

A few tips for writing your philosophy paper

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1 Characteristics of Good Writing

A man walks into a bar with a dog. He slaps 50 dollars down on the bar and says, “I’ll bet you 50 bucks this dog can answer any question I ask him.”

“You’re on,” replies the bartender.

“What’s on top of a house?” the man asks the dog.

“Roof! Roof!” goes the dog.

“Who is the greatest baseball player of all time?” the man asks the dog.

“Roof! Roof!” goes the dog.

“Get outta here!” the bartender shouts.

The man walks down the street with the dog in silence. Finally he turns to the dog and says, “You stupid dog. You just cost us 50 bucks!”

And the dog says, “What, was Gehrig the right answer?”¹

Some of my students are simply lost. But others resemble the dog in this joke when it comes to writing essays or exams. That is, they know the right answer, and they even, in a sense, manage to *give* the right answer. But they do it in a way that makes them impossible to tell apart from the students who are simply lost. The first rule of academic writing is: Don’t be like this dog. Whether you’re explicating a text or expressing an idea of your own, you need to set yourself apart from the students who are just faking it. The skills required to do this are difficult to acquire, but they will be useful to you long after you’re finished with school.

¹When I was an undergraduate, Lloyd Gerson told this joke in response to a request for advice about writing. He did not actually explain the joke at the time.

A lot of student writing is vague or unclear because students have a voice in their heads constantly telling them, “Oh, my instructor already knows that. No need to explain this point. It’s too basic.” But what your instructor knows is irrelevant to what you need to write on your paper. Your instructor is not reading your paper (solely) to learn about your topic. He or she is reading your paper to see what *you* have learned about it.

Even if you keep the first point in mind, it’s easy to lose track of what a reader does and does not need to be told about a subject. If you spend enough time writing a paper its assumptions tend to become invisible to you. One of the hardest things about becoming an effective writer is learning to step back from the text you’ve been working on and see it through another person’s eyes.

2 The Writing Process

2.1 Taking Notes

Good notes form the basis for a good paper. Don’t simply read through the text and then start writing. Writing in that way simply puts too much pressure on you to organize, think through, and formulate material, all at the same time. The result is usually a more stressful writing process and a worse final product. If you divide your labor into note-taking and writing, the whole process will seem more manageable.

As you work through a text, you might try to take apart an author’s argument and represent it in a sequence of numbered premises. For example, suppose Aristotle had written about pizza:

It remains, then, to determine the relation between Bob, hunger, and pizza eating. For this problem is prior to other problems pertaining to Bob—prior both in the order of discovery and in intelligibility. Now, Empedocles believed that Bob’s pizza eating is determined by Love and Strife. But this cannot be right, for Bob eats pizza when he is neither in love, nor when he is beset by strife, but rather when he experiencing hunger. (And for this reason he has been called gluttonous.) Rather, the relationship

between Bob and pizza eating appears to be such as we have already set out elsewhere—that is, Bob’s eating the pizza appears to be a consequence of hunger, for if Bob is hungry, Bob will eat the pizza. Now, we observe that Bob is hungry (for this premise is supplied by observation, and therefore ultimately by perception, for perception is the source of our grasp of the that, at least in these cases). Therefore, straightaway Bob eats the pizza, being deterred neither by mooching roommates nor distractions from his cell phone.

There are many things you might want from this text. If you are making a study of how Aristotle refers to his other works, you will want to make a note of the comment, “as we have already set out elsewhere.” If you are interested in Empedocles, you will want to focus on that part of the text. But suppose you are writing about Aristotle’s views on the relationship between Bob’s hunger and pizza. In that case, you might write down:

1. If Bob is hungry, Bob will eat a pizza.
2. Bob is hungry.
3. Therefore, Bob will eat a pizza.

Representing the argument in this way will often help you to figure out whether it is a good one. You can ask yourself whether any of the premises seem false to you, and also whether the conclusion follows from them. This exercise will help you a great deal when it is time for you to explain the argument in your own words in your paper.

Carefully recording citations—for example, next to the argument above, writing: “Aristotle. *On Pizza*, 1267b23-9”—also makes it much easier to add citations to your final paper.

When you take notes, you should also be very careful to distinguish clearly between your own thoughts and the thoughts of others. Many cases of inadvertent plagiarism are a result of sloppy notes: the writer returns to the notes later and inadvertently slips someone else’s material into his or her essay.

This is especially a problem when students (and sometimes famous and widely published professors) are working with secondary sources. Suppose

I am reading a book by Professor Yossarian called *Aristotle, Plato, and the Mid-Fourth Century Pizza Controversy* and I come across an especially helpful passage. If I jot down the following, I'm just asking for trouble:

Aristotle's argument about Bob and Pizza eating appears to be aimed at Empedocles, but he also has Plato in mind here too. Compare Euthydemus 344e.

