
- propound
- redundant reason markers (e.g., "the reason why is because," "justify why")
- relate to
- semantics (when it's used to mean "a trivial verbal quibble," as in "that's just semantics"); of course, it's fine to use the word as a philosophical technical term, or as a linguist would.
- shatter
- shine light on, shed light on (as a description of what you're going to do)
- Some have suggested. . . Some argue that. . . [always give an instance of someone who's got the view you want to discuss][12]
- totally (as in "totally huge")
- truly
- to try and [verb] (e.g., "to try and rely on. . . ")
- unearth (as a description of what you're going to do)
- working off of
- In a bibliography, describing a source as "Print," or for that matter as an "eBook"—this is a highschoolism.
- In English, block quotes don't take quotation marks. (Though in German, they do.)

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[12]Randall Munroe, in his *What If?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), p. 17, shows how you can use this turn of phrase gracefully, by adding: "I mean, I guess it's just me who argues that, but I'm very vocal."