Ways of Reading

In order to begin to understand how to write in a discipline, it is important to understand how to read in a discipline. Below are some strategies for reading in philosophy classes.

General Guidelines

- Look at the structure of the document. After noticing how it is structured, skim the article for the main point.
- Dissect the main arguments from the auxiliary arguments (i.e. notice where the author is saying, “I am arguing _____ and want you to accept _____” or “If B and C are true, then A must be true”).
- Keep an eye out for words like these when you are reading: because, since, given this argument, thus, therefore, hence, it follows that, consequently, nevertheless, however, but, in the first case, on the other hand, etc. These are signposts that help you keep track of the structure of the discussion.
- When reading a textbook, write an outline so that you can compare your reading notes with the notes that you take in class. This format will help you further understand concepts by checking your textbook notes with the notes from class lectures.

Reading Primary Documents or Journal Articles

- Read the abstract to start dissecting the theory.
- Expect and plan to read an article more than once to fully understand it.
- Notice when an author defines a term implicitly.
- Ask yourself questions like “Are there ambiguities in this argument?” or “Are there any unargued assumptions?”

HWS Faculty Respond to Ways of Reading in Philosophy

- “Students need to move away from the high school model of dropped quotes (quotes that appear in an essay with no introduction about how it connects to the
argument). The process should go as follows: students should engage in critical reading to understand the content, extract the argument from the reading, develop their thoughts, and then incorporate their thoughts and the quote into the essay.” — Rodmon King

- “It is not always easy to find the main point of a reading. A large part of writing in philosophy is the author addressing objectives. Students need to be sure to keep track of whether authors are speaking from an objective point of view or their own; it is very common for students to confuse these two when reading complex text for philosophy classes.” — Greg Frost-Arnold

- “Make sure to know what these words are signposts for: either premise or conclusions:
  - Evidence: because, since
  - Conclusion: given this argument, thus, therefore, hence, it follows that, consequently
  - Objective: nevertheless, however, but, on the other hand.” — Greg Frost-Arnold

- “Philosophy texts can be difficult to understand so it takes effort to move from writing descriptively to writing analytically.” — Eugen Baer

- “After reading the journal article or chapter, conclude if there is enough evidence to conclude that a theory is true.” — Steven Lee

### TYPES OF WRITING

Below is a list of some of the different types of writing you might be asked to write in your philosophy classes.

**Summarization**

- Must be able to comprehend primary source readings.
- Can be more difficult than it seems because of older styles of writing, which can have run-on sentences, historical references, and unfamiliar words.
- Needs class discussion to clarify.

**Application**

- Requires taking the ideas of a primary source and relating it to another event or person (i.e. Explain how fascism could be based on Machiavelli).
- Need to understand a primary source and have knowledge of the event or person it is being applied to.

**Analysis/Evaluation**

- Thorough comprehension of these concepts is applied to a given scenario, like the application essay described above.
- Requires taking into account many primary sources and concepts.
Must be taken a step further by defining a particular stance on the topic. For example, choosing a socialist ideology in a worldwide environmental crisis.

This requires an assessment of each ideology in the given circumstances, as well as logical explanation for defining an argument.

**Philosophy prompts often**

- Are “designed to promote the exploration of philosophical questions from a personal perspective” (writingforward.com).
- Ask the writer to explore abstract concepts like, “Does the existence of evil in the world show that God does not exist?” or “Where does it all come from—the earth, the stars, the universe, us?”
- Ask topic or discussion questions, which ask you to discuss either the position or work of some philosopher, or some philosophical problem/argument which is presented in the question. For example, “Discuss the hard determinist thesis that no one is morally responsible for what they do because all human actions are caused.”

**As a writer, you may be asked to**

- Explain the concept or argument you are writing about in detail.
- Offer an argument in support of that concept or argument.
- Offer an objection to that concept or argument.
- Defend against an objection to that concept or argument.
- Discuss potential consequences.
- Determine whether another view can be held consistent with that concept or argument.
- Determine whether another thesis or argument commits one to that concept or argument.

**HWS Faculty Respond to Types of Writing in Economics**

- “Students often struggle to understand the prompt. In order to do this, students need to break down the different components of the prompt: what they need to summarize, where they need to make arguments, etc.”—Rodmon King
- “Analysis and evaluation take into account many primary sources and concepts. Sometimes, 2-3 sources can be enough.”—Greg Frost-Arnold
- “There are two types of writing: descriptive and analytical. Philosophy writing is the most extreme of analytical writing.”—Eugen Baer

**FORMAT, COUNTERARGUMENT, AND USING OPINION**

Here are some guidelines to keep in mind when writing an essay for philosophy.

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You will want to have a concise and informative title.
Immediately begin your essay by stating the position you are arguing for—get right to the point and avoid general introductions.
Briefly state the topic of the paper and announce a plan for the paper. This plan should be a map for your readers and explain what you will discuss in your paper.
A general format will look like this:
- State hypothesis (beginning of introduction)
- State outline (end of introduction)
- Follow outline (most likely this will be the body of your essay and will be multiple paragraphs)
- Consider objections (also known as a counterargument) (this step is optional)
- Restate hypothesis (conclusion)

