



University of Fort Hare
Together in Excellence

Department of Philosophy

A Guide to being a Student of Philosophy

Compiled by Dr. Rianna Oelofsen, 2011

Revised by Neal O'Donnell, 2013

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What is philosophy?

Philosophy, like other studies, aims primarily at knowledge. The knowledge it aims at is the kind of knowledge which gives unity and system to the body of sciences, and the kind which results from a critical examination of the grounds of our convictions, prejudices, and beliefs.

Bertrand Russell, *The problems of philosophy*, 1912:154)

Although many people will give the simplified definition that philosophy is 'love of wisdom' (this is a literal translation from the Ancient Greek), this answer tends to be misleading: it would imply that philosophy is an attitude that one either has or has not. This is a conception that leads to many strange fields, as you will find out during the course.

Philosophy is more than that: it is an activity, it is the use of rational arguments to reach a conclusion, it is thinking critically about various topics that have intrigued men and women since the introduction of rationality, it is being able to engage with these topics and themes with the relevant philosophical tools of logic.

Being a philosopher or having studied the works of philosophers does not in itself confer wisdom; this emerges slowly through practicing the philosophical method in one's thoughts and conversations with other people.

With this in mind this Guide has been compiled to help you set out on the road of your studies. While much of the Guide is focused on philosophy, the principles outlined are relevant in the other courses you are doing, As such it is essential reading; not only in one session but continuously throughout your studies.

Plagiarism and how to avoid it

Plagiarism is becoming an international problem and this is why the section has been placed here at the beginning. Plagiarism is to 'take and use another person's (thoughts, writings, inventions, or abs.) as one's own.' (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 1982.)

The University Policy defines plagiarism as:

“Taking and using the ideas, writings, works or inventions of another as if they were one's own”, and comments that “this definition covers a wide range of practices from minor infractions such as inadequate referencing, through more serious misdemeanours such as copying blocks of text which are unacknowledged, to very serious offences such as stealing an entire essay from another student or from the Internet or infringing copyright.”

When you write an essay in an academic setting, it is normal, indeed advisable, to draw on material written by other people. However, when you do this it is important that you acknowledge the people whose work you are drawing on. This is a simple matter of respect.

There are standard procedures for doing this – for example by citing a reference and providing details of the source in a reference list at the end of the assignment. You are expected to do this even where you do not quote directly from your source but merely express in your own words ideas or arguments that you have taken from that source. In addition, where you quote verbatim from a published source, you must put inverted commas round the quoted material and provide a page number. The only situation in which these rules do not apply strictly is in examinations and tests written without access to books and other reference materials.

Plagiarism refers to the practice of presenting as your own work material that has been written by someone else. Any use of material that is derived from the work of another person constitutes plagiarism, *unless the source is clearly acknowledged*.

You will be guilty of plagiarism if, for example, you hand in an assignment under your own name that, either in part or as a whole, is copied from:

- an essay or assignment written by another student,
- a document downloaded from a website,
- a published article or book, or
- has been written for you by someone else.

- Using the words of someone else as if they are your own. (Direct quotations without quotation marks, even if referenced)
- Paraphrasing, but still using some original words and phrases of the original author without quotation marks. (Even if referenced)
- Using someone else's ideas and presenting them as your own.
- Unless you have cited the ideas appropriately, using ideas that come from someone else will constitute plagiarism. This is plagiarism even if you give a reference at the end of the assignment or essay, as you are not showing which ideas you have used from the sources cited in your reference list.

What is wrong with plagiarism?

Firstly, plagiarism is *intellectual and academic theft*.

And secondly, even if the plagiarised material is being used with the consent of the original thinker or writer, plagiarism still *defeats the purpose of education and undermines teaching*. The point of teaching is to transfer valuable **techniques, skills** and **dispositions** to the student. Teaching is a success only if the student shows her **own** ability to use those techniques, apply the skills and display the dispositions.

What does plagiarism look like?

Some Examples: The following examples from the website at Princeton University provide a range of instances of plagiarism from *verbatim copying* to *thorough paraphrasing*. The examples and comments offer clear guidance about how a source may be used and when a source must be cited.

Original source: From: Alvin Kernan, *The Playwright as Magician*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979, pp.102-103.¹

From time to time this submerged or latent theater in *Hamlet* becomes almost overt. It is close to the surface in Hamlet's pretense of madness, the "antic disposition" he puts on to protect himself and prevent his antagonists from plucking out the heart of his mystery. It is even closer to the surface when Hamlet enters his mother's room and holds up, side by side, the pictures of the two kings, Old Hamlet and Claudius, and proceeds to describe for her the true nature of the choice she

¹ Cited in <http://www.princeton.edu/pr/pub/integrity/pages/plagiarism/>

has made, presenting truth by means of a show. Similarly, when he leaps into the open grave at Ophelia's funeral, ranting in high heroic terms, he is acting out for Laertes, and perhaps for himself as well, the folly of excessive, melodramatic expressions of grief.

1. Example of verbatim plagiarism, or unacknowledged direct quotation (lifted passages are in red):

Almost all of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* can be understood as a play about acting and the theatre. For example, there is Hamlet's pretense of madness, the "antic disposition" that he puts on to protect himself and prevent his antagonists from plucking out the heart of his mystery. When Hamlet enters his mother's room, he holds up, side by side, the pictures of the two kings, Old Hamlet and Claudius, and proceeds to describe for her the true nature of the choice she has made, presenting truth by means of a show. Similarly, when he leaps into the open grave at Ophelia's funeral, ranting in high heroic terms, he is acting out for Laertes, and perhaps for himself as well, the folly of excessive, melodramatic expressions of grief.

Comment: Aside from an opening sentence loosely adapted from the original and reworded more simply, this entire passage is taken almost word-for-word from the source. The few small alterations of the source do not relieve the writer of the responsibility to attribute these words to their original author.

A passage from a source may be worth quoting at length if it makes a point precisely or elegantly. In such cases, copy the passage exactly, place it in quotation marks, and cite the author.

2. Example of lifting unacknowledged selected passages and phrases (lifted passages are underlined):

Almost all of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* can be understood as a play about acting and the theatre. For example, in Act 1, Hamlet adopts a pretense of madness that he uses to protect himself and prevent his antagonists from discovering his mission to revenge his father's murder. He also presents truth by means of a show when he compares the portraits of Gertrude's two husbands in order to describe for her the true nature of the choice she has made. And when he leaps in Ophelia's open grave ranting in high heroic terms, Hamlet is acting out the folly of excessive, melodramatic expressions of grief.

Comment: This passage, in content and structure, is taken wholesale from the source. Although the writer has rewritten much of the paragraph, and fewer phrases are lifted verbatim from the source, this is a clear example of plagiarism. Inserting even short phrases

from the source into a new sentence still requires placing quotations around the borrowed words and citing the author. If even one phrase is good enough to borrow, it must be properly set off by quotation marks. In the case above, if the writer had rewritten the entire paragraph and only used Alvin Kernan's phrase "high heroic terms" without properly quoting and acknowledging its source, the writer would have plagiarized.

3. Example of paraphrasing the text while maintaining the basic paragraph and sentence structure:

Almost all of Shakespeare's Hamlet can be understood as a play about acting and the theatre. For example, in Act 1, Hamlet pretends to be insane in order to make sure his enemies do not discover his mission to revenge his father's murder. The theme is even more obvious when Hamlet compares the pictures of his mother's two husbands to show her what a bad choice she has made, using their images to reveal the truth. Also, when he jumps into Ophelia's grave, hurling his challenge to Laertes, Hamlet demonstrates the foolishness of exaggerated expressions of emotion.

Comment: Almost nothing of Alvin Kernan's original language remains in this rewritten paragraph. However the key idea, the choice and order of the examples, and even the basic structure of the original sentences are all taken from the source. Although it would no longer be necessary to use quotation marks, it would absolutely be necessary to place a citation at the end of this paragraph to acknowledge that the content is not original. Better still would be to acknowledge the author in the text by adding a second sentence such as "Alvin Kernan provides several examples from the play where these themes become more obvious" and then citing the source at the end of the paragraph. In the case where the writer did not try to paraphrase the source's sentences quite so closely, but borrowed the main idea and examples from Kernan's book, an acknowledgment would still be necessary.

