Tips for Writing in Philosophy | Andrew Lavin

Formatting: Times New Roman, Garamond, Calibri, or the like (don’t you dare Comic Sans me 😅), 12 pt font, Double Spaced, One-Inch Margins, page number in top right-hand corner. I read papers back to back, I know when the style is drastically different.

Please anonymize your papers. No names on your papers anywhere. The course website will track it for me and this way I can do blind grading.

General Tips:
Write to a roommate or friend. Have them in mind as you write your paragraphs. Read them as if you were explaining them to this person. Will they look at you quizzically? Or will they lean back with the satisfied smile of one who truly understands the secrets of the universe? Pretend also that your conversant (the person whose argument you are responding to) is in the room. Will they be happy with your exposition? Will they have to defend or clarify their argument because you didn't do it justice?

Cite your sources. Tell me where your claims come from. Try to cite a specific place in the text where the philosopher under analysis makes each claim you attribute to them. This usually means dropping a footnote or inserting a set of parenthesis with a passage citation for each attribution you make (e.g. Socrates argues that…). Sometimes the assignment doesn’t require sources other than course material, which is fine.

You’ll still need to cite course material and will still need to cite any source you consult or paraphrase from outside the course.

Avoid using technical words in any but their proper use. Examples include: Logical, valid, form, matter, physical, understanding, knowledge, virtue, premise, necessary, etc. If you’re going to use them, be sure you are using them in a way that the philosopher we’re discussing would approve of. I’m happy to answer questions about this.

Have someone read your paper aloud to you. I expect a polished, clearly written paper. This should not be a rough draft. There are resources on campus for you to take advantage of when writing these papers, use them. If not, then at minimum have a roommate or friend read it aloud to you or at bare minimum read it aloud to yourself to check for awkward or unclear phrasing. You should write a draft and then revise at bare minimum once before turning any college paper in.

KEY: The key to good philosophical writing is accurate, clear, precise writing. Focus on clearly and concisely getting the ideas across. Don’t focus on elevating the style of your writing (avoid writing an informal blog post-style paper as well). Focus on getting the ideas right and written clearly. Your main job is to demonstrate understanding.

Please include a “sources consulted” list of anything you read in preparation for this assignment in addition to “works cited.” This helps to protect you.
General Style Notes:

First, try following this advice: every time you list a reason for a claim, offer an analysis of a quote or source, etc., try writing “This shows/suggests/indicates that…” and then complete the sentence. Many times this will help you structure your paragraphs naturally. After the paragraph is written, go back and delete the phrase “This shows that.” You will have a beautifully written paper that doesn’t unnecessarily use awkward transition phrases like this. For examples:

Johnson writes that “Anonymous was instrumental in supporting the Arab spring.” This shows that At least on some accounts, Anonymous is an important sociopolitical force.

Aquinas directly confronts many positions found in the classical Arabic tradition, including those of Ibn Rushd and Ibn Sina. This suggests that The Arabic tradition is an important part of western philosophy.

Avoid the following (I bolded a few especially common ones):

- Starting your essay with a vacuous or “fluff” sentence (or paragraph). (“from the beginning of history…” or “X is a moral topic with a lot of different perspectives on it.) Just dive right in and tell me what you think in the first sentence. (“Ibn Sina had a sophisticated picture of modality that he employed to great effect. It was, however, not without its vulnerabilities”). Using any “fluff” at all that fails to contribute to the project of the paper is a big no-no.
- Using hypothetical questions.
- Using hedging or deflecting language like “is considered,” “some believe,” or “people think that.” Don’t defer to the faceless masses or cite them as a source. Defer to and cite only real individuals. Tied to this is passive voice like “was argued,” “is defended,” “was refuted,” etc.
- Using slang or idioms like “fact of the matter,” “along these lines,” “judge a book by its cover,” “after all,” “as a matter of fact,” “first of all,” “touchy subject,” “makes you realize,” “hot topic,” “taken into consideration,” “just because...doesn't mean that...,” “dead wrong,” etc.
- Overly-academic tone or cadence. Just write in your natural voice. Don’t try to be too “buddy-buddy” with the reader, but don’t try to be too cold and academic. Don’t try anything. Just explain what you came to explain, argue what you came to argue, and don’t change how you naturally want to write, without being too informal. Just don’t insert ROFLMAO’s and the like, that’s not gonna win you points. Oh, and it’s ‘you’, not ‘u’. 😄

Every sentence in your essay should be included because it contributes to your argument or your exposition. Write nothing that is not directly relevant to and necessary for your discussion.
Structure and Content notes:

There are two strategies for writing a paper. One is helpful in achieving the aims of paper writing, the other is harmful. Can you guess which is which?

**The bottom-up paper:** Write down a bunch of (hopefully) true things about [insert philosopher or topic here]. Then arrange them into paragraphs by going through every six to ten lines and hitting the “return” key. Write intro and conclusion. Turn in Paper.

**The top-down paper:** Decide on a thesis. Then create an outline in which each section of the paper is given a clear aim, each paragraph is organized around a quote or idea, and the paper as a whole clearly fits together to make one clear point. Then fill out your already-planned-out paragraphs with relevant true things, illustrative examples, and thoughtful analysis.

