Reading and Writing Philosophy*

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*This document owes a lot to Jim Pryor's excellent guidelines for writing philosophy, Pryor's guidelines for reading philosophy, and a similar document by my colleague Matthew Barker.

Philosophy is one of the most exciting subjects you can study. There are several reasons for that:

1. If there is something, *X*, that is really cool and interesting, there is almost certainly a philosophy of *X* that is at least as cool and interesting.

2. Philosophy gives you orientation in many areas outside of academic philosophy, such as political debates and other disciplines.

3. In philosophy, you can think about fundamental aspects of life and reality, about the things that really matter.

4. Looking at things from the perspective of philosophy is to be truly critical, in the sense of allowing oneself neither the luxury of holding unexamined views nor the laziness of claiming that everything that really matters is beyond the reach of reason.

That being said, philosophy is also really challenging. There are three basic skills a philosopher needs: reading skills, writing skills, and debating skills. That may sound straightforward, but acquiring these skills can be really difficult because the kind of reading, writing and debating that matters in philosophy is at the same time very special and very diverse. The most important principle that ought to guide one's reading of philosophy is the so-called principle of charity, which says that your interpretation should ascribe to the author of the text a maximally plausible view. When writing philosophy one should be guided by the thought that what one writes should be as clear, simple and convincing as possible.

The aim of this document is to make things easier for you. It contains instructions, recommendations, and advice on reading philosophy and writing philosophy papers. Towards the end, I also offer some general advice on how to do well in a philosophy class.

1 Reading Philosophy

In philosophy classes, you will sometimes read secondary literature in which someone explains what some famous philosopher said. Those texts are usually easy to read, and I won't bother going into it here. What is more challenging is to read *primary sources*. Those are texts by philosophers in

which they typically present some new claim or idea. Usually, they also provide arguments for why their claim is true.

Philosophers are notorious for being difficult to understand. If you have ever opened a book by Immanuel Kant or Aristotle, you know what I mean. Unfortunately, some students think that they have to imitate Kant's or Aristotle's (or perhaps even Hegel's or Heidegger's) style in order to write good philosophy. That is false. Kant and Aristotle are great philosophers *not because but in spite of* their style. Besides the occasional lack of writing abilities on the side of philosophers, philosophical texts are also difficult for the following reasons:

1. Philosophical texts tend to be about very abstract ideas.
2. Philosophical texts often use words that you don't know.
3. Philosophical texts often connect ideas whose connection isn't immediately obvious and making such a connection typically requires several intermediate steps of which you must keep track.
4. In philosophical texts, small details of phrasing often matter a lot and the sentences are often long and complicated.
5. Often you can realize why an author is saying what she is saying at a particular point in a text only after you have read the whole text.

In order to cope with all these difficulties, you must read philosophical texts several times. It will sometimes be necessary to go through a text sentence by sentence, stopping at each one to ask yourself what the sentence says.

There is one crucial principle that should be guiding all reading of philosophical texts. It is known among philosophers as the principle of charity.

Principle of Charity: Always interpret what you read or hear in such a way that the view you thereby attribute to the author is the strongest, best supported, and most plausible view that can reasonably count as an interpretation of what you read or hear. In particular, assume as long as possible that the author says true and interesting things and makes valid arguments. Abandon that assumption only

> after considering the strongest reasons that might support the view in question.

This principle is particularly important in philosophy (although it should also be followed in other disciplines) because arguments are so important in philosophy. It is easy to reject an argument if one interprets one's opponent in an uncharitable way, but that rejection only survives until one's opponent clarifies her view. In order to cut out this boring and unproductive step, we must adhere to the principle of charity.

Given all these difficulties, what is the best way to read philosophy? What should you do when you sit down with a philosophical text? I recommend the following procedure:

1.1 Step 1: Skim the Text

The first time you read the text you should do so quickly. You should try to get the big picture right. In order to do so, try to answer the following questions:

- What is the structure of the text? How can you divide the text into parts and sub-parts and how do these parts and sub-parts hang together?
- What is the main thesis of the author?
- What is the author's argument for her main thesis, very roughly?
- Does the author argue for any secondary or intermediate conclusions in order to establish her main thesis?

While skimming the text you should underline or highlight the following things: main theses, secondary or intermediate theses, breaks at which a new line of thought begins, enumerations given by the author.

The structure of the text usually has three parts: an introduction, a main body, and a conclusion. These parts are not always labeled as such. You must often figure out for yourself where the main body begins and ends. Good introductions tell you what the topic of the text is going to be, what the problem is that the author wants to address, what the main thesis of the author is, and it will give you some idea of what the rest of the text will be like. The main body contains the author's discussion of opposing views and

her arguments for her own view. Often, it ends by the author considering and rejecting an objection to her view. The conclusion usually summarizes and recapitulates the main claims and arguments of the text.

The main thesis of a text is often stated at the beginning or at the end of the text. At the beginning of a text, philosophers often state their main thesis by saying things like the following: "I will argue that *X*" or "Here I want to show that *X*" or "I will conclude that *X*" or "I shall defend the claim that *X*" etc. At the end of a text, philosophers often say things like: "I have argued that *X*" or "We have seen that *X*" or "We now know that *X*." The first order of business is to find the main thesis (or theses) of a text and to highlight it.

Secondary or intermediate theses are typically defended because they help the author to establish her main thesis. Often each section or subsection of a text has its own secondary or intermediate thesis. You should find them and highlight them (preferably in a different color than the main thesis).

If you realize that there is a *break* in the text where, e.g., a new line of thought, the exposition of a new idea, or an argument begins, you should mark this in the text. Ask yourself what the overall structure of the text is and what the author tries to do in each of the parts.

Finally, philosophers like to *enumerate* or *list* or *contrast* things. They often say things like: "Philosopher *Y* claims that such-and-such is the case. However, there several insuperable problems with this claim. First, ... Second, ... Third, ... And finally, ..." Or: "On the one hand, bla-bla-bla, but on the other hand, this-and-that." Sometime these lists or enumerations take up several pages (or even whole books). You should keep track of them by highlighting each point in such a way that you always know to which list or enumeration or contrast the point belongs.