Now, when I go back over my notes, there is no indication whether this is something that I noticed myself or got from some place else. If I then go on to use this point in my paper, I will either plagiarize unwittingly, or I will remember that it must have come from *somewhere* and then waste a lot of time trying to track down its exact location so that I can cite it properly. Better, then, to write in my notes:

Yossarian, (A&P, p. 367): Aristotle's argument about Bob and Pizza eating appears to be aimed at Empedocles, but he also has Plato in mind here too. Compare Euthydemus 344e.

There's no need to be fancy with the citation information: I can worry about that when I write my paper. But when I do write my paper, I will have all the information I need.

2.2 Brainstorming

As you work through a philosophical text, it is a good idea to think about philosophical objections you could make to the author's argument. But sometimes it is hard to think of specific objections, even if you're generally skeptical about the text you're reading. According to a longstanding tradition in Cornell's philosophy department, there are two basic kinds of philosophical objection:

1. Oh yeah? - In other words: Is it true?
2. So what? - In other words: Why does it matter?

Jotting down a few thoughts in response to each of these questions can get you started, and can also provide material that you can later re-work into something more coherent and formal.

Unfortunately, writers often don't think hard enough about the "So what?" question. This makes a difference in both style and substance. The best kind of writing often engages its reader by setting an inquiry within a broader context. It's difficult to communicate to your readers why they should care about your view if you haven't given this question a fair bit of attention. The "So What" question is also, inevitably, a question that leads to other important substantive issues. The question asks: If I changed my mind about this issue, what else would I have to change my mind about? And to consider this involves thinking about all the various (and often quite subtle) ways that the issues under consideration are connected.

2.3 Structuring Your Paper

You should now have a collection of notes on the topic of your paper. Even if the notes are very good, however, if you simply begin writing at this point, you may well become stuck. Another exercise that you might well find useful is to map out your essay before you begin.

Hint: Don't just map things out and then launch into it. Experiment with several different ways of mapping out your essay before you settle on one way.

2.4 Writing Your First Draft

Just write it! Remember that you'll be returning later to revise it, so you needn't be hung up on getting everything right the first time around.

When you're explicating a text, make sure to avoid excessive quotation. I already know that you can type. *Paraphrasing* a text rather than simply quoting it gives you an opportunity to demonstrate that you understand it.

It is important, however, to learn to paraphrase properly. Let's take an example. Suppose you wanted to explicate the text above about pizza. This is just awful:

Aristotle then says that it remains to determine the relation between Bob, hunger, and pizza eating. He says that this problem is prior to other problems pertaining to Bob—prior both in the

order of discovery and in intelligibility. He notes that Empedocles believed that Bob's pizza eating is determined by Love and Strife. But, he argues this cannot be right, for Bob eats pizza when he is neither in love, nor when he is beset by strife, but rather when he experiencing hunger. . .

And so on. This isn't much of a paraphrase—it's more like a bad quotation. And it fails—utterly—to establish that the student actually understands Aristotle. That's partly because it doesn't explain or unpack any of the difficult words or concepts Aristotle uses. What, the reader will probably want to know, does it mean to say that something is prior in the order of discovery or prior in the order of intelligibility? The paraphrase also fails to single anything in particular out in the passage for close consideration. For example, a paper on the relation between Bob, hunger, and pizza might not *need* to dwell for long on Empedocles. If that's the case, a good paraphrase of the passage may well not mention Empedocles at all. A student who tries to paraphrase everything in a paper usually inadvertently demonstrates that he or she does not understand what is most important in the text. Sometimes we show what we understand by what is left out of an essay, and not just by what is left in.

This, therefore, is considerably better:

In the next section, Aristotle aims to show that Bob will eat pizza. This follows, he thinks, from two assumptions which he makes explicit in the text. First, he notes that Bob will eat pizza if he is hungry. He combines this with the additional claim that Bob *is* hungry.

Hardly elegant, but it gets the job done: that is, it succeeds in demonstrating a grasp of the main point of the passage.

One more tip for when you're explicating a text: Always stick to the present tense, even if the text you're working on is very old. For example, don't write this:

Polus argued that having great power was the ability to . . . Socrates responded that

Instead, write this:

Polus argues that having great power is the ability to . . . Socrates responds that. . .

2.5 Revising Your First Draft

When you're revising your paper, imagine that you've given the paper to an intelligent friend who isn't taking the class. Now, would your friend be able to follow your paper? There is a very good chance that he or she wouldn't. That's because it's very likely (especially at this stage) that you've made assumptions in your paper that could be more clearly spelled out, or explained the text in a way that only makes sense if you already understand it. Go back and fix this. But—and here starting work on a paper early will really pay off—it's best if you first set aside your paper for at least a day or two.

2.6 A Few Common Problems in Student Writing

2.6.1 Style and Content Problems

1. Failing to italicize the titles of books.
2. Failing to italicize foreign words (e.g., “*eudaimonia*”).
3. Vacuous or very general claims. For example, this claim is entirely correct:

“Aristotle’s function argument is quite complex and difficult to understand when it is first encountered.”

