

A Crash Course in Writing a Philosophy Paper

Conor Mayo-Wilson

Many philosophy professors will ask you to defend or attack a famous philosopher's argument. A good philosophy paper, then, contains three primary sections: (1) an exposition of the authors (or multiple authors') argument, (2) your analysis of the argument, and (3) a summary of how the original author might respond to your analysis and whether such a response is convincing. I will briefly talk about what each of these three sections ought to contain, and then, I will provide a brief exposition of how philosophical writing differs in style from writing in other humanistic disciplines.

1 The Exposition

An argument consists of a set of premises (or assumptions), conclusions, and an explanation of how the premises are thought to logically (or at least with high probability) imply the conclusions. As such, to reconstruct a philosophical argument, you must clearly state what premises an author assumes, what conclusions he or she intends to reach, and how he or she believes the premises imply the conclusions. This task is often more difficult than it seems. More often than not, authors fail to state all the premises that they assume, and furthermore, they do not explain each and every step of their arguments. To reconstruct an argument fairly and charitably, therefore, you must often fill in implicit premises and missing steps.

There is a difference, however, between premises and steps of an argument that are implicit, and those that the author simply forgot or missed entirely. You must be careful not to add premises that you believe the author would not endorse. For example, though Epicurus (an ancient Greek philosopher) was an atomist, he most certainly did not have detailed knowledge of the periodic table. When you add additional premises, therefore, you should not add premises (a) that conflict with explicitly stated theses, (b) that are beyond the conceptual machinery available to the author, or (c) that attempt to ratify an authors conceptual confusions. If, after adding reasonable implicit premises and steps, an argument still appears to be invalid,

then you should say that the argument is invalid.

Even if you have stated the premises, steps, and conclusions of an argument, however, you still have not completed the task of reconstructing an argument. For example, if you tell me that Joe Philosopher assumes that, first, “If metaphysio-ontological whatchamacallits exist, then so does God,” and second, “Metaphysio-ontological whatchamacallits exist,” then I can infer that God exists according to Joe Philosopher. But I will have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about unless you clearly define the terms used in the argument. Defining terms requires rephrasing an author’s claims in your own words, and often, it is helpful to give examples illustrating the concepts involved.

Finally, you should resolve tensions in the text if they exist. A philosopher might seemingly claim two different things that are conflict with one another. You should make your best attempt to resolve these conflicts using textual evidence.

2 Criticism

In criticizing an argument, you should be sure to state whether you believe that argument to be **invalid** or **unsound**. An argument is valid if when the premises are true, then the conclusions are as well. It is sound if it is valid and the premises are true. To attack an invalid argument, then, you should provide a counterexample showing that the premises can be true and the conclusion false. To show an argument is unsound, you will need to which premises are false. If the premise is an empirical claim (e.g. “Smoking causes lung cancer”), then you ought to provide empirical evidence to the contrary and explain why the authors empirical claims are less reliable than those you have presented. If the premise is not an empirical claim, then you should ascertain the reasons or arguments given in favor of the premise and criticize those.

3 Responding to potential criticisms

If you haven’t thought about how a philosopher might respond to your argument, then you haven’t thought enough. One of the key features of a philosophy paper is making sure that your argument cannot be refuted easily. Therefore, you ought to anticipate how the author might respond to your claims. In doing so, stay as close to the authors methodology and terminology as possible. For example, do not employ advanced knowledge

of mathematics to salvage a Kantian argument. Furthermore, make sure not to advance silly objections so that you can respond easily. Consider the strongest objections to your argument, and state whether said objections are convincing or not.

4 Style

Good philosophical writing has three characteristics: brevity, precision, and rigor. Being brief means that you should not pad your paper with irrelevant historical information, make banal claims about how philosophers have pondered free will for millennia, or repeat yourself in order to meet a word limit. Precision requires that you (a) use the correct terminology for an argument (e.g. “feeling good” is not an adequate rephrasing of *eudaimonia*), (b) define the terms that you use, and (c) do not replace a word with a synonym chosen arbitrarily from a thesaurus. Rigorous argumentation requires that you explicitly state the steps of your argument and make sure to omit as few details as possible.