

# Tips on writing a philosophy paper

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You're a student or a teacher and you have suggestions how to improve this guideline? Let me know!  
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## 1. The basics

### The point of a philosophy paper

The point of a philosophy paper is to make a reasoned case for an interesting philosophical claim.

- Making the case for some claim means going beyond providing a neutral account of other people's ideas on the topic. You're expected to positively argue for a philosophical claim.
- Your case for this claim should be reasoned in that you should not just state your opinion but provide arguments for it. This requires you to offer compelling considerations (premises) that support the claim you're defending and to anticipate and answer possible objections.
- The claim should be interesting in the sense that its truth should a) matter and b) not be trivial. Don't argue for claims that are irrelevant or uncontroversial. Your claim does not have to be revolutionary. Especially when writing a short essay (<5,000 words), it is perfectly legitimate to make a modest point and to focus on a relatively narrow sub-problem.
- Make sure to argue for a philosophical claim. When writing a philosophical paper on a topic in normative ethics, applied ethics, or political philosophy, to argue for a philosophical claim typically means to argue for a *normative* claim. A normative claim is a claim about what people or institutions *ought to do*.

### What you should *not* do in a philosophy paper

- Try to answer an empirical question. Many philosophical questions depend on empirical facts. It is therefore often necessary to take into account empirical findings. But the ultimate point of a philosophy paper is to answer a philosophical question, not an empirical one.
- Try to answer more than one research question, or to defend more than one claim.
- Recount what others have said about a philosophical problem without defending your own philosophical view.

### Pick a narrow topic

It's tempting to pick a very broad topic. The question 'What is justice?' is much more exciting than 'Is X's critique of Y's conditional defense of a limited right to Z successful?' Unfortunately, it is impossible to adequately address questions of the former type within a brief essay. Papers that focus on a more circumscribed problem are a lot easier to write and a lot more likely to turn out well. If you feel that your essay project is not progressing well, it might be because you have not narrowed it down enough.

Three examples of essay topics (from political philosophy) that are way too broad:

- 1a) "A defense of John Rawls' theory of justice"
- 2a) "Is there a right to immigrate?"
- 3a) "Should governments provide a Universal Basic Income?"

Better:

- 1b) "A defense of Rawls' theory of justice against Sandel's communitarian critique"
- 2b) "Why there is no right to immigrate: A critique of Michael Huemer's case for open borders"
- 3b) "Should governments provide a Universal Basic Income to respond to AI-induced technological unemployment?"

## 2. The structure

Typically, a philosophical essay consists of an introduction, the body, and a conclusion. As the old proverb goes: „In the first part you tell them what you're going to tell them; in the second part – well, you tell them; in the third part you tell them what you've just told them." (Confucius) Introduction and conclusion should together account for ~15-30 % of the paper, the body should account for ~70-85 %.

### Introduction

Typically, the introduction should address the following questions:

- What is the view/claim that you'll be arguing for in the essay?
- Why is this claim or the topic of your essay relevant and interesting? (may be omitted if obvious)
- How is the essay going to be structured? How do you intend to proceed?
- How does your contribution relate to the existing debate/literature on the topic?

You may formulate an explicit research question before stating your thesis ("This essay seeks to answer the question whether... The answer, I shall argue, is that..."). Alternatively, after introducing the philosophical problem/debate, you may omit specifying an explicit research question and cut straight to your thesis ("In this paper, I will argue that...").

Your introduction is incomplete without some such sentence as

- „In what follows, I will argue that..."
- "The goal of this paper is to show that..."
- "The question that this essay seeks to answer is..."
- "This essay will defend the following thesis: ..."

and

- „I will proceed as follows:..."
- „This essay will be organized as follows:..."
- „My argument will consist of two parts. In part one..."
- „To argue for this view, I will first... Then, I will..."

### The body

In the body of the essay, you develop your argument. You have a lot of leeway in how you organize this part of the essay. Often, it is a good idea to start with an expository section, in which you discuss in more detail the position or debate with which you're engaging or the philosophical problem you're considering. Based on this, you can advance your core argument. You can also devote a subsection to discussing possible objections to your argument.

Here are three (of many) ways of structuring an essay:

## A defense of Rawls' theory of justice against Sandel's communitarian critique

1. Introduction
2. Body
  - Subsection 1 [expository]: Rawls' theory of justice
  - Subsection 2 [expository]: Sandel's critique
  - Subsection 3 [core argument]: Why Sandel's critique fails
3. Conclusion

## Why there is no right to immigrate: A critique of Michael Huemer's case for open borders

1. Introduction
2. Body
  - Subsection 1 [expository]: Huemer's case for open borders.
  - Subsection 2 [core argument]: First counter-argument against Huemer
  - Subsection 3 [core argument]: Second counter-argument against Huemer
3. Conclusion

## Should governments provide a Universal Basic Income to respond to AI-induced technological unemployment?

1. Introduction
2. Body
  - Subsection 1 [expository]: The problem of AI-induced technological unemployment
  - Subsection 2 [core argument]: UBI as the best response to technological unemployment
  - Subsection 3 [objection]: Discussion of a possible objection
3. Conclusion

To guide the reader through your essay, use signposts when moving from one idea/section to the next.

