

## *Writing a Philosophy Paper: Tips*

- 1. Be clear with your terms and concepts.** Being vague or inaccurate will deeply hurt your argument, and being coy won't help either. Be upfront with how you understand the philosophical landscape.
- 2. Be consistent.** We need to know that you understand the multifaceted nature of different philosophies. If you present something inconsistent, then the worry is that you don't understand something about the theories involved. Consistency is one of the chief philosophical virtues. If you want to pick and choose from different views, you need to explain how this can be done without contradiction.
- 3. Avoid talking about the truth or falsity or premises, positions, claims, or objections. Instead focus on strengths and weaknesses.** Can one position account for relevant features that other positions cannot? Does a theory omit features that you think are important? Is one view more tenable or practicable than another? **What are the costs of accepting the position? What bullets does your opposition have to bite? What bullets do YOU have to bite?**
- 4. Do not try to prove something empirically. Do not include dictionary definitions of concepts.** A great deal of philosophical complexity lies in conceptual analysis; you can frequently distinguish positions by discovering the different ways in which they define the same concept.
- 5. Your goal is to **make a compelling case** for a certain position. Generally, you want to avoid the language of "proof."**
- 6. Avoid slippery slope arguments.** To do this successfully, you would need to show that the philosopher's outlook on the problem results in a slippery slope. This is a very tricky tactic, and it will probably lead you astray. Instead, focus on what is actually said.
- 7. It is far more impressive to present a strong objection to your view and then have a weak response than vice versa.** In other words, you want to provide a compelling reason to disagree with what you have presented. By doing so, you let us know that you understand alternative positions, and you also acknowledge that your view is not invulnerable. If you present an easy, knock-down argument or a straw man, you have not been charitable to your opposition. Giving an easy objection is just that--too easy.
- 8. Give a specific objection to your argument.** The objection can be aimed at a **specific claim (premise), an entailment, or the form (validity) of your argument.** This last tactic--attacking the form--is the most difficult. To show an argument to be invalid, you have to demonstrate that the conclusion does not follow from the premises (i.e., if all the premises were true, the conclusion could be false). Regardless of which objection you choose, the key is being precise. Do not give a general description of a different philosophy. You will probably need to explain how the opponent understands the concepts you are employing, and that will require discussing basic tenets of the contrasting philosophy. However, giving a synopsis of another theory is unhelpful. The challenge is to think about how an opponent

would specifically reply to you.

9. **Your response to the objection should be similarly specific.** You need to respond to the particular objection you gave.
10. In your retort to the objection, do not repeat yourself. **Your response should augment your view; it should add nuance, specificity, and depth to what you have already presented.** To accomplish this, you might need to hold back when it comes to the initial development of your view. If you run out of things to say before you reach the objection, then you obviously are forced to repeat yourself. The development of your view, the objection, and your counter should all be talking to each other. On the news and on editorial programs, you have probably seen opponents simply pounding their fists on the table (metaphorically or literally) and repeating themselves over and over again. The result of this repetition is that the opponents are talking past each other, and there is no progress in the argument. In philosophy we want to avoid fist pounding (well, unless your G.E. Moore, but don't worry about him).
11. Regarding the format of the paper, here's a generally good strategy:
  - (1) Introduction with thesis
  - (2) Roadmap can be included in introduction, or you can make it its own paragraph following the introduction
  - (3) Your position: What are you arguing? You do not want this section to be merely an explanation of what you are NOT arguing.
  - (4) Objection
  - (5) Response
  - (6) Conclusion
12. If you want to bring in personal experiences or your own thought experiments, you can do so successfully. Keep an eye on all parts of the prompt. You don't want to spend all your time expositing on your summer experience and then be left with no space to engage in philosophical analysis.