Often the author has made an effort to make these tasks easier for you. The author typically does that by providing little summaries at appropriate places or by using words or expressions that make it clear what they are doing. These words or expressions serve as signposts. Here are some examples of such words:

- because, since, after all, that is why, this explains why, the explanation for this is that
- thus, therefore, hence, it follows that, consequently, I conclude that, we must conclude that

- nevertheless, however, but, despite, although
- in the first case, on the other hand.

Little summaries can sometimes be found at the start or the end of a text. Ideally, the author says something like the following in her first section: "In section n, I will argue that X. I will then show, in section n+1, that Y. In section n+2, I will show that X and Y together imply that Z. I will end by considering and rejecting a popular objection to Z in section n+3." Such statements are usually very helpful and you should use them when reading the text.

You want to pay attention to the use of signposts and little summaries not only because they help you to understand the text you are reading but also because their effective use is important in writing philosophy yourself.

1.2 Step 2: Read the Text Closely

Once you understand the central theses and the structure of the text, you can sit down and read it slowly and carefully. This second reading has two principal goals:

1. You must find out what the author's argument(s) for her main thesis or theses are, and what her arguments for her intermediate and secondary theses are. To this end, you should try to answer the following three questions.

   (a) What reasons does the author give for believing her main thesis?

   (b) Are some of these reasons themselves conclusions of further arguments?

   (c) If so, what are these further arguments?

   If you answer these questions in the right way, you will get a detailed picture of the text in which every part is playing a particular role in establishing the author's main thesis.

2. You must get the details of the author's view right. To this end, you should try to answer the following questions:

   (a) Does the author say explicitly what she means by certain terms? If so, what does the author mean by these terms?

   (b) What distinctions are important for the author? Why? How does the author draw these distinctions?

   (c) What are the premises that the author takes as her starting point? Does she state these premises explicitly? If not, do you think the author is aware that she is relying on the premise at issue?

   (d) Are there different ways of understanding what the author says? If so, what are the advantages and what are the problems of these different interpretations, from the perspective of the author?

It helps to annotate the text with arrows, brief comments, question marks, and the like. When you think that different parts of the text are closely connected, e.g., it is a good idea to draw a line between them or to highlight them in the same way, or do something else that visualizes the connection.

Answering the questions just listed typically requires going back and forth within the text, rereading various paragraphs, thinking about them, and making notes that summarize your understanding of the text.

When you think there is a gap in what the author says, do not try to make up a story about what the author must think. Rather, look closely at what the author actually says. In ordinary conversation, we rely a lot on our interlocutor knowing what we mean. Suppose I say to you: "There was a car accident on my way to work. I was in the IR all morning." You will assume that I or someone close to me got injured in the car accident. But I never said that. Without this "filling in" by the audience communication would hardly be possible. But this kind of "filling in" can lead you astray in philosophy. Be careful when you assume that the author beliefs something that she doesn't explicitly assert.

It rarely happens that one understands every paragraph of a philosophical text. If you don't understand something, you should formulate and write down what exactly you don't understand and raise the question in class. Such questions could look like this:

> Searle says on page *x* that such-and-such but I don't know why. What is Searle's argument for such-and-such? Such-and-such doesn't seem plausible to me, and I don't understand how Searle thinks he makes it plausible. Also: Why is it important for Searle that such-and-such is the case? His overall goal is to establish that this-and-that. As I understand him his argument for this-and-that is ... But such-and-such doesn't play any role in that argument.

If you can formulate questions like that, it shows that you understood a good deal of the text and that you are going about reading philosophy in the right way.

1.3 Step 3: Evaluating the Arguments

The last step in reading philosophy is to decide whether, and about which claims, you agree with the author. In order to do that, you must understand what the author is saying and what her arguments for saying it are. You should have a good grasp of the overall structure of the text, the main thesis, and the argument for it. If you are unsure about any of these points and you cannot formulate a clear question regarding what you don't understand, you must go back to Step 2.

I explain how you can evaluate argument in a separate document. There I describe a three step procedure to determine whether an argument is good or bad. The steps are: (i) convert the text into structured arguments, (ii) extract the form of the arguments, (iii) reach a verdict by checking whether the arguments are valid and the premises are true. You should go through this procedure for each of the author's arguments. Notice that the premises of one argument can be the conclusion of a second argument. In such a case, you cannot say that the premise of the first argument is false unless you are prepared to say that the second argument is either invalid or has itself a false premise.

Once you reached a verdict on all the arguments an author gives, you know exactly which claims you agree or disagree about with the author.

Next, you should go through them one by one and ask yourself different questions, depending on whether you agree or not. If you agree with a claim, you ask yourself the following series of questions:

(1) If someone were to doubt the claim, what reasons and arguments could such a person have for doubting the claim?

(2) What could the author (or you) say in order to convince such a person that the claim is true?

(3) Is there a good argument for the claim that the author doesn't mention?

If you disagree with a claim, you should ask yourself the following series of questions:

(1′) Do you agree with the premises of the author's argument for the claim (if there is such an argument)?
If not, which premise (if there are several) do you disagree with? Why do you think that the premise is false? Why does the author believe that the premise is true? Do you have an argument that shows that the premise is false? How could you convince someone (like the author) that the premise is false?

(2′) Do you think that the author's argument for the thesis is valid?
If not, can you give a counterexample?

(3′) Are you sure that you correctly identified the reason why the author thinks the claim is true? Have you perhaps overlooked an argument that the author gives for the claim?

(4′) Is there a way for the author to rescue her argument? Can the author, e.g., change her argument in such a way that it no longer depends on the premises you find objectionable? Or can the argument be fixed by adding a plausible further premise?

If you disagree with a claim for which the author gives an argument, you must answer "no" to the first question of at least one of (2′) or (3′). If you don't do that, you must reconsider your disagreement with the claim.