Just as sentences are unified, organized collections of words, so are paragraphs unified, organized collections of sentences. To be unified and organized are actually one and the same though: to have a purpose around which a set of things is organized into roles. Paragraphs can be about explaining a concept, introducing a piece of text to be analyzed, transitioning between sections of your paper, defending a premise or claim in your argument, etc. But they should generally be about only one of these things.

Paragraphs should *generally* do three things: *Assert, Explain, and Support*. They should make an assertion, explain what the assertion means exactly, and then provide support for thinking that the assertion is true. Often a paragraph won’t fit this structure, but it is a good general structure to keep in mind for the paradigmatic paragraph.

Use paragraphs in a *top-down* manner. **Don’t let paragraphs evolve as you type.** Choose what you want a paragraph to do at the beginning, and then deliver 4-10 sentences of pure, organized, gold. I want to read gold, people.

Don’t include “filler” or “fluff” just to meet the page requirement. This number of pages on a prompt of this size is not even enough to do the topic justice. **If you find yourself not getting to the page requirement, there is something important being left out.** Re-read your paper as ask yourself “does this make sense? Would it be improved by an expanded discussion of x, or a longer articulation of the worry/argument? What haven’t I discussed?”

In general, aim for *overexplaining*, but don’t introduce extraneous or irrelevant *topics*. Stay on topic, but be careful, slow, and thorough in your explanations.
Writing for Philosophy:

Ignore everything you've ever learned. Okay not really, but do mind the following convention-breakers:

We use the singular and plural first person a lot in philosophy. As long as you don’t say “I personally believe that…” or “I feel that this argument sucks,” you should be fine. Remember you aren’t reporting your feelings, intuitions, or hunches. You are telling your reader:

- what you plan to do (I will begin by explaining the difference between…),
- what your goals are (I hope to show that…),
- what you aren’t doing (I won’t be discussing… because it would be too far afield), and
- why you find an argument unconvincing (I, however, am not swayed by this argument of Al-Ghazali’s because it rests on the problematic assumption that…).

It’s okay to stop the prose and list out an argument in outline form (still make it look nice, though, and single-space/indent it .5 in on both sides like a block-quote please). Only do this if you plan on analyzing the argument premise by premise though. See the end for formatting guidelines.

We don’t change up the words we use for the sake of style. If you have a word, like “knowledge,” use it everywhere you intend the reader to understand “knowledge.” In fact, throw away your thesaurus for the sake of this assignment. Just write what you intend to say in as clear a way as possible, even if it comes out a bit boring or unoriginal. If it’s the right word, use it. Your high school English teacher be damned! 😂

So: try to avoid adjectives and adverbs unless where necessary. If it doesn’t clearly add content (as opposed to merely “enhancing” the content) then leave it out.

Try to avoid using unnecessary modals like “would”, “could”, “can”, and “should.” These all have their uses, but can easily be overused or used incorrectly. Use with care.

Take great care with your connecting words: “Because”, “in virtue of”, “implies”, “exemplifies”, “entails that”, “reveals that”, “means that”, and others can easily be used incorrectly.

Be very careful with premise and conclusion indicators. Conclusions: Therefore, So, Hence, Ergo (avoid this one), Thus, In Conclusion, etc. Premises: Given that, Since, Because, Owing to the fact that, etc.

Try to avoid at all costs: "is considered" "just because...doesn't mean that..."

Use Simple Words and Simple Sentences. No extra credit for writin’ all fancy like they do in them Aye-Vee Leeegs. Clarity, Concision, Completeness!

Finally, tell me what you’re going to do (explicitly, but at a broad conceptual level without all the details), then do it (exactly as you said you would). Whether or not you use the conclusion to tell me what you just did is up to you, I’m ambivalent about that step.
Passive Voice

If you can put the words “…by Zombies” at the end of a phrase, then that verb phrase is in passive voice. If your verb phrase seems to require a "...by Socrates" or "...by me" or other "by" phrase, then it's in passive voice.

Examples:

She was eaten yesterday…by zombies
*She ate a casserole yesterday…by zombies ☺
Paolo was taken to the movies …by zombies
*Elika took Paolo to the movies…by zombies ☺

(Sure “by” can be a preposition of location like in “the frog settled by me,” but in this case we ignore that use)

Block Quote Format for Argument Outlines:

This is an introductory paragraph. You can indent the first line or not. That’s up to you. It’s double-spaced like the rest of the paper. The introductory paragraph gives you the opportunity to explain to your reader exactly and specifically what they are going to read and give them a sense of why they should read it. Socrates argues $x$ by appeal to $y$ and $z$. I’m going to raise a small worry about Socrates’ argument and then propose a response Socrates can use to deflect the worry. In the end, though, the argument leaves us unsatisfied.

This is the paragraph where you introduce the argument itself. Socrates argues that the soul is immortal in the following way: [I’ve removed the space after this “paragraph” in Word]

(I) We remember things from before we were born
(II) Note that this argument is single-spaced and the premises/steps are numbered
(III) Therefore, the soul is immortal. [Removed space again using “page layout” tab]

This is still part of the paragraph, so it isn’t indented. Back to double-spacing. Summarize the main steps and concepts used in the argument here before moving on to a new paragraph. Socrates utilizes his theory of recollection…