BEWARE

The university has invested in sophisticated Plagiarism Detection Software, and students are warned that periodic checks will be made by the lecturers and TLC staff.

How can plagiarism be avoided?

These points of advice are taken from Gordon Harvey, *Writing With Sources: A Guide For Students* (Hackett Publishing, 1998, pp.30-34) and slightly adapted:

- Don't put off written work till just before the deadline.
- In your notes distinguish carefully between your own thoughts and thoughts from the reading. "Adopt these habits in particular: Either summarize radically or quote exactly – *always using quotation marks when you quote*. Don't take notes by loosely copying out source material and simply changing a few words. When you take a note or a quote from a source, jot down the author's name and the page number beside *each* note you take (don't simply record ideas anonymously) and record the source's publication data on that same page in your notes, to save yourself having to dig it up as you are rushing to finish your paper. ... Take or transcribe your notes on sources in a separate ... file for notes, *not* in the file in which you are drafting your paper." (p.31)
- Get into the habit of building up your notes *actively*, instead of *passively*. Your notes should be a record of your developing understanding and thinking (*What could this possibly mean? Should I accept these views? What are the alternatives? What are the difficulties and objections?*), not a mere collection of passively recorded opinions.
- Avoid pretentiousness. Don't try to appear more sophisticated or erudite than you really are.
- Don't read another student's paper or borrow someone else's notes.
- Do not write your paper jointly with another student, unless this allowed or required.

Procedure to be taken in a case of Suspected Plagiarism

The following procedure will be followed by the department when plagiarism is suspected:

- the lecturer concerned will investigate the matter and assess whether plagiarism indeed has been committed and how serious it is
- the HOD will be informed
- the student(s) concerned will be informed of the preliminary findings and be given a chance to explain, after which the appropriate disciplinary action will be taken as per the Policy on Plagiarism.
- all cases, however minor, will go on record.

How can plagiarism be avoided?

In order to ensure that the subject is constantly kept in mind each essay or assignment must

include the following plagiarism statement on the front page:

I have read and understand the university policy on Plagiarism.

This work is my own.

SUMMARY

Plagiarism is intellectual and academic theft.

As such the University regards the subject seriously.

There is a set-down procedure to deal with instances of plagiarism. This can entail expulsion from the University.

To avoid being accused of plagiarism, it is wise to ensure that all ideas that are not your own are properly cited in the text and referenced at the end of the essay.

NOTES:

Referencing

There are two reasons that it is important to reference in an academic context. First, it is a sign of respect to acknowledge someone else's intellectual property. Second, it is necessary so the reader of your work can easily find the source of the ideas and words you have used. It is all part of honourable discourse.

There is a variety of ways to reference material, each a favourite of the various institutions or publishers. There are, for instance, the Harvard and Chicago systems, the American Psychological Association (APA) method, the Modern Language Association (MLA) system, and many more.

In this department please use the **APA style of referencing**, which gives the author, date of publication and page number of the relevant quote, as part of your in text citation system. Though this is not standard practice, please include the page number in all your in text citations as well, even if it is not a direct quote. In this way, it is easy for the reader to go and find the idea where it is explained by the original author.

You also then have to give a list of references used in your assignment, which includes all the relevant information necessary for the reader to easily find the article/book/ internet source where the idea or quotation is from.

Trusted sources: Only use academically trusted sources for your assignments. Sources are academically trusted if they have been peer reviewed. This means that Wikipedia, Yahoo answers, difference between etc. are not trusted academic resources, as anyone is able to say anything on these sites without proper channels to ensure that the information given is in fact correct, and also the sites and information can change dramatically over time.

Basic formats for referencing

Source of information : <http://www.wsulibs.wsu.edu/electric/quickguides/docs/apa2.html>

Books

Author's name(s). Year of publication. *Title* (Edition). Location of publisher. Publisher.

Book with an Editor

Editors names(Ed.). Year of publication. *Title*. Location of publisher. Publisher.

Example:

Simpson, A., & Burns, M. (Eds.). (1989). *The flying hellfish*. Cypress Creek, SD: Globex Press.

Article or Chapter in an Edited or Reference Book

Author's name(s). Year of publication. Chapter / entry title. In Editor(s) (Ed.). *Title of book* (pages). Location of publisher. Publisher.

Example:

Simpson, C., & Lumpkin, L. (1989). Country singin' ain't for me. In E. Winthrop (Ed.), *Traveling Country* (pp. 352-358). Washington, DC: Country Press.

Electronic Book

Author's name(s). Year of publication. *Title*. Retrieved from URL

Use "Available from" instead of "Retrieved from" when the URL leads to information on how to obtain the cited material rather than to the material itself.

Example:

Wiggum, C. (1993). *Big Daddy in the Big Easy*. Retrieved from <http://www.wiggumpi.com/pubs/bigeasy.asp?itemid3528>

Electronic Book chapter

Author's name(s). Year of publication. Title of chapter. In Editors names (Eds.), *Book title* (pp. xxx- xxx). Retrieved from URL

The database name is included in the reference to aid readers in finding an electronic version of the book because it may be difficult to find in print

Example:

Frink, J. (2007). The flying motorcycle. In C.M. Burns (Ed.), *Nuclear powered Vehicles of tomorrow* (pp.352 - 420). Retrieved from <http://www.nuclearebooks.com/frink/NPVT.html>.

Article or Chapter in an Edited or Reference Electronic Book

Author's name(s). Year of publication. Chapter / entry title. In Editor(s) (Ed.). *Title of book*. Retrieved from URL

Use "Available from" instead of "Retrieved from" when the URL leads to information on how to obtain the cited material rather than to the material itself.

Example:

Terwilliger, R. & Terwilliger, C. (1997). 'Dam' the hydroelectric blow up. In M. Szyslak (Ed.), *101 ways to kill Bart Simpson*. Retrieved from <http://www.simpsonsdirect.com/reference/02231997>

Proceedings

Author's name(s). Year of publication. Title of article. In Editor(s) (Eds.). *Title of Proceedings* (pp. xxx - xxx). Location of publisher. Publisher. doi: (if available)²

Example with doi:

Simpson, M. (2009). Innovations in applications of salt and other pretzel toppings. In F. Ormand Ed.), *Proceedings of the 34th International Symposium on Stadium Food* (pp. 12- 23). Vancouver, British Columbia: Fallout Press. doi:10.1037/a0028240

Example without doi:

Van Houten, N., & Flanders, R. (1975). Nachos Flanders style. In H. Krustofski (Ed.), *Proceedings of the Fourth International Symposium on Stadium Food* (pp. 123-157). Vancouver, British Columbia: Fallout Press.

Journal Article

Author's name(s). (Year). Title of article. *Title of periodical*, volume. Page numbers. doi: (if available)

When there is no author listed or the author is unknown, begin the entry with the work's title.

² A Digital Object Identifier (DOI) is a unique alphanumeric string assigned by a registration agency (the International DOI Foundation) to identify content and provide a persistent link to its location on the Internet. The publisher assigns a DOI when your article is published and made available electronically.

All DOI numbers begin with a 10 and contain a prefix and a suffix separated by a slash. The prefix is a unique number of four or more digits assigned to organizations; the suffix is assigned by the publisher and was designed to be flexible with publisher identification standards.

We recommend that when DOIs are available, you include them for both print and electronic sources. The DOI is typically located on the first page of the electronic journal article, near the copyright notice. The DOI can also be found on the database landing page for the article.

They look like this: doi:10.1037/a0028240

Source: <http://www.apastyle.org/learn/faqs/what-is-doi.asp>

If there are more than six authors, list the first six and "et al" indicating there are additional authors.

For periodicals where each issue begins on page one, list the issue immediately after the volume number in parentheses.

Example:

McAllister, C., & Nahasapeemapetilon, S. (1991). Robbed again: returning to work after being held up. *Journal of Kwiki Management*, 22(3), 17-29.

Magazine Article

Author's name(s). Date (Year, Month Day). Title of article. *Title of periodical*, (issue). Page numbers.

For periodicals where each issue begins on page one, list the issue immediately after the volume number in parentheses.

Example:

Duff, E. (1993, May 4). Dealing with a surly brewer. *Brewers Magazine*, 32, 35-38.