If there are many theses in the text, asking yourself all these questions for every thesis can be too much. In that case, you must learn to focus on the important parts of your evaluation. You must ask yourself: Which of these points really matter?

1.4 Philosophical Terminology

Sometimes philosophers use words that you might not know. The most obvious resources to help you in this situation are glossaries, dictionaries, and encyclopedias.

Jim Pryor has a helpful but very limited glossary online here. Another helpful glossary can be found here, and Wikipedia offers one here. The best, free online encyclopedia of philosophy is the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP). But it can be difficult for beginners to understand the entries. The library also has a good selection of philosophical dictionaries and encyclopedias.

2 Writing Philosophy

In general, philosophical texts aim at convincing the reader of a thesis by presenting arguments, that is, rational considerations in favor of the thesis.[1] In order to do that, philosophical texts must be as clear and simple as possible. Otherwise, the reader will be confused rather than convinced.

Of course, being clear and simple isn't, by itself, good enough. Philosophical texts must also contain good arguments or examples or thought experiments, i.e., ones that can convince critical but reasonable people that the thesis is true. In a philosophy paper, you shouldn't simply state your opinion by saying something like "I believe that such-and-such." Rather, you should give convincing reasons for what you believe; you should write things like "I believe that such-and-such because ..." or "I think that so-and-so. And here is my argument for this claim: ..." You shouldn't write things like: "I agree with Hume's thesis because his reasoning is logical." That is not to give a reason for why you agree with Hume. When you write

[1] I take over many of the things below from Jim Pryor's guidelines, occasionally tweaking what Pryor says or expanding on something. There are many websites with further helpful advice, e.g., the one here.

a philosophy paper, you should assume that the reader does not already accept your theses and you must convince her that they are true. This may apply even to claims that you find obvious. Of course, arguments must stop somewhere; but if they stop too early, it isn't good philosophy.

Giving convincing arguments often requires giving an illuminating, critical but charitable interpretation of other philosophical texts or theories. After all, if you cannot even convince anyone that you understood the most important texts by other philosophers on your topic, no one will believe that your view is the correct one.

So, how do you go about writing a good philosophy paper? I will distinguish three phases of writing a paper, and below I will go through them one by one. But before I do so, you need to know what to aim for in more detail. I will explain this in the next subsection.

2.1 What is the Goal?

Although philosophy papers always try to convince the reader of a thesis or claim, what that amounts to may vary considerably. Here is a list of things philosophy papers often try to accomplish:

- criticize an argument that was given by another philosopher, e.g., showing that the argument is invalid or unsound,
- suggesting a novel way of looking at a problem by proposing a new theory,
- giving an interpretation of a philosophical text,
- defending and argument, theory, or thesis against criticism,
- giving an argument for a thesis or theory,
- presenting a counter-example to a general thesis,
- comparing two theories and deciding which one is better,
- showing that a particular theory or thesis has certain implications,
- revising a theory or thesis in light of objections.

When you write a philosophy paper, you should tell the reader right at the start what your goal is. You can do that, e.g., by starting a paper in a way similar to this:

> "Descartes defends the claim that X. In this paper, I will show that this is false by arguing that if X were true, then Y would be impossible. And I will show that Y is possible by presenting a thought experiment. I will furthermore explain why Descartes thinks that X and argue that his reasons are unconvincing."

Now, you not only have to tell the reader what your goal is, you should also try to reach your goal in such a way that the result is a good philosophy paper. In order to give you a first idea what that means, I am listing some features of good philosophy papers:

(a) *A good paper is clearly structured.*
That is, the paper contains a clear statement of the claim(s) or thesis that the author puts forward in the paper. The reader knows at every point what the author is doing, why she is doing it, and how she is doing it. Section-breaks and paragraph-breaks mark units of content in a reasonable and easily understandable way. Headings are informative. Signposts and little summaries help the reader to understand the text.

(b) *A good philosophy paper is written in a clear and easy to understand style.*
That is, there is no unnecessary use of uncommon or complicated words. Sentences are not longer or more complicated than they need to be. Words like "hence," "thus," "therefore," "also," "whereas," "however," "nevertheless" and the like are used appropriately and in a way that helps the reader to understand the text. The text conveys the ideas of the author in the most effective way. The text states exactly what the author means. (You cannot say later on: "Yes, I wrote that but what I really meant is ...")

(c) *A good philosophy paper gives charitable interpretations of opponents.*
The Principle of Charity again. The author attributes the strongest, most coherent, and best supported view to her opponents that is compatible with what the opponent actually says. The author represents the views of others accurately and in a respectful way. In particular,

the author presents the arguments of opponents in a way that brings out the force and plausibility of the opponent's view.

(d) *A good philosophy paper presents cogent and compelling arguments.*
That is, the arguments that the author uses are such that the premises are plausible—either in themselves or because they are supported by further arguments—and you cannot rationally deny the conclusion and also accept all the premises.

(e) *A good philosophy paper presents interesting new arguments or views.*
For students: a good philosophy paper shows that the student thought hard and carefully about the topic at hand. It presents some of the student's own reasoning. For more advanced philosophers: either the thesis of the paper or the argument for the thesis is novel and original.

(f) *A good philosophy paper is modest and makes a small point.*
It is almost impossible to establish ground-breaking conclusions in a couple of pages (unless you are Peter Geach or Edmund Gettier). If you try, the result is usually a chaotic mess of poorly defended claims.

A paper that has all of these virtues is an outstanding work of philosophy. Now that you know what the result should look like, we can start worrying about how you get there. Let's break it up into three steps.

2.2 Step 1: Begin to Write a Paper

If you are writing a philosophy paper for a course, you might have a prompt. You will probably be able to choose from several prompts. My prompts will typically ask you to begin by explaining some argument we have discussed in class, next you will probably be asked to evaluate the argument, and finally I will most likely ask you to present your own considered view on the topic. I say "considered view" because the paper should not only present what you think in a clear way, you must also give your reasons for thinking it, i.e., you must provide an argument. How do you get started?