- „Having outlined X's case for Y, I will now proceed to put forth my main criticism...“
- “In the previous section I considered what is at stake in the debate between X and Y. Against this backdrop, I will now turn to developing my argument for Z.”
- “My argument for X, put forth in the previous section, raises two possible objections. It is to addressing these objections that I will turn in the next section.

See also the uploaded document on signposting.

### Conclusion

Things you can do in a conclusion:

- *Briefly* summarize the most important findings. Make sure your summary of what you did in the essay matches what you said in the introduction you were going to do.
- Provide additional context and perspective. What are the broader implications of your findings?
- Mention some open questions, which you did not have the space to address in your essay.
- Acknowledge limitations of your argument.

Things you should not do in a conclusion:

- Don't put any of the important stuff in the conclusion. If the aim of your essay is to argue for some philosophical claim X, your argument for X should be fully developed in the body of the essay.

## 3. Finding and using literature

### What kind of literature to use

- Use scholarly/academic literature. This includes e.g. books published with an academic publisher, articles published in academic journals (see list below) or edited volumes, handbook articles, and *certain* online publications (especially [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#), [Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)).
- It does not include random websites or Wikipedia. Wikipedia is a fantastic resource, but it's not an appropriate source for academic writing.

### Some ways of finding relevant scholarly literature

- Check out the literature on the syllabus
- Online encyclopedias ([Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#), [Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#));
- Survey articles in handbooks (e.g. Blackwell Guides, Cambridge Companions, Oxford Handbooks) and journals (e.g. *Philosophy Compass*, which publishes only survey articles)
- Oxford Bibliographies (<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com>)
- scholar.google.com (use also the 'cited by' function)
- philpapers.org (note you can browse by topics)
- Browse specialist journals (see list below). For instance: Writing a paper on a topic in moral psychology? => Browse *Philosophical Psychology* for relevant literature.

### How to access literature

To actually find the articles, use e.g. google scholar or PhilPapers, or navigate directly to the journal website. Although some publications are 'open access', most academic literature is behind a paywall. Fortunately, Utrecht University has subscriptions for most journals. This website explains how you can access academic literature that is behind a paywall:

<https://www.uu.nl/en/university-library/help-in-searching/online-access>

When you do not have access to a paper, you might find it on the author's personal website or on google scholar (=> search for paper => go to 'All [number] versions' => look for pdf). If you're really desperate, you can ask the author for a copy of the paper (don't do this too often).

Use the library catalogue to find books (duh!). Some books are available as e-books. You might also find book chapters online (again, look for them on google scholar, PhilPapers, or the author's website).

### How to handle a large amount of literature

More often than not, your problem will not be a lack of relevant literature but an excess of it. For many topics, you will find dozens if not hundreds of articles and books that might be relevant. When writing a seminar paper, you will only be able to read a very small fraction of it. *That's ok*. Here are some 'filters' you can apply to decide which literature to use:

- use literature that you personally find helpful or interesting.
- focus on recent literature
- choose literature that is central to the debate (e.g. mentioned in survey articles)
- pick papers that are published in respected journals (see list below)

### 'Ok, but how many references do I need?'

It depends. A long list of references is neither sufficient nor necessary for a good essay. As a very rough rule of thumb, you should aim for 1 to 2 references per 500 words. It is always a good idea to position yourself within the debate (who do you agree/disagree with? how does your contribution add to the debate?). This will allow/require you to reference some of the relevant literature.

### How to cite and quote

- Whenever you quote or paraphrase, cite the source including page number. For more on this, see <https://www.uu.nl/en/university-library/advice-support-to/students/responsible-use-of-sources>
- Quote sparingly. Use literal quotations when the precise wording matters, else paraphrase. Avoid writing an essay that is a pastiche of quotations.
- Be consistent in your citation style. It does not matter which citation style you choose, as long as you do it right. If you cannot decide which citation style to use, why not use the [Harvard Style](#)? You can also copy the citation style used in one of the seminar readings.
- The list of references should include all sources you actually cite in your essay. It should not include works that you consulted while writing your paper but which you do not cite.

Plagiarism is the appropriation of another author's works, thoughts, or ideas without crediting the source. Don't plagiarize. Plagiarism a very serious offense, which may lead to the submission of a request for expulsion to the Executive Board. To avoid plagiarism, credit the source whenever you paraphrase another author's ideas. When using the same words as the author, credit the source *and* use quotation marks. For more information, see UU's plagiarism website.