Some useful sites for referencing styles

Here are some useful sites that give excellent links to referencing guides:

Washington State University

<http://www.wsulibs.wsu.edu/electric/quickguides/docs/apa2.html>

Princeton University

<http://www.princeton.edu/pr/pub/rrr/00/htm/41.htm>

Wits University

<http://libguides.wits.ac.za/content.php?pid=165338&sid=1872439>

SUMMARY

Correct and accurate citing and referencing is a sincere mark of respect for the work of other

people.

It is also a mark of respect for your reader who may wish to follow-up on who you are citing.

This Department uses the APA style of referencing. Please keep to this.

In the beginning you will find yourself continually referring to style guides, this is a mark of a good student and in short time you will know exactly what to do.

Only use trusted sources of information, especially when drawing from internet resources.

NOTES

Reading a Philosophical Text

Reading any philosophical text for the first time is always a challenge, and the higher up the ladder one goes the worse it becomes. Often this is due to the author's unusual use of language, the use of a novel technical vocabulary, and so on. Sometimes it won't be obvious what the overall argument of the text is supposed to be. The prose may be complicated, and the article may have to be picked apart sentence by sentence. Thus here are some tips to make the process easier and more effective.

- 1. Skim the Article to Find its Conclusion and Get a Sense of its Structure.** Try and identify what the **overall structure**, and **conclusion** the author is arguing for are.

A good way to begin when trying to read a difficult article is to first skim the article to identify what the author's main conclusion is. Begin with the opening and closing paragraphs, since many of the better authors will often disclose what they intend to be arguing for and where they got to. When you do figure out what the author's main conclusion is, try to restate it in your own words. This will help you to be sure that you really understand what the author is arguing for.

While skimming the article, try also to get a general sense of what's going on in each part of the discussion. What is the structure of the article? Sometimes authors will explain, early in the paper, what their argument will look like. This makes the job of reading easier.

However, many articles won't always have a straightforward structure. They won't always be of the form:

This is the conclusion I want you to accept. Here is my argument for that conclusion...

Philosophers often provide auxiliary arguments, arguments for important premises they appeal to in support of their main conclusion. For instance, the author's discussion may have the form:

The conclusion I want you to accept is A. My argument for this conclusion is as follows: B and C are true, and if B and C are true, then A must also be true. It is generally accepted that B is true. However, it is controversial whether C is true. I think you ought to accept C for the following reasons...

Here the author's main argument is for the conclusion A, and in the process of arguing for A he advances an auxiliary argument in support of C. Try to identify these auxiliary arguments, and

the claims they're intended to support; and try to avoid mistaking one of these auxiliary arguments for the author's main argument.

Articles can be complex in other ways, too. Not everything the author says will be a positive conclusion or a premise in support of his conclusion. Sometimes he'll be supporting his view with a thought-experiment. Sometimes he'll be arguing for a distinction which his positive view relies on. Sometimes he'll be arguing that another philosopher's views or arguments ought to be rejected. Sometimes he'll be defending a view against somebody else's objections.

Keep an eye out for words like these when you're reading:

- because, since, given this argument
- thus, therefore, hence, it follows that, consequently
- nevertheless, however, but
- in the first case, on the other hand

These are signposts which help you keep track of the structure of the discussion. For example, one philosophy article might run as follows:

Philosopher X advanced the following argument against dualism...

The dualist has two responses to X's argument.

First...

However, this response runs into problems, because...

A better response for the dualist says...

X might be tempted to counter as follows...

However...

and so on. The words "first" and "however" and "a better response" make it easy to see where the discussion is going. Putting signposts like these in into an essay improves the style of writing.

Another example:

The skeptic says that we can't tell whether we're seeing things as they really are, or whether we're brains- in-vats being force-fed false experiences, like the inhabitants of The Matrix. Y raised

the following objection to the skeptic... Hence, Y concludes, we have no reason to think our situation is as bad as the skeptic makes it out to be.

This is an attractive response to the skeptic, but I don't think it can really work, for the following reason... Y might respond to this problem in one of two ways. The first way is... However, this response fails because... The second way Y might respond is... However, this response also fails because... So in the end I think Y's objection to the sceptic cannot be sustained. Of course, I'm not myself a skeptic. I agree with Y that the sceptic's conclusion is false. But I think we'll have to look harder to see where the flaw in the sceptic's reasoning really is.

In this article, the author spends most of his time defending the skeptic against Y's objections, and considering possible responses that Y might give. The author's main conclusion is that Y's objection to the skeptic does not work. (Notice: the main conclusion *isn't* that scepticism is true.)

2. Go Back and Read the Article Carefully. Read the article again more carefully, try to get a sense for the author's overall argument. Sketch arguments that can be found, and make notes of points, terms, etc. that are not fully understood.

Then go through the different arguments in the text, and try to understand how they work – what are the premises and are they true? What is the logic of the argument the author puts forward, and does it follow?

When you've figured out what the main conclusion of an article is, and what the overall structure of the article is, go back and read the article carefully. Pay attention to how the various parts fit together.

Most importantly, figure out what the author's central argument(s) are. What reasons does he offer in support of his conclusions? Where in the article does he put these reasons forward?

Also keep an eye out for the following:

- Notice where the author says explicitly what he means by a certain term.
- Notice what distinctions the author introduces or argues for.
- Take special notice of any unargued assumptions you think the author is relying on.
- Consider various interpretations of what he says. Are there any important ambiguities that his argument fails to take account of?

All of these things will help to better understand the article. And they'll be crucial when trying to evaluate the author's argument, and deciding whether or not to accept his conclusion.

In making notes, it is useful to make a quick outline of the article's major argumentative "pieces." Draw arrows to illustrate how the pieces seem to fit together. Go back and look at the article again and again to get a better understanding of what the author is up to.

- 3. One can expect to read a philosophy article more than once.** Professional philosophers still have to read articles many times before they fully understand them; intellectually digesting a philosophy article takes time, effort, and concentration. It is so often the case that the reader won't understand everything in the article the first time it is read, and there may be some parts of the article that defy understanding even after three or four readings.

One must ask questions about each part of the article, such as:

What is going on in p. 13? Nagel says X, but I don't see how this fits in with his earlier claim Z. Is X supposed to follow from Z? Or is he trying here to give an argument for Z? If so, why does he think that X would be a reason in favor of Z?

- 4. Evaluate the Author's Arguments.** Obviously, one is in a position to evaluate an author's argument only when the work of figuring out what it is he's really saying, and how his arguments work, has been completed.

When at that point, questions like these can be asked: Do I agree with the author? If not, what do I think is wrong with his reasoning? Does he appeal to some premise which I think is false? (Why do I think it is false?) Is there some assumption which the author does not make explicit, and which I think is false? Does his argument equivocate or beg the question?

- 5. A word or two of encouragement.** There will be times when the debates being examined seem to be tangled messes and it is difficult to know which argument to believe. There's no escaping this. Many philosophers feel this way much of the time. The good news is that the process becomes easier as the reading becomes wider, as more and more views from the past are brought to light.

Rather fascinating is that sometimes one philosophical issue leads into two or more other issues, which themselves lead into yet other issues, and one can't possibly explore all of the relevant connections right then. So one has to learn to make do without definitive answers.

Occasionally it is nigh impossible to come to a settled view about whether or not to accept some philosopher's argument, because it turns on further issues P, Q, and R, which haven't been resolved yet—this is perfectly normal. Many philosophy professors often feel this way about many of the arguments they read.

Other times, some argument may seem flawed, but there isn't the time and resources to figure out, or explain and argue for, *everything* deemed wrong with the argument. In such cases, it is useful to provisionally accept one of the argument's premises, and move on to focus on other premises, which may be more important or which are easier to evaluate. (This is why it is possible to hear philosophers saying, "Even if we assume such-and-such for argument's sake, I still think X's argument fails, because...")

SUMMARY

Reading any philosophical text for the first time is always a challenge, and the higher up the ladder one goes the worse it becomes—for everyone!

- Skim the Article to Find its Conclusion and Get a Sense of its Structure. Make notes of any thoughts that appear—any thoughts!
- Go back and read the article carefully—here is where those random thoughts come in useful.
- Now try to evaluate the author's arguments. This entails finding areas or points of agreement or disagreement. If there is disagreement, be quite ready to substantiate your disagreement.

This last point is so important.

There will be times when the debates being examined seem to be tangled messes and it is difficult to know which argument to believe. There's no escaping this. Many philosophers feel this way much of the time. The good news is that the process becomes easier as the reading becomes wider, as more and more views from the past are brought to light.