- *Find a topic*: The writing process begins *well before* you sit down and start to write your first draft. First of all, you have to decide on a prompt or topic. Choose the one you find most interesting. Philosophy

gets complicated quickly, and unless the topic really interests you, it will be difficult to put up with all the complicated stuff.

- *Find a main thesis*: Your paper should have a main thesis, that is, a claim you want to defend. Everything you do in your paper should be geared towards supporting your main thesis. Start to think hard and long about your thesis. Read and reread texts on your topic with your thesis in mind. Try to think of objections to your thesis. Start to construct an argument for your thesis.

- *Talk to others*: Once you have a topic and a thesis in view, you should talk to other people about it. Try to explain the topic and your thesis to them. We often only realize that we don't understand something once we try to explain it to others.

- *Make an outline*: Before you start to write a draft, you should think about the structure of your paper. Make an outline in which you list the different parts of the paper and what you want to do in each part. That outline will be your guide for the rest of the writing process. Every paper should have a short introduction and conclusion and several parts in-between. By looking at the outline you should be able to answer the following questions: In which order are you going to explain things? What are the "sub-parts" or paragraphs of the different parts of your paper? What is the most important thesis of your opponent (if there is one), for your purposes? In what order will you present your criticism (if any)? What is your central thesis? What is your argument for your central thesis? In which order will you explain this argument to the reader? The structure of your paper must make sense. For a five-page paper, the outline should be at least one page. For each part of your paper, the outline should say what happens in the part and in what order. The outline should also include rough formulations of your central theses and arguments and of important theses and arguments by others that you are going to discuss. I am providing a **template for an outline in Appendix A**.

- *Start early*: You need enough time to think about your topic, to write and outline, to write several drafts and to have time in-between when you can set the paper aside so that you can look at it with a fresh pair

of eyes. It is a bad idea to start three or less nights before the paper is due. Give yourself at least one week for a 5 page paper.

2.3 Step 2: Write a First Draft

Once you know exactly what your main thesis is, what your argument for that thesis is, what you want to say about other philosophers, and you have organized all of this in an outline, you are ready to sit down and write the first draft of your paper.

Since you have a good outline, all you have to do is to fill in all the details, turn bullet points into full sentences, spell out arguments, add quotes, a bibliography, introductory remarks, connecting remarks, signposts, and little summaries.

The most common mistakes in writing philosophy papers are: (i) the prose isn't simple and clear enough, (ii) the structure of the paper isn't clear, (iii) the author rambles, repeats herself and adds irrelevant points, (iv) the author doesn't state her thesis clearly, (v) the author doesn't provide convincing arguments for her thesis and makes controversial assertions without providing any reasons, (vi) the author misrepresents views of others. Try to avoid these mistakes.

2.3.1 Language and Style

Let's start with some general advice on language and style. (You can find more rules for writing philosophy papers with examples in **Appendix B**.)

- *Use simple and clear prose*: Don't try to write like a novelist. Use simple and straightforward sentences. Keep your paragraphs short. Use familiar words. Write only sentences that you would also use in conversation (but without swearwords etc.). Don't try to sound sophisticated or educated. Don't try to emulate the style you read in some difficult philosophy books or papers. Of course, complicated ideas sometimes require the use of complicated language. But don't use complicated language unless it is *absolutely* necessary.

- *Don't try to get the reader excited*: Do not start your paper with sentences like "Since the beginning of time, people have wondered whether ..."

Cut to the chase. Start your paper with sentences like "Kant says that *X*. In this paper, I will argue that this can only be right if ..."

- *Don't follow bad rules*: To clear up some misunderstandings: There is nothing wrong with using the first person pronoun, "I" and "me" etc., nor is there anything wrong with splitting infinitives, ending sentences with prepositions, or using the passive voice. Just make sure that what you are writing is something that you would also naturally say in conversation.

- *Explain everything*: Don't leave anything out. Don't let the reader guess what you mean. Details matter a lot. And unless you state all the details explicitly, misunderstandings and lack of clarity are unavoidable. If you give an argument or raise an objection, explain it in such a way that even a lazy and stupid reader gets it.

- *Don't vary vocabulary for the sake of variety*: Do not switch between different words with similar meanings for stylistic reasons. Do not, e.g., switch for the sake of variety between "soul" and "mind" or between "freedom" and "liberty" or between "desire" and "wish" etc.

- *Be concise*: You should say everything you need to say in order to deal with the problem at hand. However, you should do so as concisely as possible. Do not include anything that isn't strictly necessary for what you want to do. Do not ramble. Do not repeat yourself unnecessarily.

- *Use helpful examples*: Philosophy gets very abstract very quickly. In order to make sure that the reader nevertheless understands what you are saying it is often important to give examples. Examples are helpful only if their structure is clear, their connection to the abstract point is obvious, and they focus on the point that matters for the claim at issue.

- *Use definitions*: In philosophy, it is always a good idea to state explicitly how you are using a word. Using definitions from dictionaries, however, is almost never a good idea. They are imprecise and typically list many different meanings. The definitions that are useful in philosophy are ones that allow the reader to assess the plausibility of premises and the validity of arguments. You should define terms like "physicalism,"

"dualism," "supervenience," "Gettier case," "induction," etc., when you are using them. You can do so by saying things like; "Dualism is the thesis that ..." or "I will say that something is a Gettier case just in case ..." or "By 'induction' I mean ..." You don't have to define terms like "valid argument," "soundness," "possibility," "*a priori*," etc. For familiar words that you'd use in everyday conversation, you only have to define them if you want to use them in a special way or your argument hinges on a subtle aspect of their meaning.

- *Use technical terms only if necessary*: Philosophy has its own technical vocabulary (see Section 1.4 above for links to glossaries). It includes terms like "*a priori*," "*prima facie*," "contingent," "consequentialism," "qualia," etc. You should use these terms only if this is necessary and the term really expresses exactly what you want to express. If you can make your point just as well without using the term, don't use it.

