How to Write an Essay in Philosophy

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Outline

Getting Started

Recommended Reading for Beginners

Jim Pryor's Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper
www.jimpryor.net → *Teaching & Advice*

What you have to do:

1. Choose a topic according to your interests and find a suitable research question within that topic.
2. Read some philosophical texts related to your question and understand the arguments in these texts.
3. Develop and defend your own position in response to these arguments.

Collaboration Within a Group

You are free to do your project alone or in a group of 2 or 3 students. Working in a group enables you to

- share the workload,
- discuss your topic with others, which is the best way of learning about it,
- develop your teamwork skills.

If you work in a group, you should not *completely* divide the different tasks among the group members. Reading and discussing what other group members have written is important for

- the quality of each part,
- the internal coherence of your whole essay.

Collaboration with your Assistant

There will be at least 3 meetings with your supervising assistant:

1. in October/November to discuss the choice of topic
2. in February to discuss intermediate progress
3. in May to discuss your results

Further remarks:

- Do not hesitate to contact your assistant (by email) whenever you have questions. If necessary, additional meetings can be arranged.
- It is normal to encounter difficulties in the course of your work. We prefer to help you with them as early as possible, rather than in the final version of your essay!
- It is also possible (even desirable) to send us parts of your work at early stages and ask for feedback.

What Is a Suitable Research Question?

Main Difficulty

It takes a lot of work to understand philosophical texts and to defend a philosophical claim.

Therefore:

Choose a sufficiently specific research question, which enables you to focus on only a few arguments!

> *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. (Jim Pryor)*

Don't worry that your research question could be *too* specific. It is always possible to *widen* the scope of your question as you go along, but it is hard to *narrow* it.

How to Find a Good Research Question

1. Start with a general question that suits your interests and your background knowledge. We encourage you to work on a topic that is connected with your main branch at EPFL.
2. Read some introductory texts to identify the main positions and arguments with regard to that question.
3. Focus on one or two of these arguments and try to understand how they work. This involves reading some original texts very carefully.
4. Based on this understanding, specify your research question.

Specifying a Research Question: An Example

1. General question: What is a scientific explanation?
2. Main positions: deductive-nomological model, causal model, unification model. There are several arguments for and against each of these models.
3. Focus on one argument against the deductive-nomological model: the problem of explanatory irrelevancies.
4. Specific research question: *Can the problem of explanatory irrelevancies be overcome within the deductive-nomological model of explanation?*

How to Read a Philosophical Text

Another Reading Recommendation

www.jimpryor.net also provides some Guidelines on Reading Philosophy.

Reading philosophy is not like reading a story or a newspaper article. Be prepared to spend much time on a few sentences! Your main task is to understand the argumentative structure of the text. This requires the following steps:

1. Identify the central claims of the text.
2. Try to *sensibly* divide the text into small parts.
3. Figure out what the function of each part is (premise, conclusion, example, definition, conceptual distinction etc.) and how the parts are connected to each other.

Only when this job is completed can you begin to assess (and, possibly, criticize) the author's position.

How to Write about a Text You Have Read

Your essay should clearly show that you have understood the texts you have read. Therefore, do not just recount what the texts say, but try to reconstruct their arguments.

Recounting a Text

"The author starts by saying X, then he says Y, and he finishes by saying Z."

Reconstructing an Argument

"The author claims that X. His main argument for X is Y, which depends on premise Z. He seeks to make Z plausible by introducing . . ."

Focus on a few arguments (namely those which are relevant for your research question), and reconstruct these very carefully!