Just keep at it until your experience makes your reading easier.

Writing A Philosophical Paper

There are as many ways to write philosophy as there are philosophers. Philosophers who use a more literary style in their work, using metaphor, rhetorical questions and so forth for effect (Friedrich Nietzsche and Clifford Geertz are good examples). This is, however, not recommended at an undergraduate level of philosophy, as it requires great skill, even greater than trying to write clearly without these literary devices. Part of the basis of philosophy is to be able to make clear and communicate to another person one's thoughts, arguments and opinions on certain issues. (Seeing philosophy as the love of wisdom, would you call someone wise if they are unable to communicate their ideas to you?) This means that if your reader does not understand what you are trying to explain, that you have not communicated your ideas well enough yet. Part of doing philosophy is gaining the skills for clear and critical thinking, and writing in many fields of endeavour.

However, philosophical writing is different from the style of writing required in other courses. Most of the strategies described below will also serve well when writing for other courses, but don't automatically assume that they all will. Nor should one assume that every writing guideline given by other teachers is important when writing a philosophy paper. Some of those guidelines are routinely violated in good philosophical prose.

The Process of Argumentation

Your first year Logic course deals with this topic extensively. See the Appendix 1 of this handbook for an overview.

Definitions, Thought Experiments & Counter-Examples

An **analysis** is a kind of definition. Distinguish, though, between **stipulative definitions** and **analyses of pre-existing concepts**. A person may stipulate:

In this essay I shall use the word "grog" to mean such-and-such.

As long as such stipulations are clear and consistent and the author consistently holds to them, there is no objection.

If a philosopher asks a question like "What is death?" on the other hand, he's not just after some stipulative answer. He wants to know what death really is. He wants to know what we're thinking and talking about when we think and talk about death. He's seeking an analysis of our

pre-existing concept of death.

Counter-Examples and Thought-Experiments

One way we test analyses is by trying to come up with **counter-examples**.

Say for instance that Professor Smith analyzes death as the cessation of the biological processes.

To test his analysis, we try to imagine a case where some creature has died but the biological processes of his body continue, or a case where the creature's biological processes have stopped but the creature is not yet dead. To do this is to engage in a **thought-experiment**. A thought-experiment is sort of like *an imaginary test case*. We're trying to see whether we can conceive of some situation that's incompatible with the proposed analysis.

Philosophical thought-experiments often involve pretty far-out science fiction. For instance, at various times philosophers (and their students) discuss brain transplants, teletransportation, and time-travel. Newcomers to philosophy tend to find all this science fiction bewildering.

What relevance can science fiction cases have to real life?

To answer this question, you have to understand the nature of philosophical claims and what's required to produce a counter-example to them.

Professor Smith, for instance, is trying to tell us *what death is*. He's not just making a claim about actually existing creatures on the planet Earth, and what happens when they die. He's making a claim which purports to be true of *any imaginable creatures anywhere*, no matter how bizarre and science-fiction-ey they may be.

Hence, Professor Smith's claim about what death is seems vulnerable to the following counter-example. Suppose Charles is put into suspended animation, and his body is frozen to near absolute zero. One week later, he is thawed out and revived. Now, during the period he was frozen, all biological processes in his body had stopped. But it does not seem correct to say that Charles was dead during this period. Hence, Professor Smith's analysis of death is incorrect. Charles' biological processes had stopped but he was not dead because the potential for being revived was with him.

Perhaps it is not in fact technologically possible to freeze a person and revive him again. This is not the point. Professor Smith's claim purports to be true of any imaginable creatures

anywhere. So if it's *possible even in principle* for someone to be frozen, and for his biological processes to stop, without his thereby dying, then Professor Smith's claim is false. This is what our counter-example purports to show.

Several comments can be made in this discussion:

First, Professor Smith might have given us a perfectly good biological **test** for death: a way of checking whether actual creatures of the sort we're likely to come across have died. However, it's not a good *analysis* of death.

In general, we want to distinguish between questions about **what it is** to be X and questions about **how we find out** that something is X. In the same way, defining the difference between two things--say, hydrogen and helium--is different from finding a practical way to tell hydrogen and helium apart.

Second, in offering our counter-example, we appealed to certain **intuitions** about whether Charles had died in the imagined scenario. We often do this in assessing philosophical claims.

It's important to acknowledge that our intuitions aren't sacrosanct. Sometimes they're wrong. For example, modern physics is forcing us to revise many of our intuitions about time, space, and probability.

So it can sometimes happen that we ought to accept a philosophical claim that conflicts with our intuition, and throw out the intuition. But in general, there is a presumption that our pre-philosophical intuitions are true, and we should throw them out only if we have very good reasons for doing so.

Sometimes we can say "Imagine a situation in which..." and go on to describe a situation which is *incoherent* or contradictory or otherwise impossible. For instance, if a philosopher says "Every square has four corners," and you say "Not so! Imagine a round square," you haven't in fact described a coherent possibility, and so you haven't succeeded in offering a genuine counter-example to his claim.

Sometimes it's hard to tell whether you've described a coherent possibility or not. That's a big part of what makes philosophy so challenging.

What Does One Do in a Philosophical Paper?

In philosophy, you need to give an **argument** for your conclusion, no matter what the

assignment.

A philosophy paper consists of the reasoned defense of some claim. Your paper must offer an argument. It can't consist in the mere report of your opinions, nor in a mere report of the opinions of the philosophers we discuss. You have to *defend* the claims you make. You have to offer reasons to believe them.

So you can't just say:

My view is that P.

And leave it there. You must say something like:

My view is that P. I believe this because...

or:

I find that the following considerations...provide a convincing argument for P...

Similarly, don't just say:

Descartes says that Q...

Instead, say something like:

Descartes says that Q; however, the following thought-experiment will show that Q is not true...

or:

Descartes says that Q. I find this claim plausible, for the following reasons...

There are a variety of things a philosophy paper can aim to accomplish. It usually begins by putting some thesis or argument on the table for consideration. Then it goes on to do one or two of the following:

- Criticize that argument; or show that certain arguments for the thesis are no good
- Defend the argument or thesis against someone else's criticism
- Offer reasons to believe the thesis
- Offer counter-examples to the thesis
- Contrast the strengths and weaknesses of two opposing views about the thesis

- Give examples which help explain the thesis to your reader, or which help to make the thesis more plausible
- Argue that certain philosophers are committed to the thesis by their other views, though they do not come out and explicitly endorse the thesis
- Discuss what consequences the thesis would have, if it were true
- Revise the thesis, in the light of some objection

No matter which of these aims you set for yourself, **you have to explicitly present reasons for the claims you make**. Students often feel that since it's clear to them that some claim is true, it does not need much argument. But it's very easy to overestimate the strength of your own position. After all, you already accept it. You should assume that your audience does *not* already accept your position; and you should treat your paper as an attempt to persuade such an audience. Hence, don't start with assumptions which your opponents are sure to reject. If you're to have any chance of persuading people, you have to start from common assumptions you all agree to.

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

People very often attempt to accomplish too much in a philosophy paper. The usual result of this is a paper that's hard to read, and which is full of inadequately defended and poorly explained claims. So don't be over-ambitious. Don't try to establish any earth-shattering conclusions in your 5-6 page paper. Done properly, philosophy moves at a slow pace.

Originality : The aim of these papers is for you to show that you understand the material and that you're able to think critically about it. To do this, your paper does have to show some independent thinking.

That doesn't mean you have to come up with your own theory, or that you have to make a completely original contribution to human thought. There will be plenty of time for that later on. An ideal paper will be clear and straightforward (see below), will be accurate when it attributes views to other philosophers (see below), and will contain thoughtful critical responses to the texts we read. It need not always break completely new ground.

But you should try to come up with your own arguments, or your own way of elaborating or

criticizing or defending some argument we looked at in class. Merely summarizing what others have said won't be enough.

Stages of Writing

The early stages of writing a philosophy paper include everything you do before you sit down and write your first draft. These early stages will involve *writing*, but you won't yet be trying to write a complete paper. You should instead be taking notes on the readings, sketching out your ideas, trying to explain the main argument you want to advance, and composing an outline.

Discuss the issues with others : As I said above, your papers are supposed to demonstrate that you understand and can think critically about the material we discuss in class. One of the best ways to check how well you understand that material is to try to explain it to someone who isn't already familiar with it.