But it's also not very helpful, especially as the first sentence of a paper. Since it's Aristotle your reader is likely to suspect already that it's difficult. Beginning your paper this way wastes valuable space, in which you might have been telling your reader something they didn't already know.

4. Awkward or imprecise transitions. Students sometimes introduce a new point with the phrase, “in addition.” When they do this, they miss the opportunity to say something more meaningful and precise

about the relations between the preceding point and the one they're making.

5. General or vague phrases. “. . . is related to . . .” — Is related to *how*? Of course it's not a mistake to claim that two things are related. Indeed, sometimes anything more precise would be a mistake. But students often claim two things are “related” to cover up the fact that they haven't a clue what the relation between them is. So ask yourself whether A and B are related because A determines B, or because A causes B, or because A is a part of B, etc.
6. Unclear referents. If you use the word “this” (or “these” or any other demonstrative), make sure that it is clear what you are referring to.

2.6.2 A Few Common Grammatical Errors

1. Comma-splices. E.g.,

“I think A, B is good.”

The comma is used here improperly. A semi-colon, a period, or the word “and” after the comma would be fine here.

2. Writing “where” when you mean “in which.”
3. Mixing up “it's” (a contraction of “it is”) and “its” (possessive).
4. Switching between “one” and “he” or “they.” E.g.,

“But one shouldn't do A. Rather, he should do B.”

In this case, “one” doesn't agree grammatically with “he.” You should write either,

“But one shouldn't do A. Rather, one should do B.”

Or you should write,

“But a person shouldn't do A. Rather, he (or she) should do B.”

3 Working with Sources

3.1 What is Plagiarism?

Plagiarism is the unacknowledged theft of another person's words and/or ideas. A writer who plagiarizes misrepresents to the reader the extent of his or her thinking, research, and understanding of a subject. Many students recognize that straightforward copying of a text without acknowledgement constitutes plagiarism. Far fewer students recognize that plagiarism also includes the unacknowledged borrowing of thoughts and ideas.

This is why if you consult a work—including a website—during the course of your research and it has any influence at all (even subtle) on your thinking about the subject, it ought to be included in your bibliography. And if you paraphrase any work while writing your paper, you need to include a citation of the work, including the page number *even if you are not quoting directly from it*.

3.2 Avoiding Plagiarism

Here are some tips on how to avoid plagiarism:

1. *Always remember to cite ideas, as well as quotations.*
2. Err on the side of caution. When in doubt, ask your instructor.
3. If you take good notes there is less chance that you will inadvertently plagiarize when you come to write your paper. If you copy a passage out of a text, always make sure to indicate the source clearly in your notes, rather than relying on memory. Being careful at this stage minimizes the risk that you will later transcribe the notes into your own essay, mistaking it for your own work.
4. When you're trying to figure out whether or not to cite something, it can help to remember the *point* of such rules:
 - (a) to give credit where credit is due;
 - (b) to bolster your argument (for example, by citing work that defends a point at greater length);

- (c) to indicate the extent and kind of your research.
5. If you come across an idea which you arrived at independently, cite it, and then either:
- (a) note that you came up with the idea independently when citing it; or,
 - (b) just accept that someone got there first and give them the credit.

3.3 How to Cite Sources

There are many ways to cite sources, and different instructors prefer different ways. You should always check with your instructor, but here is one fairly common way:

For an article:

Young, Christopher. 'Wither the Weather?,' *Canadian Journal of Finnish Studies* 5 (1999), 13-56.

For a book:

Young, Christopher. *Whisky and Wheat: My Life on the Prairies*. (New York: Little League Press), 2001.

For a website:

Young, Christopher. <http://www.chrisyoung.net/teaching> [Date: 05/04/2006]

3.4 If a Friend is Ever Tempted to Plagiarize

If a friend is ever tempted to plagiarize, you can offer him or her the following arguments:

1. A plagiarist's chances of getting caught are actually pretty good. Professors and graduate students have usually read an astonishing amount of secondary literature, and in more than one language. Also, computers are making it much easier to catch plagiarism these days. My own average hunch-to-confirmation time is somewhere in the vicinity of 45 seconds.

2. The consequences of plagiarism are usually fairly severe. It's a better bet to fail the paper, or to take an incomplete, than to plagiarize.
3. Your friend is cheapening the value of your own degree.
4. Plagiarism is just a sleazy thing to do.

4 Other Resources

I use a free windows program called Keynote to organize my notes. You can get it here:

<http://sourceforge.net/projects/keynote/>

Jim Pryor has a useful page on writing a philosophy paper:

<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

Several people commented helpfully on drafts of this handout. I would especially like to thank my friend Anne Nester, who made many valuable suggestions.

For questions and comments on this handout, please contact me at:

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