

A Template for Philosophy Essays

[The following document provides a suggested format for philosophical papers. While there are many ways to organize a paper, this format will help you present your argument in a clear form, and will also make it easy for readers to identify your key points, and follow the progression of your overall argument]

Paragraph 1: Overview

"In this paper, I discuss _____" [Be specific about which issue you are writing about. This is where you can easily lose the reader's attention]

"This topic is important philosophically [culturally, or theoretically, etc.] because _____" [Don't assume that your reader will recognize the importance. Remember, the reader has other things to read]

"From a very general perspective, this topic relates to the larger issue of _____" [This will help the reader see the context of whatever issue you are writing about]

Notes

1. Do not begin your argument in the introduction. The introduction is simply where you explain what your argument will attempt to prove.
2. The introduction should present, or *introduce*, your paper to the reader. It should answer questions almost in a journalistic style: what is the paper about? Why is the issue you've chosen important? and so on. Many authors choose to write the introduction last, once they have completed the paper. Some find that this helps them focus on the argument, and lets them only later worry about how they will present the paper itself.
3. Regardless of when you write it, there are few parts of your paper more important than the introduction. If you do not attract the reader's attention in the introduction, you may never convince him or her to take your paper seriously. By the same token, if you appear to cite other authors in a superficial way, or make a series of unsupported (and often unsupportable) generalizations in your introduction, readers are likely to dismiss you as an author. In that respect, the introduction is sometimes crucial in establishing the tone or 'flow' of your discussion.

Paragraph 2: Body

[Here you will begin to lay out your argument. This is not the place to impress upon the reader that your topic is important. You should have done that in the Introduction]

Paragraph 3: Body

Paragraph 4: Body

Paragraph 5, 6, 7.... etc.

Paragraph x: Body

"One objection to what I have just said would be that....."

[After presenting your argument, or a significant part of it, you should describe a response that someone might make to your claims. Try to think of the strongest critique that might be offered against your position. Elaborate on this and put it in the form of an argument in itself: "This objection might go like this:....." If it helps you to think in terms of an exchange of views, imagine that the original author has just listened to your account of the problem, and is now trying to reply to what you said. You can, if you like, play on this theme in the next paragraph by saying something like "To this, (author's name or "a critic") might reply that XYZ...." Do not try to raise an objection and reply to it in the same paragraph.]

Paragraph x: Body

"I would reply to this objection in the following way..." or "But there is a response to this objection, and it goes like this...."

[Here is where you will respond to the objection. The key here is to remember to be charitable and respectful (e.g., "While this is a strong objection, it overlooks the following...."). Do not be dismissive or make it appear that you think that the objection was naive or stupid. After all, you just a few sentences earlier spoke of the objection as if it was a good one.]

Paragraph x: Body

"Another objection would be _____"

[Cite as many objections that you can think of, giving each its own paragraph or even section. There is nothing wrong with a paper that presents a series of objections and responses (just ask Plato, Descartes, or Kant). Your ability to anticipate the objections that a reader might have upon reading your work will greatly affect how credible you appear as an author. You want your paper to say, figuratively, "yes, I've thought of *that* objection, and here's how I would reply..." If you can succeed in that, the reader will benefit from reading your paper. Fall short of that goal, and the reader will wonder what the point of your paper was or if you really understand what it is that you are writing about.]

Paragraph 7: Conclusion

"To summarize....."

[You often won't need a conclusion, but it is not a bad idea to include one in a paper of over 7-8 pages. In a shorter paper you should have already gotten inside the reader's mind, done what you need to do to convince him/her, and let your argument sink in. Some authors like to summarize their key points here, briefly. That's sometimes important, but it is not essential that you provide a list. You can also let your paper end simply, and one trick to doing this is to paraphrase what you said in your introduction (it is in some respects true that an introduction and a conclusion should be inter-changeable). In any event, you should *never* try to tack on some new points in the conclusion that you didn't address in the body of your paper. This is also not the place to cite other authors. They should have been mentioned in the flow of your argument and discussion. Think of it this way: there should be nothing new in your conclusion. You will essentially be telling the reader what you already said. Anything new and exciting should have gone into the body of your paper.]

Checklist:

1. Does each of your paragraphs relate to the one that precedes and follows it? That is, do you digress without it being clear why you are? Your paragraphs should be linked, and present your argument in a step-by-step fashion that makes it easy for someone who knows *nothing* about your topic to follow you.
2. Do you use transitions when moving from one paragraph to the next?
3. Are your sections labeled with headings that help give a preview of what the paragraphs in that section contain?
4. Do you keep the promises that you make in the introduction? If you promised the reader that you will discuss XYZ, for instance, do you actually do that in the paper (and only that)?
5. Do you attempt as much as possible to be original, drawing on the literature devoted to your topic only to supplement your argument (or the objections to it)?
6. Is the tone of your paper, including word choice and colloquial phrase usage, appropriate for a scholarly paper? Sarcasm or slang rarely go over well in a scholarly paper. But it is equally bad to try to use language that is stuffy or verbose. Try to write as you would speak, if you were presenting your paper to a roomful of fellow scholars. Another tactic is to use language that seems consistent with what you would hear on a well-made TV documentary (in that case, imagine yourself to be the narrator, and your paper is the "script").

7. Are your paragraphs roughly 4-6 sentences each? If they are longer, the paragraphs may over-load the reader's attention span; if they are too short, your paragraphs may fail to make your point clear.

8. Is there a clear logical structure to your paper? Does your discussion model, for example, the classical forms of logical syllogism? (E.g., "Either A or B. Not A. Therefore, B") Any deviation from these forms can leave the reader unable to see what you're getting at. That is not to say that you cannot be original or innovative, but it is a much better idea to do that with your ideas, rather than your structure. That structure should be as traditional or conventional as possible. You are trying to win an argument, not display your artistic abilities.