We've discovered time and again while teaching philosophy that we couldn't really explain properly some article or argument we thought we understood. This was because it was really more problematic or complicated than I had realized. You will have this same experience. So it's good to discuss the issues we raise in class with each other, and with friends who aren't taking the class. This will help you understand the issues better, and it will make you recognize what things you still don't fully understand.

It's even more valuable to talk to each other about what you want to argue in your paper. When you have your ideas worked out well enough that you can explain them to someone else, verbally, then you're ready to sit down and start making an outline.

Make an outline : Before you begin writing any drafts, you need to think about the questions: In what order should you explain the various terms and positions you'll be discussing? At what point should you present your opponent's position or argument? In what order should you offer your criticisms of your opponent? Do any of the points you're making presuppose that you've already discussed some other point, first? And so on.

The overall clarity of your paper will greatly depend on its structure. That is why it is important to think about these questions before you begin to write.

I strongly recommend that you make an outline of your paper, and of the arguments you'll be presenting, before you begin to write. This lets you organize the points you want to make in

your paper and get a sense for how they are going to fit together. It also helps ensure that you're in a position to *say* what your main argument or criticism is, before you sit down to write a full draft of your paper. When students get stuck writing, it's often because they haven't yet figured out what they're trying to say.

Give your outline your full attention. It should be fairly detailed. (For a 5-page paper, a suitable outline might take up a full page or even more.)

I find that making an outline is at least 80% of the work of writing a good philosophy paper. If you have a good outline, the rest of the writing process will go much more smoothly.

Start Work Early : This point has been placed in italics to emphasise the importance of starting with an essay at least two weeks before it is due. Philosophical problems and philosophical writing require careful and extended reflection. Don't wait until two or three nights before the paper is due to begin. That is very stupid. Writing a good philosophy paper takes a great deal of preparation.

You need to leave yourself enough time to think about the topic and write a detailed outline. Only then should you sit down to write a complete draft. Once you have a complete draft, you should set it aside for a day or two. Then you should come back to it and rewrite it. Several times. *At least* 3 or 4. If you can, show it to your friends and get their reactions to it. Do they understand your main point? Are parts of your draft unclear or confusing to them?

All of this takes time. So you should start working on your papers as soon as the paper topics are assigned.

Write a Draft : Once you've thought about your argument, and written an outline for your paper, then you're ready to sit down and compose a complete draft.

Use simple prose : Don't shoot for literary elegance. Use simple, straightforward prose. Keep your sentences and paragraphs short. Use familiar words. We'll make fun of you if you use big words where simple words will do. These issues are deep and difficult enough without your having to muddy them up with pretentious or verbose language.

Don't use prose you wouldn't use in conversation: if you wouldn't say it, don't write it.

You may think that since your tutor and I already know a lot about this subject, you can leave out a lot of basic explanation and write in a super-sophisticated manner, like one expert talking

to another. I guarantee you that this will make your paper incomprehensible.

If your paper sounds as if it were written for a school audience, then you've probably achieved the right sort of clarity.

In your philosophy classes, you will sometimes encounter philosophers whose writing is obscure and complicated. Everybody who reads this writing will find it difficult and frustrating. The authors in question are philosophically important *despite* their poor writing, not because of it. So do not try to emulate their writing styles.

Make the structure of your paper obvious : You should make the structure of your paper obvious to the reader. Your reader shouldn't have to exert any effort to figure it out. Beat him over the head with it.

How can you do this?

First of all, use connective words, like:

because, since, given this argument

thus, therefore, hence, it follows that, consequently

nevertheless, however, but

in the first case, on the other hand

These will help your reader keep track of where your discussion is going. Be sure you use these words correctly! If you say "P. Thus Q." then you are claiming that P is a good reason to accept Q. You had better be right. If you aren't, we'll complain. Don't throw in a "thus" or a "therefore" to make your train of thought sound more logical than it really is.

Another way you can help make the structure of your paper obvious is by telling the reader what you've done so far and what you're going to do next. You can say things like:

I will begin by...

Before I say what is wrong with this argument, I want to...

These passages suggest that...

I will now defend this claim...

Further support for this claim comes from...

For example...

These signposts really make a big difference. Consider the following two paper fragments:

We've just seen how X says that P. I will now present two arguments that not-P. My first argument is...

My second argument that not-P is...

X might respond to my arguments in several ways. For instance, he could say that...

However this response fails, because...

Another way that X might respond to my arguments is by claiming that...

This response also fails, because... So we have seen that none of X's replies to my argument that not-P succeed. Hence, we should reject X's claim that P.

I will argue for the view that Q.

There are three reasons to believe Q. Firstly...

Secondly...

Thirdly...

The strongest objection to Q says...

However, this objection does not succeed, for the following reason...

Isn't it easy to see what the structure of these papers is? You want it to be just as easy in your own papers.

A final thing: make it explicit when you're **reporting your own view** and when you're reporting the **views of some philosopher** you're discussing. The reader should never be in doubt about whose claims you're presenting in a given paragraph.

You can't make the structure of your paper obvious if you don't know what the structure of your paper is, or if your paper has no structure. That's why making an outline is so important.

Be concise, but explain yourself fully : To write a good philosophy paper, you need to *be concise* but at the same time *explain yourself fully* with as many examples as you can conjure up.

These demands might seem to pull in opposite directions. (It's as if the first said "Don't talk too

much," and the second said "Talk a lot.") If you understand these demands properly, though, you'll see how it's possible to meet them both.

We tell you to be *concise* because we don't want you to ramble on about everything you know about a given topic, trying to show how learned and intelligent you are. Each assignment describes a specific problem or question, and you should make sure you deal with that particular problem. Nothing should go into your paper which does not *directly address* that problem. Prune out everything else. It is always better to concentrate on one or two points and develop them in depth than to try to cram in too much. One or two well-mapped paths are better than an impenetrable jungle.

Formulate the central problem or question you wish to address at the beginning of your paper, and keep it in mind at all times. Make it clear what the problem is, and why it is a problem. Be sure that everything you write is relevant to that central problem. In addition, be sure to say in the paper *how* it is relevant. Don't make your reader guess.

One thing I mean by "explain yourself fully" is that, when you have a good point, you shouldn't just toss it off in one sentence. Explain it; give an example; make it clear how the point helps your argument.

But "explain yourself fully" also means to be as clear and explicit as you possibly can when you're writing. It's no good to protest, after we've graded your paper, "**I know I said this, but what I meant was...**" Say exactly what you mean, in the first place. Part of what you're being graded on is how well you can do that.

Pretend that your reader has not read the material you're discussing, and has not given the topic much thought in advance. This will of course not be true. But if you write as if it were true, it will force you to explain any technical terms, to illustrate strange or obscure distinctions, and to be as explicit as possible when you summarize at some other philosopher said.

In fact, you can profitably take this one step further and pretend that your reader is *lazy*, *stupid*, and *mean*. He's *lazy* in that he doesn't want to figure out what your convoluted sentences are supposed to mean, and he doesn't want to figure out what your argument is, if it's not already obvious. He's *stupid*, so you have to explain everything you say to him in simple, bite-sized pieces. And he's *mean*, so he's not going to read your paper charitably. (For example, if something you say admits of more than one interpretation, he's going to assume

you meant the less plausible thing.) If you understand the material you're writing about, and if you aim your paper at such a reader, you'll probably get an A.

Use plenty of examples and definitions : It is very important to use examples in a philosophy paper. Many of the claims philosophers make are very abstract and hard to understand, and examples are the best way to make those claims clearer.

Examples are also useful for explaining the notions that play a central role in your argument. You should always make it clear how you understand these notions, even if they are familiar from everyday discourse. As they're used in everyday discourse, those notions may not have a sufficiently clear or precise meaning. For instance, suppose you're writing a paper about abortion, and you want to assert the claim "A foetus is a person." What do you mean by "a person"? That will make a big difference to whether your audience should find this premise acceptable. It will also make a big difference to how persuasive the rest of your argument is. By itself, the following argument is pretty worthless:

A foetus is a person.

It's wrong to kill a person.

Therefore, it's wrong to kill a foetus.

