Writing a Philosophy Paper

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Good writing is the product of proper training, much practice, and hard work. The following remarks, though they will not guarantee a top quality paper, should help you determine where best to direct your efforts. I offer first some general comments on philosophical writing, and then some specific "do"s and "don't"s.

One of the first points to be clear about is that a philosophical essay is quite different from an essay in most other subjects. That is because it is neither a research paper nor an exercise in literary self-expression. It is not a report of what various scholars have had to say on a particular topic. It does not present the latest findings of tests or experiments. And it does not present your personal feelings or impressions. Instead, it is a reasoned defense of a thesis. What does that mean?

Above all, it means that there must be a specific point that you are trying to establish - something that you are trying to convince the reader to accept - together with grounds or justification for its acceptance.

Before you start to write your paper, you should be able to state exactly what it is that you are trying to show. This is harder than it sounds. It simply will not do to have a rough idea of what you want to establish. A rough idea is usually one that is not well worked out, not clearly expressed, and as a result, not likely to be understood. Whether you actually do it in your paper or not, you should be able to state in a single short sentence precisely what you want to prove. If you cannot formulate your thesis this way, odds are you are not clear enough about it.

The next task is to determine how to go about convincing the reader that your thesis is correct. In two words, your method must be that of <u>rational persuasion</u>. You will present arguments. At this point, students frequently make one or more of several common errors. Sometimes they feel that since it is clear to them that their thesis is true, it does not need much argumentation. It is common to overestimate the strength of your own position. That is because you already accept that point of view. But how will your opponent respond? It is safest to assume that your reader is intelligent and knows a lot about your subject, but disagrees with you.

Another common mistake is to think that your case will be stronger if you mention, even if briefly, virtually every argument that you have come across in support of your position. Sometimes this is called the "fortress approach." In actual fact, it is almost certain that the fortress approach will not result in a very good paper. There are several reasons for this.

First, your reader is likely to find it difficult to keep track of so many different arguments, especially if these arguments approach the topic from different directions.

Second, the ones that will stand out will be the very best ones and the very worst ones. It is

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