

Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper

Philosophical writing is different from the writing you'll be asked to do in other courses. Most of the strategies described below will also serve you well when writing for other courses, but don't automatically assume that they all will. Nor should you assume that every writing guideline you've been given by other teachers is important when you're writing a philosophy paper. Some of those guidelines are routinely violated in good philosophical prose (e.g., see the [guidelines on grammar](#), below).

Contents

- [What Does One Do in a Philosophy Paper?](#)
 - [Three Stages of Writing](#)
 - [Early Stages](#)
 - [Write a Draft](#)
 - [Rewrite, and Keep Rewriting](#)
 - [Minor Points](#)
 - [How You'll Be Graded](#)
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What Does One Do in a Philosophy Paper?

1. A philosophy paper consists of the reasoned defense of some claim

Your paper must offer an argument. It can't consist in the mere report of your opinions, nor in a mere report of the opinions of the philosophers we discuss. You have to defend the claims you make. You have to offer reasons to believe them.

So you can't just say:

My view is that P.

You must say something like:

My view is that P. I believe this because...

or:

I find that the following considerations...provide a convincing argument for P.

Similarly, don't just say:

Descartes says that Q.

Instead, say something like:

Descartes says that Q; however, the following thought-experiment will show that Q is not true...

or:

Descartes says that Q. I find this claim plausible, for the following reasons...

There are a variety of things a philosophy paper can aim to accomplish. It usually begins by putting some thesis or argument on the table for consideration. Then it goes on to do one or two of the following:

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

No matter which of these aims you set for yourself, **you have to explicitly present reasons for the claims you make**. Students often feel that since it's clear to them that some claim is true, it does not need much argument. But it's very easy to overestimate the strength of your own position. After all, you already accept it. You should assume that your audience does not already accept your position; and you should treat your paper as an attempt to persuade such an audience. Hence, don't start with assumptions which your opponents are sure to reject. If you're to have any chance of persuading people, you have to start from common assumptions you all agree to.

2. A good philosophy paper is modest and makes a small point; but it makes that point clearly and straightforwardly, and it offers good reasons in support of it

People very often attempt to accomplish too much in a philosophy paper. The usual result of this is a paper that's hard to read, and which is full of inadequately defended and poorly explained claims. So don't be over-ambitious. Don't try to establish any earth-shattering conclusions in your 5-6 page paper. Done properly, philosophy moves at a slow pace.

3. Originality

The aim of these papers is for you to show that you understand the material and that you're able to think critically about it. To do this, your paper does have to show some independent thinking.

How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper

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Table of Contents How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper

1. Understanding the eBook How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper
 - The Rise of Digital Reading How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper
 - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper
 - Personalized Recommendations
 - How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper User Reviews and Ratings

- How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper and Bestseller Lists
- 5. Accessing How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper Free and Paid eBooks
 - How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper Public Domain eBooks
 - How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper eBook Subscription Services
 - How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper Budget-Friendly Options
- 6. Navigating How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper eBook Formats
 - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
 - How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper Compatibility with Devices
 - How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper Enhanced eBook Features
- 7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper
 - Highlighting and Note-Taking How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper
 - Interactive Elements How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper
- 8. Staying Engaged with How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper
- 9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper
- 10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
- 11. Cultivating a Reading Routine How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper
 - Setting Reading Goals How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
- 12. Sourcing Reliable Information of How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper
 - Fact-Checking eBook Content of How To Write A Philosophy Of Life Paper
 - Distinguishing Credible Sources

13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
 - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
 - Exploring Educational eBooks
14. Embracing eBook Trends
 - Integration of Multimedia Elements
 - Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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