<https://students.uu.nl/en/practical-information/policies-and-procedures/fraud-and-plagiarism>

## 5. Writing style

### Bad style

*"The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power."* (Judith Butler — winner of the [Bad Writing Contest](#) of the journal *Philosophy and Literature*)

### Good style

Good style is simple, precise, and free from unnecessary jargon. Philosophy is complicated enough. Don't make it more complicated by writing long and convoluted sentences or using pretentious, show-offy language. If you've got something interesting to say, why not say it in plain English (or Dutch)? Make sure to be precise about the meanings of the terms you use. Lack of clarity and precision is a major cause of philosophical confusion.

### personal vs. impersonal

You may use the first person ('I shall argue that...'), impersonal phrases ('It will be argued that...'; 'This essay seeks to...'), or combine both.

## 6. General tips

- Start early with the actual writing. Writing is itself part of the reflective process. Often you only fully understand your own ideas once you try to express them in writing.
- Writing a philosophical paper is not a linear process. You do not have to start with the introduction. A good way of overcoming writer's block is to start with whichever section you find easiest to write.
- Be prepared to discard or revise substantial parts of what you've already written. This is an inevitable and perfectly normal step in the writing process. Published research articles usually undergo numerous rounds of substantial revisions before they see the light of day.

## 7. Other helpful resources

### Other great guidelines for writing philosophy papers

- [Benn, Claire/Cameron, Christina/Cawston, Amanda/Siriwardena, Shyane](#)
- [Brinkmann, Matthias](#)
- [de Bres, Helena](#)
- [Earp, Brian](#)
- [Harvard Philosophy Department](#)
- [Huemer, Michael](#) (go to 'advice' => 'writing')
- Martinich, A. P. 2016: *Philosophical Writing: An Introduction*. Walden, MA: Wiley Blackwell
- [Mehta, Neil](#)
- [Pryor, Jim](#)

### Even more guidelines and other useful resources

- <https://adamfpatterson.weebly.com/resources.html>
- <https://dailynous.com/2019/01/15/write-philosophy-paper-online-guides/>
- <https://www.su.se/english/education/student-support/academic-writing-service/resources-for-academic-writing-1.440427>
- <https://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/>

### Guideline on layout and formatting

- [Brinkmann, Matthias](#)

### Great book on how to stay focused and productive

Cal Newport 2016: *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*. New York: Grand Central Publishing

## ***Incomplete list of (mostly anglophone) journals that publish work in ethics and political philosophy***

### **General journals that publish work in ethics and political philosophy**

*Algemeen Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Wijsbegeerte; American Philosophical Quarterly; Analysis; Canadian Journal of Philosophy; Australasian Journal of Philosophy; Ergo; Erkenntnis; European Journal of Philosophy; Inquiry; Midwest Studies in Philosophy; Mind; Nous; Pacific Philosophical Quarterly; Philosophers' Imprint; Philosophia; Philosophical Issues; Philosophical Perspectives; Philosophical Topics; Philosophical Studies; Philosophical Review; Philosophy & Phenomenological Research; Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society; Ratio; Southern Journal of Philosophy; Synthese; The Journal of Philosophy; The Monist; The Philosophical Quarterly; Thought; Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*

### **Specialist journals by subject area**

Applied Ethics: *Journal of Applied Philosophy; Journal of Practical Ethics; Public Affairs Quarterly* (see also domain-specific journals)

Business Ethics: *Business Ethics Quarterly; Journal of Business Ethics*

Ethics of Technology: *AI & Ethics; AI & Society; Ethics & Information Technology; Minds & Machines; Philosophy & Technology; Science & Engineering Ethics*

Environmental Ethics: *Environmental Ethics*

Medical Ethics/Bioethics: *AMA Journal of Ethics; American Journal of Bioethics; BMC Medical Ethics; Bioethics; Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics; Hastings Center Report; Journal of Medical Ethics; Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*

Metaethics: *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*

Moral Philosophy: *Ethical Perspectives; Ethical Theory & Moral Practice; Ethics; Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy; Moral Philosophy & Politics; Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics; The Journal of Ethics; The Journal of Moral Philosophy; The Journal of Value Inquiry; Utilitas*

Moral Psychology: *Neuroethics; Philosophical Explorations; Philosophical Psychology*

Philosophy and Economics: *Economics & Philosophy; Politics, Philosophy, and Economics*

Philosophy and International Affairs: *Ethics & International Affairs; Journal of Global Ethics*

Philosophy of Law: *Canadian Journal of Law & Jurisprudence; Jurisprudence; Law & Philosophy; Legal Theory; Oxford Journal of Legal Studies; Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Law; Ratio juris*

Political/Social Philosophy: *Ethics; Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy; Constellations; European Journal of Political Theory; Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy; Moral Philosophy & Politics; Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy, Philosophy & Public Affairs; Political Theory; Political Studies; Politics, Philosophy, and Economics; Public Affairs Quarterly; Res Publica; The Journal of Political Philosophy; The Journal of Politics; The Journal of Social Philosophy; Social Philosophy & Policy; Social Theory & Practice*

Note that most specialist journals publish articles in more than one subject area. Most journals in the 'Moral Philosophy' category publish articles on all subject areas in ethics and political philosophy.