Recounting vs. Reconstructing: An Example

From J. Pryor: *Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper*

Original text passage (D. Hume, 1740):

> *All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call impressions and ideas. The difference betwixt these consists in the degrees of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind, and make their way into our thought or consciousness. Those perceptions, which enter with most force and violence, we may name impressions; and under this name I comprehend all our sensations, passions, and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul. By ideas I mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning.*

Example of a bad paraphrase:

> *Hume says all perceptions of the mind are resolved into two kinds, impressions and ideas. The difference is in how much force and liveliness they have in our thoughts and consciousness. The perceptions with the most force and violence are impressions. These are sensations, passions, and emotions. Ideas are the faint images of our thinking and reasoning.*

Discerning the Structure of a Text

All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call impressions and ideas. The difference betwixt these consists in the degrees of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind, and make their way into our thought or consciousness.

introduces a distinction between two kinds of perceptions: *impressions* and *ideas*

Those perceptions, which enter with most force and violence, we may name impressions; and under this name I comprehend all our sensations, passions, and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul.

characterizes *impressions*

By ideas I mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning.

characterizes *ideas*

Recounting vs. Reconstructing: An Example

From J. Pryor: *Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper*

Example of a better paraphrase:

> *Hume says that there are two kinds of 'perceptions,' or mental states. He calls these impressions and ideas. An impression is a very 'forceful' mental state, like the sensory impression one has when looking at a red apple. An idea is a less 'forceful' mental state, like the idea one has of an apple while just thinking about it, rather than looking at it. It is not so clear what Hume means here by 'forceful.' He might mean. . .*

- This paraphrase makes clear the structure of Hume's distinction.
- It also gives an example to illustrate the distinction.
- It serves as a good starting point for further thinking, e.g., about what Hume means by 'forceful.'

Five Questions and Answers About Using and Quoting Literature

When are references necessary?

- References are **necessary** whenever you use results, arguments, data, etc. of others.

  In our case, this applies to philosophical authors as well as authors from other branches, such as mathematics, physics, CS, engineering, etc. This means: if you use a five year old script of a lecture in linear algebra for your paper, then you have to add a reference to this script.

- References are **not necessary** in the case of 'common knowledge'. Examples of common knowledge are: 'Paris is the capital of France', or 'World War 1 lasted from 1914 to 1918'.

  mathematical definitions, theorems, as well as laws of physics are NOT common knowledge in general.

Why are references necessary and useful?

- **Avoid plagiarism.** The papers, scripts, textbooks etc. you use are the intellectual property of others. If you do not acknowledge the use of their property, you are stealing it. Plagiarism will be sanctioned.
- **References give context.** The bibliography of a paper indicates against what background a paper was written. This is helpful because you can a) read up on that background, b) check whether the author takes into account the relevant literature.
- **References keep track of sources.** It can be very fruitful to check references, especially if there is some doubt that an author represents other people's arguments, data, etc. correctly. (We will do this with your paper.) It is therefore important to be as specific as possible.

Where do I search for literature?

- **If you do a project from the booklet**, or on a subject we know: bibliographies are in the booklet, and in our brains, so ask us.
- **If you do your own project**: a) ask us, b) use general references list in the booklet, especially survey articles from http://plato.stanford.edu/ c) use handbooks, such as Oxford Handbooks etc. d) use any (scientific) literature you like (but tell us)
- Use references and bibliographies of *good, recent* papers, survey articles, etc. to find further literature.
- Tell us what literature you want to use, and ask us if you cannot find papers, books etc.

What kind of literature can I use?

- **The only admissible *references* are to *scientific* literature.** This excludes references to e.g. Wikipedia, but includes references to e.g entries of the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
- **Does this mean that you cannot *use* Wikipedia, or any source you like?** No. Use Wikipedia to get ideas, literature, hints. But in the end, you will have to ground your work in other souces, possibly found on Wikipedia.
- **But why may I not quote Wikipedia?** It is very well possible to get good information from anywhere, but the problem is that you do not know whether information found on Wikipedia is reliable. The difference between Wikipedia and SEP is that the latter is written by leading philosophers and peer-reviewed.

How do I cite correctly? Type 1

1. Quotations: This is a verbal reproduction of a passage from a source put in quotation marks. *Every* change you make to the original has to be indicated, including added italics, omissions, changing lower case to capital letters etc. Quotations should only be used if necessary, i.e. if the exact phrasing of a passage is very important. Quotations do not speak for themselves, but have to be explained or paraphrased – they do not save work.