For we don't know what the author *means* by calling a foetus "a person." On some interpretations of "person," it might be quite obvious that a foetus is a person; but quite controversial whether it's always wrong to kill persons, in that sense of "person." On other interpretations, it may be more plausible that it's always wrong to kill persons, but totally unclear whether a foetus counts as a "person." So everything turns here on what the author means by "person." The author should be explicit about how he is using this notion.

In a philosophy paper, it's okay to use words in ways that are somewhat different from the ways they're ordinarily used. You just have to make it clear that you're doing this. For instance, some philosophers use the word "person" to mean any being which is capable of rational thought and self-awareness. Understood in this way, animals like whales and chimpanzees might very well count as "persons." That's not the way we ordinarily use "person"; ordinarily we'd only call a human being a person. But it's okay to use "person" in this way if you explicitly say what you mean by it. And likewise for other words.

Don't vary your vocabulary just for the sake of variety : If you call something "X" at the start

of your paper, call it "X" all the way through.

So, for instance, don't start talking about "Plato's view of the *self*," and then switch to talking about "Plato's view of the *soul*," and then switch to talking about "Plato's view of the *mind*."

If you mean to be talking about the same thing in all three cases, then call it by the same name. In philosophy, a slight change in vocabulary usually signals that you intend to be speaking about something new.

Using words with precise philosophical meanings : Philosophers give many ordinary-sounding words precise technical meanings. Consult the handouts on Philosophical Terms and Methods to make sure you're using these words correctly. Don't use words that you don't fully understand.

Use technical philosophical terms only where you need them. **You don't need to** explain general philosophical terms, like "valid argument" and "necessary truth." But you should explain any technical terms you use which bear on the specific topic you're discussing. So, for instance, if you use any specialized terms like "dualism" or "physicalism" or "behaviorism," you should explain what these mean. Likewise if you use technical terms like "supervenience" and the like. Even professional philosophers writing for other professional philosophers need to explain the special technical vocabulary they're using. Different people sometimes use this special vocabulary in different ways, so it's important to make sure that you and your readers are all giving these words the same meaning. Pretend that your readers have never heard them before.

Presenting and assessing the views of others : If you plan to discuss the views of Philosopher X, begin by figuring out what his arguments or central assumptions are, using your own words.

Then ask yourself: Are X's arguments good ones? Are his assumptions clearly stated? Are they plausible? Are they reasonable starting-points for X's argument, or ought he have provided some independent argument for them?

Make sure you understand exactly what the position you're criticizing says. Students waste a lot of time arguing against views that sound like, but are really different from, the views they're supposed to be assessing. Remember, philosophy demands a high level of precision. It's not good enough for you merely to get *the general idea* of somebody else's position or

argument. You have to get it exactly right. (In this respect, philosophy is more like a science than the other humanities.) A lot of the work in philosophy is making sure that you've got your opponent's position right.

You can assume that your reader is stupid (see above). But don't treat the philosopher or the views you're discussing as stupid. If they were stupid, we wouldn't be looking at them. If you can't see anything the view has going for it, maybe that's because you don't have much experience thinking and arguing about the view, and so you haven't yet fully understood why the view's proponents are attracted to it. Try harder to figure out what's motivating them.

Philosophers sometimes do say outrageous things, but if the view you're attributing to a philosopher seems to be *obviously crazy*, then you should think hard about whether he really does say what you think he says. Use your imagination. Try to figure out what reasonable position the philosopher could have had in mind, and direct your arguments against *that*.

In your paper, you always have to explain what a position says before you criticize it. If you don't explain what you take Philosopher X's view to be, your reader cannot judge whether the criticism you offer of X is a good criticism, or whether it is simply based on a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of X's views. So tell the reader what it is you think X is saying.

Don't try to tell the reader everything you know about X's views, though. You have to go on to offer your own philosophical contribution, too. **Only summarize those parts of X's views that are directly relevant to what you're going to go on to do.**

Sometimes you'll need to argue for your interpretation of X's view, by citing passages which support your interpretation. It *is* permissible for you to discuss a view you think a philosopher *might* have held, or should have held, though you can't find any direct evidence of that view in the text. When you do this, though, you should explicitly say so. Say something like:

Philosopher X doesn't explicitly say that P, but it seems to me that he's assuming it anyway, because...

Quotations : When a passage from a text is **particularly** useful in supporting your interpretation of some philosopher's views, it may be helpful to quote the passage directly. (Be sure to specify where the passage can be found.) However, direct quotations should be used *sparingly*. It is seldom necessary to quote more than a few sentences. Often it will be more appropriate to paraphrase what X says, rather than to quote him directly. When you are paraphrasing what somebody else said, be sure to say so. (And

here too, cite the pages you're referring to.)

Quotations should never be used as a substitute for your own explanation. And when you do quote an author, you still have to explain what the quotation says *in your own words*. If the quoted passage contains an argument, reconstruct the argument in more explicit, straightforward terms. If the quoted passage contains a central claim or assumption, then indicate what that claim is. You may want to give some examples to illustrate the author's point. If necessary, you may want to distinguish the author's claim from other claims with which it might be confused.

Paraphrasing : Sometimes when students are trying to explain a philosopher's view, they'll do it by giving very close paraphrases of the philosopher's own words. They'll change some words, omit others, but generally stay very close to the original text. For instance, Hume begins his *Treatise of Human Nature* as follows:

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.

Here's an example of how you *don't* want to 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.

There are two main problems with paraphrases of this sort. In the first place, it's done rather mechanically, so it doesn't show that the author understands the text. In the second place, since the author hasn't figured out what the text means well enough to express it in his own words, there's a danger that his paraphrase may inadvertently change the meaning of the text. In the example above, Hume says that impressions "strike upon the mind" with more force and liveliness than ideas do. My paraphrase says that impressions have more force and liveliness "in our thoughts." It's not clear whether these are the same thing. In addition, Hume says that ideas are faint images of impressions; whereas my paraphrase says that ideas are faint images

of our thinking. These are not the same. So the author of the paraphrase appears not to have understood what Hume was saying in the original passage.

A much better way of explaining what Hume says here would be the following:

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...

Anticipating objections : Try to anticipate objections to your view and respond to them. For instance, if you object to some philosopher's view, don't assume he would immediately admit defeat. Imagine what his comeback might be. How would you handle that comeback?

Don't be afraid of mentioning objections to your own thesis. It is better to bring up an objection yourself than to hope your reader won't think of it. Explain how you think these objections can be countered or overcome. Of course, there's often no way to deal with *all* the objections someone might raise; so concentrate on the ones that seem strongest or most pressing.

What happens if you're stuck? : Your paper doesn't always have to provide a definite solution to a problem, or a straight yes or no answer to a question. Many excellent philosophy papers don't offer straight yes or no answers. Sometimes they argue that the question needs to be clarified, or that certain further questions need to be raised. Sometimes they argue that certain assumptions of the question need to be challenged. Sometimes they argue that certain answers to the question are *too* easy, that is, they won't work. Hence, if these papers are right, the question will be *harder* to answer than we might previously have thought. These are all important and philosophically valuable results.

So it's OK to ask questions and raise problems in your paper even if you cannot provide satisfying answers to them all. You can leave some questions unanswered at the end of the paper. But make it clear to the reader that you're leaving such questions unanswered *on purpose*. And you should say something about how the question might be answered, and about what makes the question interesting and relevant to the issue at hand.

If something in a view you're examining is unclear to you, don't gloss it over. Call attention to

the lack of clarity. Suggest several different ways of understanding the view. Explain why it's not clear which of these interpretations is correct.

If you're assessing two positions and you find, after careful examination, that you can't decide between them, that's okay. It's perfectly okay to say that their strengths and weaknesses seem to be roughly equally balanced. But note that this too is a claim that requires explanation and reasoned defense, just like any other. You should try to provide reasons for this claim that might be found convincing by someone who didn't already think that the two views were equally balanced.

Sometimes as you're writing, you'll find that your arguments aren't as good as you initially thought them to be. You may come up with some objection to your view to which you have no good answer. Don't panic. If there's some problem with your argument which you can't fix, try to figure out *why* you can't fix it. It's okay to change your thesis to one you can defend. For example, instead of writing a paper which provides a totally solid defense of view P, you can instead change tactics and write a paper which goes like this:

One philosophical view says that P. This is a plausible view, for the following reasons...
However, there are some reasons to be doubtful whether P. One of these reasons is X. X poses a problem for the view that P because...
It is not clear how the defender of P can overcome this objection.