- *Use words correctly*: Philosophers use ordinary words like "concept," "proposition," "refute," "vague," "ambiguous," "logical," or "imply" in precise and technical ways. Always use such words with their correct and precise meaning. A concept, e.g., is usually the meaning of a noun phrase like "house" or "government." Concepts cannot be true or false; you cannot say "the concept that ..." The word "vague" doesn't mean the same as "ambiguous." A term is vague if it doesn't have sharp boundaries, like "bold" or "rich." A term is ambiguous if it has more than one meaning, like "bank." Neither "vague" nor "ambiguous" mean the same as "unclear." The term "bank" is ambiguous and in its use for river bank it is vague (because there is no clear boundary where a river bank ends), but the term "bank" isn't unclear.

- *Use of secondary sources*: If you are writing a paper for one of my classes, you don't have to use any secondary sources that we haven't read together. I want to see that you have understood the readings and can think critically and clearly about them for yourself. If you want to use secondary sources, I recommend using PhilPapers.org and the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy to track down helpful literature.

2.3.2 Structure

The structure of your paper should be obvious to the reader. Even someone you skims your paper while falling asleep should have no trouble to tell what the structure of your paper is. Given that you know exactly what the structure of your paper is because you have a detailed outline, this shouldn't be difficult. Here are some rules to help you with the structure of your paper:

- *Have a clear statement of your thesis in the introduction*: A paper should have an introduction in which you explain what the paper is about, and what your goals are. This introduction should include a clear statement of your main thesis. So somewhere on the first page (ideally) there should be a statement like this: "In this paper, I will argue that such-and-such" or "The aim of this paper is to establish that such-and-such."

- *Use helpful little words appropriately*: You should use words like "hence," "thus," "however," "but," "nevertheless," and so on regularly and appropriately. Pay close attention to what these words mean. If what you just said might suggest that x but you don't think that x is true, you can say: "nevertheless, it is not true that x." If you say "Such-and-such; hence, this-and-that" that indicates that you think that such-and-such is a good reason to believe this-and-that.

- *Use signposts appropriately*: There are many phrases that you can use to make the structure of your paper clear. E.g., "I will now argue that ..." or "Before I explain why x, I want to ..." or "This quote suggests that ..." or "As we have just seen, ..." or "For instance, ..." or "As already intimated, ..." or "My second point is that ..." or "A third problem with this view is that ..." or "This claim has several problems to which I will now turn" and so on. Here is an example:

  > "I have argued in the previous section that Peirce's reason for claiming that X is that Y. As already intimated in the introduction, I will argue below that Y cannot be true. Before I do so, however, I want to show that even if Y were true, it wouldn't be a good reason for believing X. In order to do so,

> I will first give a counterexample to Peirces argument. Next I will give a general recipe for creating such counterexamples.
>
> Here is my counterexample: Suppose that ...
>
> ...
>
> As we have seen above, Y isn't a good reason to believe that X. I will now argue that even if I am wrong about this, Peirce's argument is still unsound because Y is false. We can see that Y is false by noting that ..."

Here it is obvious what the author is doing at each point. Make sure that this is also the case in your own paper.

- *Use little summaries*: Include little summaries of your paper in the introduction and the conclusion of your paper. These little summaries should be no longer than a couple of lines. They may read something like this:

  > "The paper is structured as follows: In Section 1, I explain Moore's argument for ... In Section 2, I argue that Moore's argument isn't convincing. And I end, in Section 3, by showing that although Moore's argument is unconvincing, there are still good reasons to believe that ..."

  If the paper includes such a little summary, typically as the last paragraph of the introduction, the reader knows exactly what to expect. And that will make it easier for her to understand what you are saying in the paper.

- *Always be clear whose view you are expressing*: When you are reporting what other people think or what an opponent might think or say, always make it clear that what you are saying isn't your own view. Write things like: "According to Popper, ..."

2.3.3 Presenting, Interpreting and Assessing the Views of Others

When writing a philosophy paper, you will almost certainly have to present the views of other philosophers. In order to do so, you must of course have read the text you are discussing very carefully (see my advise in Section 1 above). Ask yourself what the central theses and arguments of the text are,

whether the premises are plausible, whether the argument is valid, and where (if at all) you disagree with the author.

- *Make sure you understand the text*: If you don't understand the text you are discussing, you can neither criticize it nor explain why you might agree with it. You have to get the view exactly right, understanding the rough outlines of it or the general idea behind it isn't good enough.

- *Adhere to the Principle of Charity*: If you think that what the texts says is stupid or false or the arguments are unconvincing, you must try harder to understand why the author is saying what she is saying. You must always give the author the benefit of the doubt.

- *Explain before discussing*: If you discuss a philosophical theory or thesis, you must always explain it before you criticize it or say why you agree with it.

- *Explain the reasons*: Never just state what someone else said. Always explain the reasons the person gave for what she said.

- *Focus on what is important*: Don't say everything you know about the text. Explain only what matters. Give pride of place to parts with which you are going to disagree.

- *Use quotes effectively*: If you quote or paraphrase what someone else said, you must do so correctly and you must provide your sources in an appropriate way (see Section 2.5 below). The purpose of quotes is to demonstrate that the author really holds the view you say she holds. You should use brief quotes (one sentence or two) that support the crucial point of your interpretation. Use few quotes. Only quote things that are important for what you say. Always explain what the author says in the passage you are quoting.

- *Use paraphrases effectively*: It is often better to paraphrase what the author says than to quote the author. When you paraphrase the author, you must indicate which part of the text you are paraphrasing (give a citation). Do not mechanically replace words in the original text for words with similar meanings or rearrange the grammatical structure of the sentences.

- *Be clear about what you criticize*: Don't say anything like: "I disagree with Descartes because his premises aren't plausible." Rather, say things like: "I do not accept Descartes's argument for such-and-such because I find the premise that this-and-that implausible." Always be maximally explicit regarding what you disagree with and why you disagree with it. Always say whether you disagree with a premise or you think that the argument is invalid.

2.3.4 Presenting Your Own View

Your should present your own view in such a way that even a stupid reader will easily understand what you think and why you think it.