How do I cite correctly? Type 2 - 3

2. Paraphrases: See above for do's and dont's. Reference to your source is indispensable.
3. Ideas, Theses, Concepts: These are usually not as close to texts as the above. An example. Consider the following claim: 'Physicists believe that the world according to quantum mechanics is indeterministic.' This claim is unsubstantiated if you do not produce evidence, either in the form of systematic surveys about the beliefs of physicists, or by making a more modest claim and have a look at some textbooks, papers etc. to produce evidence.

How do I cite correctly? Form.

1. **References in the text.** They should be as specific as possible. Example:

   '[t]he miracle of the appropriateness of the language of mathematics for the formulation of the laws of physics is a wonderful gift which we neither understand nor deserve.'(Wigner, 1960, p. 14)

2. **Corresponding item in the bibliography.** Example:

   Wigner, E. P. (1960). "The unresonable effectiveness of mathematics in the natural sciences". *Communications on Pure and Applied Mathematics*, 13: 1–14.

The exact form of items for various kinds of literature can be inferred from e.g. the bibliography in the booklet of this course. I recommend using BibTeX – then you never have to worry about formatting again.

Advice for the Writing Process
A 5 Step Programme

Writing, Step 0: Question and Literature

Writing presupposes that you have settled for a good research question, and have read (some of) the literature. Therefore:

- Step 0: Write an abstract of your project – at most half a page – in which you describe your research question in 3 sentences and how you intend to answer it. (Send this to your TA.)

Writing, Step 1: Table of Contents

- Step 1: Write a table of contents. The table of contents is structured as follows:
  1. Introduction: a clear formulation of your research question, and presentation of your methods.
  2. Presentation of the philosophical context of your research question, and of the necessary scientific background.
  3. Your main arguments, results, etc.
  4. Conclusion: summing up the most important results, pointing out further, open questions etc.
  5. Bibliography
- Note under each heading what your plan for this section is. The division into subtasks will make your life easier. Some sections will need further subdivision.

Writing, Step 2: Start in the middle

- Start writing in the middle, that is, with your contribution, your main arguments, theses etc. and the necessary background. Don't start with introduction and conclusion. Background follows your contribution.
- One possibility is to start with a careful analysis of an argument from the literature that addresses your research question, and then go on from there with your own argument.
- Outline first: write in thoughts and theses, not in sentences. No one cares about correct sentences when writing a first sketch.
- Writing down your arguments (and those of others) will help you get clear on your thoughts. You will find out whether you make sense, are confused etc. So start early, especially before you 'feel ready to write'.

Writing, Step 3: Evaluate and Restructure

You have written a first, badly formulated outline of your paper. Now:

- Reread what you have written and decide if you need additional literature, if your research question still makes sense, if you need to restructure your paper etc.
- If you feel confident that the structure of your paper is ok, you should now start to formulate: Write a text with full sentences and paragraphs so that other people can read it, and then show it to your TA.
- If you don't feel that confident, talk to your group, others, or your TA, and restructure your paper accordingly.

Writing, Step 4: Formulate

Now you do what's left over:

- Write conclusion and introduction, both not too long. Note: The conclusion is not your 'personal opinion' section, and the purpose of the introduction is to state what you do (question) and how you do it (outline).
- Revise your writing. Make sure you use plain, simple language. Eliminate big words, -isms, long sentences, commonplaces. Write in paragraphs.
- Ask others to proofread your paper.

Writing: Some Final Words

- Start early. Writing is part of the thinking process, and needs time.
- Try writing in teams. All steps above, maybe except step 4 (formulating) can profit from teamwork.
- Writing is fun, especially step 2 above. Here you will learn most about the question you are interested in.

References

- Pryor, J.: Guidelines on Reading Philosophy. http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html
- Pryor, J.: Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper. http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html
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