Or you can write a paper which goes:

One argument for P is the 'Conjunction Argument,' which goes as follows...
At first glance, this is a very appealing argument. However, this argument is faulty, for the following reasons...
One might try to repair the argument, by...
But these repairs will not work, because...
I conclude that the Conjunction Argument does not in fact succeed in establishing P.

Writing a paper of these sorts doesn't mean you've "given in" to the opposition. After all, neither of these papers commits you to the view that not-P. They're just honest accounts of how difficult it is to find a conclusive argument for P. P might still be true, for all that.

Philosophical resources

Lecture notes: do not quote directly from lecture notes. Rather follow the resources given to you by the lecturer, such as the course readings, and use the ideas from the original sources. Remember that your lecturer is not infallible, and you need to follow up on the information they give you – this is part of the skill set that you are supposed to learn from doing a degree in the Humanities.

The Fort Hare Library offers a wide range of philosophical resources for students. Ask the librarians to assist you if you are stuck.

Of special significance to students of Philosophy are the following, all in the library:

- Various Dictionaries of Philosophy
- Various *Companions* to Philosophy (such as the *Oxford Companion to Metaphysics*, etc.)
- The Philosopher's Index
- Various Encyclopaedias of Philosophy (such as *The Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*)

Apart from the library book holdings, there is also the wide range of Philosophy Journals which students can consult, especially for original articles. Some of the most recognized journals are:

The Journal of Philosophy, Mind, Analysis, Synthese, American Philosophical Quarterly, Ethics.

The Fort Hare Library also offers a number of electronic resources such as JSTOR and EBSCOHost which provide electronic access to online journals.

Popular Philosophy Internet sites:

- Comprehensive Philosophy Links :- <http://www.phil.ruu.nl/philosophy-sites.html>
- Electronic Journal of Analytic Philosophy :- <http://www.phil.indiana.edu/ejap/ejap.html>
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy :- <http://plato.stanford.edu/>
- EpistemeLinks :- <http://www.epistemelinks.com/>
- John Hopkins University Philosophy Links :- <http://www.jhu.edu/~phil/links.html>

What is a trusted internet resource? Being able to tell whether a specific resource is to be trusted or not is part of learning how to be a good researcher. Not all information and

resources are to be trusted! Anyone has access to the internet to say anything, and you need to learn when sources have the relevant authority. This is usually the case when the author is an expert (you cannot trust their word on this though – you need an indication from some other source that they are), or when the content has been peer reviewed. (This means that experts in the relevant field have looked at the content and have judged that it is correct.) For philosophy, lecture notes from other universities, blogs and personal websites are not trusted sources.

Beware of Plagiarism

It is especially easy to be guilty of plagiarism by using web-based resources.

Use such resources with care.

SUMMARY

Part of the basis of philosophy is to be able to make clear and communicate to another person one's thoughts, arguments and opinions on certain issues.

Most of the strategies described above will also serve well when writing for other courses, but don't automatically assume that they all will. Nor should one assume that every writing guideline given by other teachers is important when writing a philosophy paper. Some of those guidelines are routinely violated in good philosophical prose.

Your paper must offer an argument. It can't consist in the mere report of your opinions, nor in a mere report of the opinions of the philosophers we discuss. You have to *defend* the claims you make. You have to offer reasons to believe them.

The guidelines from page 26 are vital. These include such strategies as

- discussing your ideas with others,
- Starting the project early,
- Prepare a draft with a clear outline,
- Above all, be concise, making sure that your reader will understand what you are saying!

Appendix 1: Basic Philosophical Terms & Concepts: A Glossary For Beginners

To begin this process it is useful to introduce certain terms and concepts that are fundamental to reading, writing and speaking philosophy.

The following are a collection of common terms one finds in philosophical texts. It is wise to become well acquainted with them.

Ad hoc : One refers to something as 'ad hoc' when it's introduced for a particular purpose, instead of for some general, antecedently motivated reason. So, for instance, an *ad hoc* decision is a decision you make when there's no general rule or precedent telling you what to do.

Philosophers sometimes accuse their opponents of making **ad hoc hypotheses** (or *ad hoc* stipulations, or *ad hoc* amendments to their analyses, etc.). These are hypotheses (or stipulations or amendments) adopted purely for the purpose of saving a theory from difficulty or refutation, without any independent motivation or rationale. They will usually strike the reader as artificial or "cheating."

For instance, suppose a "bird" is defined as "any creature that can fly" and mosquitos are offered as a counter-example: they can fly, but they aren't birds. Now, an ad hoc factor might be introduced as follows:

A bird is any creature that can fly, *and which is not a mosquito.*

This, however, doesn't clear up the situation so the factor will have to be changed again as follows:

A bird is any creature that can fly, *and which has a backbone.*

This would be an independently motivated, and more appropriate, response to the counter-examples. (Of course, someone may discover counter-examples even to this revised analysis.)

Ad hominem : An *ad hominem* argument is an argument that attacks a claim on the basis of features of the person who holds it. Two different sorts of argument are called "*ad hominem* arguments." One of these is a fallacious sort of argument; the other is perfectly respectable.

The *fallacious version* is where you criticize someone's views because of logically irrelevant personal defects. For instance:

His views about relationships must be false because he's a philanderer.

or:

His views about politics must be false because he doesn't know what he's talking about.

You should remember that authorities no matter how eminent can be wrong, and that scoundrels and fools--even if they are unjustified in their beliefs--might nonetheless turn out to be right. The *source* of a belief is one thing, and whether there are any *good reasons* to hold the view is something else.

The *respectable* argument called an "*ad hominem* argument" consists in objecting to someone's claim on the grounds that it's incompatible with other views he holds. For instance, suppose Max says:

The U.S. Postal Service is very unreliable. I think we should allow private, for-profit companies like FedEx and UPS to compete on an equal footing with the Postal Service.

Then Sally objects:

But Max, how can you say that – you are a communist!

Sally is not just calling Max a name. Sally's point is that Max's previous commitments force him to support state control and oppose private enterprise, and these commitments conflict with the view he's advocating now. This is a perfectly legitimate criticism of Max. Philosophers generally use the phrase "*ad hominem* argument" in the second sense.

Appeal to authority : In philosophy, there are no real authorities. It is never acceptable to support a position *simply* by pointing out that someone else also holds it. One must explain why the Philosopher X's arguments for that position are persuasive, but a mere statement that the renowned Professor X holds a certain position carries no argumentative weight.

Ambiguous : In a philosophical discussion, a term is regarded "ambiguous" when and only when the expression has more than one acceptable meaning. This particular lack of precision usually arises through poor sentence construction. For instance, "bank" can be ambiguous – it could be a river bank, or the Bank of Africa.

Also, sentences can be ambiguous, as in "Flying planes can be dangerous." Is it the activity of flying an aeroplane which is dangerous, or is it that flying planes (those that are not stationary on the ground) are dangerous?

Or: "Every child loves a clown." Does this mean there is one lucky clown that all the children love? Or does it mean that for each child, there is a particular clown which he or she loves (but not necessarily the same clown for each child)? Or does it mean that every child is favorably disposed to clowns in general?

One does not call an expression "ambiguous" just because different people have different views or theories about it. Different people have different views about what it means to be good, but that doesn't yet show that the expression "good" is ambiguous. It just shows that there's some controversy over what "good" means.

Nor should you call an expression "ambiguous" just because it's vague, or imprecise, or difficult to know what the correct philosophical theory of it is. In writing philosophy one has to continually check sentences for ambiguity.

When an argument illegitimately trades on an ambiguity, the argument is said to equivocate (see **vague** below).

Equivocal : "Philosopher Smith is equivocal here" means that he gives some argument which **equivocates**. It does not mean that he's neutral or agnostic about the matter. Nor does it mean he can't make up his mind. (These might be explanations of *why* he equivocates; but the clause "he equivocates" must not be used to describe his neutrality or agnosticism or indecision.)

Falsehood and **fallacy** : A fallacy is an error in one's inferences or argument. A falsehood is an error in the claims one makes. Claims, beliefs, and statements are true or false. Only inferences and arguments can be fallacious.

Imagine and **conceive** : To imagine or conceive of some possibility is to form an idea of it, to entertain that possibility in your mind. When you imagine some possibility, you are not committing yourself to the claim that that possibility actually obtains or is likely to obtain. Although there are semantic differences, conceive can be regarded as a synonym. See **thought experiment** below.