- *State explicitly what your main thesis is*: You should let the reader know already at the start of the paper what your main thesis is. Once you get to the point where you defend the thesis, you should remind the reader by explicitly stating it again.

- *Make your starting points explicit*: It should be obvious to the reader what assumptions you use as premises, i.e., which claims you take to be in themselves plausible.

- *State your argument clearly*: You must say explicitly and clearly what your reasons for your main thesis are. You can do that, e.g., as follows:

> "It is hard to deny that X. Now, if X is true, then Y must also be true. Moreover, I have argued above that Descartes is right in claiming that Z. Hence, Y and Z are both true. Therefore, W also holds, and that is what I want to establish in this paper."
>
> Or:
>
> "The central claim I want to defend is that W. This claim follows from two premises: Y and Z. I have already argued for Z in my discussion of Descartes. So it suffices to establish that Y is true. But you cannot deny that Y if you accept that X. Now, X is clearly true and, hence, we have good reason to accept W."

Never let the reader guess what your reasons for making controversial claims are.

- *Anticipate objections*: You should always test your view by wondering what someone who disagrees might say against it. Try to find the strongest objections to your view. Then respond to it. It is always better if you raise an objection yourself than if someone else raises the objection. Say clearly what the objection to your view is and why you think it doesn't succeed. You may say something like:

  > "An opponent might think that what I just said must be false because X. This objection fails because it presupposes that Y. It cannot be true that Y, however, because Z."

  This applies also when you are criticizing the view of someone else. Always think about what the comeback from the other side will be. Don't assume that you have refuted a view unless you have good responses to these comebacks, and to the comebacks to your responses, and so on.

- *It's okay if you are just taking a first step*: If you are discussing the view, say, that all mental states are states of the brain, it is unlikely that you will be able to settle this question conclusively. That is okay. You shouldn't always try to answer the big questions immediately. You will produce better philosophy if you focus on some detail. Is this or that particular argument for a big thesis convincing? Is such-and-such a premise really plausible? Would we need to answer another question before we can answer the question that the discussion is about? Is there a good reply to a particular objection to this or that argument? Your paper will probably be better if your main thesis is an answer to a question like that than if you are trying to show that mental states are always brain states, that god doesn't exist, or the like. The conclusion of your paper can be that you don't know what mental states are and that, for all you know, mental states may be states of the brain but that *this conclusion cannot be established by this-and-that particular argument* (here it is the last bit of this sentence that is philosophically interesting).

2.4 Step 3: Keep Revising the Draft

After you have written the first draft of your paper, set it aside for at least one full day. You will need a fresh pair of eyes to look at it again in order to revise it. You should give your paper several rounds of revisions, at least 3 or 4.

- *Critically reread every sentence*: After a day or two, return to your paper and read it slowly and carefully sentence by sentence. Ask yourself for every sentence the following questions:
  - Does this sentence make sense? Do I really understand what I want to say with this sentence?
  - Is it clear? Could I simplify the language, grammar or style?
  - Do I really need this sentence? Why is it important? Am I repeating myself?
  - Does the sentence say exactly what I mean? Could someone misunderstand what I want to say? Can I make the sentence easier to understand?
  - What are the connections between this sentence and what comes before and after it? Will it be clear to the reader what these connections are? Can I make these connections clearer?
  - Is what I say convincing? Would someone who disagrees with me regarding my main thesis accept what I say in this sentence?

  Revise the paper in light of your answers to these questions.

- *Make sure you say exactly what you mean*: You may have written: "The minds of machines are just like human minds." Is this really what you mean? Or do you mean that machines can be in some of the same kinds of mental states that humans can be in?

- *Try to make the structure clearer and easier to understand*: Make sure that even a stupid and lazy reader knows at every point in the text what you are doing in the paragraph she is currently reading, why you are doing it, and what the role of this paragraph in the overall structure of your paper is.

- *Get feedback from friends*: If you find someone who is willing to read your draft and give you feedback on it, make sure you take advantage of this opportunity.
- *Read the paper out loud*: Ideally you will have an audience and can ask them whether they understood what you said and found it convincing. Even if you don't have an audience, however, it is a good idea to read the paper out loud. Check whether the sentences flow naturally, whether they are short and easy to follow, and whether anything sounds odd. Are there gaps or holes in what you are saying?
- *Keep rewriting*: You will need several rounds of revisions in order to produce a good philosophy paper. Don't become too attached to parts of the paper because they were a lot of work. Keep the earlier drafts of your paper, so that you can go back and undo revisions easily.

2.5 Formatting and Citations

The formatting of the paper should be such that it is easy to read. I suggest the following formatting:

- Font: Calibri, Garamond, Times New Roman, Arial, or something else that is very common.
- Font-size: 11 pt or 12 pt
- Line spacing: between 1.3 and 2
- Margins: roughly 2 cm
- Include page numbers in the header or footer

You should also do the following:

- Include, on the first page, your name (unless explicitly asked not to do so), student ID, date, title of the course, name of professor, and (if applicable) topic you have chosen.
- Use informative section headings.
- Give your paper an informative and interesting title.

- Hand in your paper as pdf, doc, or docx.

You will need to cite literature, either because you are quoting it or because you are paraphrasing it or relying on it. You ought to follow some well-established set of conventions for doing this, and you should follow the citation style you are using consistently. Some well-established citations standards are the following:

- Chicago Manual of Style
- APA Citation Style
- Harvard Style

There are many other such styles. The easiest way to make sure that you are following a citation style consistently is to use software to add citations. If you are writing in MS-word or Libre-Office, you can use EndNote, Mendeley (free), Zotero, and more. If you are writing in LaTex (perhaps with a Lyx-interface) you can use BibTex, e.g., with JabRef to manage your bib-files. These programs typically allow you to access bibliographical information online (via the Library of Congress, or download options on the websites of journals and at PhilPapers, etc.).

Personally, I like the author-date citation style from the Chicago Manual of Style. Please check out the details for yourself. This style uses in-text citations and a bibliography at the end of the paper. The four most important kinds of sources in philosophy are books, essays in books, journal articles, and websites.

Books:
When you want to quote a book you add the following kind of entry to your bibliography:

> Pollan, Michael. 2006. *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. New York: Penguin.

So the format is this: [author's last name] [comma] [author's first name] [dot] [publication year] [dot] [title in italics] [dot] [place of publication] [colon] [publisher] [dot]. If the book title occurs in your bibliography, you must cite the book somewhere in your paper (and the other way around: if you cite it, it must be in the bibliography). You cite the book in the text in the following way:

> Things are thus-and-so (Pollan 2006, 99–100). As Pollan (2006, 99–100) argues, things are thus-and-so. Pollan writes: "some quote" (Pollan 2006, 99–100).

So the format is this: [open parenthesis] [author's last name] [year of publication] [comma] [page number(s)] [close parenthesis].

Chapter or other part of a book:
I will now be briefer and assume that you know how to construct the general format from examples. In the bibliography:

> Kelly, John D. 2010. "Seeing Red: Mao Fetishism, Pax Americana, and the Moral Economy of War." In *Anthropology and Global Counterinsurgency*, edited by John D. Kelly, Beatrice Jauregui, Sean T. Mitchell, and Jeremy Walton, 67–83. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

In-text citation: (Kelly 2010, 77)

Journal article:
In the bibliography:

> Weinstein, Joshua I. 2009. "The Market in Plato's Republic." *Classical Philology* 104:439–58.

In-text citation: (Weinstein 2009, 440)

Website:
In the bibliography:

> Google. 2009. "Google Privacy Policy." Accessed March 11. http://www.google.com/intl/en/privacypolicy.html.

In-text citation: (Google 2009)

There are special rules for blog-entries, dissertations, book reviews, and so on. Make sure that, for each item, you follow the appropriate rule.

2.6 Gender Neutral Language & Human Diversity

In addition to all the other reasons for using gender neutral language and language that attends to human diversity, there are philosophical reasons for this. Philosophy demands that we think very carefully, clearly and rigorously about human life and ideas. Using gender neutral language in your writing and speaking reminds us that human beings are diverse in gender, that not all of them are "he."

There are different ways of approaching the task of keeping gender and other differences in mind, e.g., substituting "she" where "he" might have traditionally been expected, alternating systematically between the two, using "she/he," and so on. No formal procedure is adequate to the task. The *American Philosophical Association* has provided helpful "Guidelines for the Nonsexist Use of Language."

2.7 Academic Integrity and Plagiarism

The most common offense under the Academic Code of Conduct is plagiarism which the code in force at Concordia University defines as "the presentation of the work of another person [an author of a book, a journal, a fellow student, etc.] as one's own or without proper acknowledgment."

This could be material copied word by word from books, journals, internet sites, professor's course notes, etc. It could be material that is paraphrased but closely resembles the original source. It could be the work of a fellow student, for example, an answer on a quiz, data for a lab report, a paper or assignment completed by another student. It might be a paper purchased through one of the many available sources. Plagiarism does not refer to words alone—it can also refer to copying images, graphs, tables, and ideas. "Presentation" is not limited to written work. It also includes oral presentations, computer assignments and artistic works. Finally, if you translate the work of another person and do not cite the source, this is also plagiarism. In simple words: *Do not copy, paraphrase or translate anything for anywhere without saying from where you obtained it!*

The Academic Code of Conduct can be found here:

> http://www.concordia.ca/content/dam/common/docs /policies /official- policies /Academic-Code-Conduct-2015.pdf

Please make sure that you comply with it. In case of doubt as to what counts at plagiarism, ask me. Cite your sources and inspirations; this enriches your ideas by showing their roots in the thoughts of other people, and does not detract from your exposition, articulation, and development of ideas.

3 Doing Well in Philosophy

As in every other course and subject, the key to doing well in philosophy is to work hard. This means, among other things, doing the following:

- Do all of the readings completely and carefully before each class. Follow the guidelines above when reading philosophy.
- Come to every class and participate in discussions.
- Think hard about the readings.
- Follow the guidelines above when writing philosophy.
- Do research: look up terms, read encyclopedia entries, look at guides on reading and writing philosophy, ask professors and classmates to direct you to information you might need.
- Take your time. Never start working on an assignment the night before it is due.
- Take notes by hand and not on a laptop. Research shows that its better: Take Notes by Hand.
- Be realistic about the amount of work you can do. Cut down if it is too much.
- Don't text, surf, email, Tweet, etc. when you are reading or writing philosophy, let alone in class.
- Ask me if anything is unclear.

Doing these things is time consuming. Unfortunately, I don't know any way to do philosophy that takes less time. There are, however, ways of making things easier for yourself. Here are some suggestions:

- Study with groups of other students that you like and find helpful. Meet outside the classroom at least once a week. Do the readings together, or discuss them after doing them individually. Give each other feedback on your papers.
- Discuss the topics of the readings with classmates. If someone said something in class that you found interesting or didn't understand, ask that person after class what she meant or what exactly she had in mind.
- Come to talks in the philosophy department to get a feeling for how philosophers think. Join the discussions after the talk.
- Get enough sleep.
- Use the resources at the end of the syllabus if you need assistance that isn't directly linked to philosophy. There you have a list of institutions at Concordia that can help you with your writing skills, if you have a disability, if you need advice regarding planning your studies, if you experience stress, anxiety or depression, if you need help with citations, housing, health, etc. Take advantage of these services.
- If there is anything that threatens your academic success, talk to me about it as soon as possible.

Philosophy can be a lot of fun and it can change your life. Since philosophy is incredibly broad, it almost always in some way connected to things you care about.Take advantage of that fact.

Appendix A: Template for Outline

You can generate an outline by filling in all the boxes below.