Infer and **imply** : Inferring is the psychological activity of drawing conclusions from premises.

Only people can infer. So don't say:

This argument infers that...

What the argument does is *imply* or *entail* a conclusion—it doesn't infer it.

In addition to arguments implying things, sometimes we talk about *people* implying things. In this usage, implying is an activity, but it's a different activity than inferring. For instance:

Sarah implied that I was a fool.

means that Sarah suggested that I was a fool, without explicitly saying so.

But in the primary usage of these words, *implying* is something premises and arguments do: they imply their conclusions. And *inferring* is something people do. People infer by looking at the evidence and deciding what hypothesis that evidence best supports.

Logical : "John's attitude to smoking just isn't logical," or "Spock is incapable of emotion because he tries to be so logical," are illustrations of common erroneous uses of the term 'logical.' In philosophy, the word "logic" has a special technical meaning which is made plain in the course on Logic. One rather says something like:

John's attitude to smoking is *unreasonable*.

Such statements as: "That was a logical point," or "That was a logical objection," or "This is a logical argument" are also incorrect. It is better to write:

That was a fair or *convincing* point.

or:

That is a *reasonable* objection.

or:

This is a *valid* or persuasive argument.

Meaningless : Something is meaningless if it is nonsense, like "XH\$%^IE", or if it is insignificant.

It is incorrect to say that a claim is meaningless if all that is meant is that it is *false*.

Propositions and concepts : A proposition is something that you could hold, or believe, or put forward as a claim. It's capable of being true or false. It's expressed in language by a **complete sentence**.

A concept is 'an idea of a class of objects; a general notion' (Concise Oxford Dictionary), and it is usually expressed in language by a **noun phrase**, not by a sentence.

So, we have "the **concept** of electricity," and "The **proposition** that Socrates was a philosopher."

Refuting and proving : Refuting a claim is showing it to be false beyond redemption – typically by producing irrefutable reasons that make it clear that it's false. Until reasons or arguments for refuting are produced, one may *deny* or *reject* the claim, but that is all. In addition, it is not wise to say:

Berkeley refutes Locke's claim that there are material objects.

unless it can be shown that Berkeley has *succeeded* in demonstrating that Locke's claim is false. If Berkeley has refuted Locke, then Locke must be wrong. "Berkeley refuted Locke's claim, but in fact Locke was right" is a contradiction as if Berkeley's refutation is successful Locke's claim is not being considered any longer. If there is some doubt whether Berkeley's criticisms of Locke have been successful, it is better to make the point thus:

Berkeley *denies* Locke's claim that...

or:

Berkeley *argues against* Locke's claim that...

or:

Berkeley *rejects* Locke's claim that...

or:

Berkeley *tries to refute* Locke's claim that...

Similarly, one does not say that Locke has *proven* some claim, or shown that something is the case, unless there is some possibility that Locke's arguments for his claim are successful. If Locke has proven a claim, then the claim must be true.

Doubt whether Locke's arguments for a claim have been successful could be written thus:

Locke *argues* that...

or:

Locke *defends the claim* that...

or:

Locke *tries to prove* that...

or something of that sort.

Thoughts and things : The Charles River and the idea of the Charles River are two very different things. One of them (the river) has existed since before I was born. The other (my idea of the river) has only existed since I first heard about the Charles River. Nevertheless people often confuse thoughts with things. This sentence is regarded as inferior in construction:

Descartes realizes that even if all things are false, still he is thinking about those things, and if he is thinking about them he must exist.

It would be improved immeasurably in the following manner:

Descartes realizes that even if all *his thoughts or beliefs* are false, *thinking falsely* is still a form of thinking, and if he is thinking at all then he must exist.

Truth and validity : In philosophical discussions, only *arguments* can be valid. Not points, objections, beliefs, or claims. Claims, beliefs, and statements are true or false.

A claim is not termed as "valid"— it is true or false – and an inference or an argument is not regarded as "true"— they can be valid.

Vague : Philosophers call a term "vague" when there's no sharp borderline between cases where the term applies and cases where it doesn't apply. So, for instance, it's a vague matter how few hairs on your head makes you *bald*, or how many dollars in your bank account makes you *rich*, or how many grains of sand it takes to make *a heap*. "Vague" does not mean "ambiguous." Nor does it mean "unclear" or "difficult to understand." Consider the following sentence:

The point of this essay is to prove that human beings never perceive material objects themselves, but only the *a priori* interface between a phenomenal object and its conceptual content.

This doesn't mean anything; it's just a bunch of words put together in a way that doesn't make any clear sense. Such prose can be regarded as "opaque," or "difficult to understand," or "gibberish," never vague.

Appendix 3 : Essay assessment criteria

This is a criterion referenced marking grid. It is designed to give you tips on what makes for a good essay and to indicate to you what your marker will be looking for when assessing your essay. There are no specific marks attached to each criterion; rather, the criteria are used to assist the marker to generate an overall grade and percentage mark. The marks given are: 1st (75% and up); 2A (70 – 74%); 2B (60 – 69%); 3rd (50 – 59%); F (0 – 49%).

From looking at all these criteria, your lecturer will give you an overall mark for your essay.

Please also note:

An outstanding essay (80% to 85%): Demonstrates unusual sophistication or originality. This is relatively rare.

Brilliant essays: 90% Publishable work. Extremely rare, if ever.

Criteria	First Class	Second Class A	Second Class B	Third Class	Fail
Grasp of the relevant material and issues. [This is an “overall” criterion which is mainly met through fulfilling the other criteria]	Excellent grasp of the relevant material and issues demonstrated through such achievements as providing sound and novel explanations, hypothesising new alternatives and directions, the use of illuminating and original examples, etc.	Very good grasp of the relevant material and issues demonstrated through such achievements as providing good, sound explanations, relating elements to each other, etc.	Fair to good grasp of the relevant material and issues demonstrated through such achievements as providing adequate explanations, some effort at relating elements to each other, etc.	Barely adequate grasp of the relevant material and issues demonstrated through such achievements as the provision of recognisable explanations and comparisons.	Inadequate grasp of the relevant material and issues demonstrated through such achievements as failing to explain key elements or arguments failing to relate elements, etc.
Point of the essay	The essay has a clearly expressed, viable and useful claim to make.	The essay has a clearly expressed point to it, but perhaps of limited interest and usefulness.	The point of the essay is not very clearly expressed and is of limited interest and usefulness.	The point of the essay is vague and/or unchallenging.	There is little or no point being made.

Criteria	First Class	Second Class A	Second Class B	Third Class	Fail
Argument	The argument used to support the essay's main claim is clear and sound.	The argument used to support the essay's main claim is quite clear but/or may have gaps.	The argument used to support the essay's main claim is at times unclear and may have a few gaps.	The argument used to support the essay's main claim is weak, poorly thought through or incomplete.	There is little or no argument given in support of the essay's claim.
Structure	The essay is clearly structured in order to achieve its aims. Very easy for reader to follow.	The essay is clearly structured with the <i>intent</i> of pursuing the essay's aims, but there are problems with clarity or unification such that it is not always easy to follow.	The essay is not <i>clearly</i> structured with the intent of pursuing the essay's aims, and there are problems with clarity or unification such that it is at times not easy to follow.	The essay is not well structured for the purposes of fulfilling its aims, but there are signs of intent. The essay's structure often makes it difficult for the reader to follow	There is little or no effort put into the structuring of the essay
Critical thought	Mature, independent, perhaps original. The student's own voice comes through	Attempts at critique, but they tend to be derivative, such that the student's own voice is faint. Little independent thought	Critique is mainly derivative, with very little of the student's own voice coming through.	There is little critical thought	There is an absence or incoherence of critical thought
Written expression	Clear, mature, shows excellent grasp and use of terms and discourse	By and large clear, by and large good use of terms and discourse	Often clear, often good use of terms and discourse, but the reader has some difficulty in following	There is neglect of written expression such that the reader often experiences some difficulty in following	Poor; generally difficult or impossible for the reader to understand what the student is saying.
Referencing	All quoting and paraphrasing are appropriately referenced	Most quoting and paraphrasing are appropriately referenced	By and large quoting and paraphrasing are appropriately referenced	An effort is made to reference, but there are many slips	Insufficient or no referencing