A. Topic or main problem, stated in one sentence:

B. Main thesis. This must be a philosophically interesting claim that you will defend in your paper. You should formulate it in one sentence that is absolutely clear, unambiguous, and easy to understand:

C. Two-sentence summary of the main argument which you will use to support your main thesis. The conclusion of your argument has to be the main thesis you mentioned under B:

D. List of sections of the paper, for each section state what the aim or function of this section and how that aim or function contributes to

your defense of your main thesis:

- Section 1
  - Aim:
  - Contribution:
- Section 2
  - Aim:
  - Contribution:
- Section 3
  - Aim:
  - Contribution:
- Section 4
  - Aim:
  - Contribution:

    ⋮

E. List of texts (with their authors) that you need to summarize in order to defend your thesis:

F. Arguments from authors you will discuss. Give structured arguments and their forms:

Structured Argument from _____:

1.
2. _____
3.

Argument Form:

1.
2. _____
3.

Structured Argument from _____:

1.
2. _____
3.

Argument Form:

1.
2. _____
3.

G. You most important objection to the arguments in F (e.g. "premise 1 of the argument from *x* is false"):

H. Your argument for your main thesis, state it as a structured argument with a deductively valid form:

Argument for your main thesis:

1.
2.
3. _____
4.

I. State your arguments for your controversial premises as structured arguments with a deductively valid form:

Sub-argument 1:

1.
2. _____
3.

Sub-argument 2:

1.
2. _____
3.

J. The most pressing objection to your thesis that you can think of, in one or two sentences:

K. Your response to the objection under J, in one or two sentences:

L. List of important implications of your thesis. Why is your thesis interesting?

M. List of concepts or expressions you must clarify in your paper.

Appendix B: Stylistic Rules

Your language should be as simple, straightforward and easy to understand as possible. Here are some rough rules to help you with that. For each rule, I give you an example where the rule is not followed and an improvement of the passage in which the rule is followed. See also the advice in the text above.

1. ***No Fluff***. Get directly to the point. Don't write anything that is not strictly necessary to make your point.

   Violation of the Rule:
   For many centuries philosophers have wondered and argued about various theories of what knowledge is. On one side of the debate there is the time honored account of Plato, a Greek philosopher from Athens who was the teacher of Aristotle. It was asserted by Plato that to know something is to have a belief that is justified and also true. Contrary to this account, it has been argued by Edmund Gettier, in a seminal paper that philosophers often discuss, that having knowledge cannot consist in having a justified true belief.

   Improvement:
   Plato said that knowledge is justified true belief. Edmund Gettier has criticized this view.

2. ***Try the active voice.*** There is nothing wrong with the passive voice, but the active voice is often simpler. Use the active voice instead of the passive voice whenever this is simpler and easier to understand.

   Violation of the Rule:
   It has been argued by many philosophers that determinism is incompatible with free will.

   Improvement:
   Many philosophers have argued that determinism is incompatible with free will.

3. ***Avoid Clichés.*** Avoid unoriginal phrases that are lazy and boring.

Violation of the Rule:
I will *take the horn by the bulls* and show that Popper's argument is invalid.

Improvement:
I will show that Popper's argument is invalid.

4. ***Keep sentences short.*** Break up long sentences into several shorter ones.

Violation of the Rule:
As we have seen, despite Popper's arguments that psychoanalysis is not a scientific theory because it cannot be refuted by any possible observations, we don't have to accept this claim because Popper's arguments presuppose his falsificationism, which is undermined by my example from quantum physics.

Improvement:
We have seen that Popper argues that psychoanalysis is not a scientific theory. His reason is that it cannot be refuted by any possible observations. This argument presupposes falsificationism. Given my example from quantum physics, we should reject falsificationism and, hence, Popper's argument.

5. ***Keep adjectives and adverbs to a minimum.*** Don't use adjectives and adverbs that don't contribute anything of substance.

Violation of the Rule:
Ayer's long-winded and confusing article boldly states the outrages thesis that moral judgments have no cognitive content.

Improvement:
In his article, Ayer states that moral judgments have no cognitive content.

6. ***Verbs with content instead of nouns and "to be".*** Let the verb carry genuine meaning. Don't let nouns do all the work.

Violation of the Rule:
- Kant's suggestion was that time and space are forms of sensibility.
- A criticism of idealism was a project of realists.

Improvement:
- Kant suggested that time and space are forms of sensibility.
- Realists criticized idealism.

7. ***One verb.*** Don't use more than one verb if you can avoid it.

Violation of the Rule:
Marxists have tried to criticize capitalism.

Improvement:
Marxists have criticized capitalism.

8. ***Keep dashes colons and semi-colons to a minimum.*** Make the sentence flow by avoiding interruptions.

Violation of the Rule:
This conclusion—although it may strike some as absurd—follows from obvious premises.

Improvement:
This conclusion may strike some as absurd, but it follows from obvious premises.

9. ***Use "I" not the third person.***

Violation of the Rule:
The author of this paper will argue that this is false.

Improvement:
I will argue that this is false.

10. ***Resist hedging and qualifications.*** If you feel tempted to add qualifications or hedges, try to think of ways to avoid that without overstating your point.

Violation of the Rule:
- There many be exceptions and perhaps more factors must be taken into account, but, given my argument, it seems that determinism is incompatible with free will.
- I argued that Schopenhauer is wrong in holding that pity is the basis of morality, and this suggests that pity has no place in moral theory.

Improvement:
- My argument provides reasons to think that determinism is incompatible with free will.
- As I have argued, Schopenhauer is wrong in holding that pity is the basis of morality.

11. ***One paragraph, one point.*** Avoid long paragraphs that try to deal with many points at once. Break things up into several paragraphs each of which has a clear message.

Violation of the Rule:
What Kuhn says cannot be right because it is self-undermining and in tension with the history of science. The history of science clearly shows that scientists usually adopt a new paradigm on rational grounds, and it is self-defeating to base the view that says that there are no objective historical facts on an account of the history of science. So there are two big problems with Kuhn's view.

Improvement:
There are two problems with Kuhn's view. First, his view is in tension with the history of science. History clearly shows that scientists usually adopt a new paradigm on rational grounds.

The second problem with Kuhn's view is that it is self-undermining. He is defeating himself when he claims that an account of the history of science supports his view that there are no objective historical facts.