HWS Faculty Respond to Ways of Formatting Essays in Philosophy:
- “When formatting an essay, state your hypothesis at the beginning of your introduction and state the outline of your essay at the end of your introduction. This is your basic thesis statement that argues in 1-2 sentences how you will present your argument”—Greg Frost-Arnold
- “An essay must be logically organized for the reader to understand all of the evidence provided and the claims being made by the writer. The strongest claim with development of evidence must come first, then objections and counterarguments, followed by an evaluation of how the claim outweighs the counterargument. The first paragraph is written after the rest of the paper.”—Eugen Baer
- “There are two ways to use criticism to create an argument:
  1. Challenge Premise/Form: How does an author create his argument? How is it structured or argued? Does the author address counterarguments? The conclusion may be wrong, but the idea here is not to base your criticism on that, but to judge and criticize the way the argument is structured.
  2. Content Criticism: Challenge the substance and solidarity of the author’s argument. What is the author not addressing? What is left out or not considered? The conclusion here can be true, but there may not be enough evidence to support the over-arching argument.”—Steven Lee

HWS Faculty Respond to Writing a Counterargument:
- “Assuming there is an argument, it is very good to include [a counterargument], but not always required. It is important to look at the other side and no to have the perception ‘if I know the truth why say anything else?’. This is why the counterargument is a good idea.”—Carol Oberbrunner

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“When your counterargument becomes too much of your essay, the writer switches their viewpoint of the subject. The whole essay is then written in a new perception so you must adjust accordingly.” —Carol Oberbrunner

“There are many types of philosophy prompts and counterarguments are used for some. They are unnecessary for essays that articulate a positive view like your own theory supported by other philosophers’ arguments (i.e. establishing your own environmental ethic). However, counterarguments are necessary in comparison essays that ask you to present what each theory says and what it entails. You should provide a counterargument here to show which theory is best by deconstructing other theories (i.e. an argument for or against God’s existence).” —Rodmon King

“You always want to have a counterargument and it should not be large; however, you don’t have to address all existing counterarguments. If you don’t at least mention an obvious counterargument, it will come across as though you didn’t do enough research.” —Greg Frost-Arnold

“You also want to consider the objections to your argument. This is your counterargument and should be mentioned in your essay if it is obvious” —Greg Frost-Arnold

“It is important to provide the strongest counterargument possible in order to demonstrate that you know the material. It is better to provide the best counterargument and have trouble tearing it down.” —Eric Barnes

“The goal of philosophy writing is to convince the reader of your opinion based on other works and theoretical concepts, so understanding the counterarguments is absolutely necessary.” —Eugen Baer

“A thorough understanding of the material is essential to develop one’s own opinion. The hardest thing to do while weighing a counterargument is to disassemble one’s own assumptions of a concept. Claims cannot be based on assumptions.” —Eugen Baer

HWS Faculty Respond to Using Your Opinion in Philosophy Writing:

“There should be a balance of your own opinion and research in an essay. You must, however, make sure your opinion is supported by research. Using ‘I’ statements are important and encouraged in philosophy essays.” —Rodmon King

“It is not enough to simply reiterate the readings in your essays. Students need to take an original step even if it is small. However, originality needs to be justified and have supporting evidence. It is okay to use ‘I’ because it distinguishes the student’s voice from the author’s. Students need an original idea, but one that can be supported with evidence.” —Greg Frost-Arnold

“Depending on the assignment given, you can give your opinion, use ‘I’ in your essay and give reasons and evidence to back up your opinion. Try not to just insert it. You can avoid this by agreeing or disagreeing with authors based on other articles or arguments you have read.” —Steven Lee
GUIDELINES AND STRATEGIES

Below you will find a list of guidelines and strategies to use when writing for Philosophy. Please note that this list is not exhaustive, but merely provides some examples of things to keep in mind while you are writing.

Do

- Outline your paper with possible arguments to defend your thesis.
- Outline all theories being used in your paper.
- Clearly state your argument and your evidence.
- Define and explain all theories being used in the paper.
- Include quotes.
- Explain why you personally feel a certain way.

Don’t

- Be repetitive.
- Start writing before you decide on your argument.
- Use ambiguous terms or theories without defining them.
- Ignore possible objects.

HWS Faculty Provide Some Guidelines and Strategies for Philosophy Writing:

- “Opinions are always allowed. Students should sing their own song. The sources students use in a paper are based on your preconceived opinion. You have to have passion about what you are writing about because without your opinion you wouldn’t have a thesis. It does not help to depend only on scholarly articles to write your paper because then you are not able to develop your own opinion or theme.”—Carol Oberbrunner
- “Have confidence and courage when you write. This is how your paper will stand out from others. Many lose themselves through the concepts of others.”—Carol Oberbrunner
- “The HWS Philosophy department allows first person (the use of ‘I’) in students’ writing because it distinguishes students’ voices from the work of others. Papers should be clearly written and well structured. Always be cohesive because you can lose the audience otherwise. For example, if you repeat yourself, the paper is not organized.”—Carol Oberbrunner
- “Explain why your personally feel a certain way. This means using evidence to support your ideas.”—Greg Frost-Arnold
- “Don’t ignore possible objections. However you don’t need to state all objections. For example, if there are 5 objections to your argument, you can focus on one. The point is to mention obvious objections.”—Greg Frost-Arnold
“The writing process is absolutely necessary to develop an understanding of the material (descriptive writing/summarization) before developing an argument (analysis).” — Eugen Baer

Grammar and proofreading mistakes are extremely disappointing because they ruin a paper with good content.” — Eugen Baer

“Style and message are not exclusive. You must understand your audience.” — Eugen Baer

“Citations can be made by referencing someone (As John Smith states in...).” — Eugen Baer

“Make sure not to criticize just the conclusion of the main argument. You should also look at the sub-arguments, evidence, and the structure and form in which the in which the author creates the argument. Always ask if the premises of the argument address the entirety of the main argument.” — Steven Lee

“Quotes should be used to ground claims, not as a crutch. Apply quotes when grounding arguments, but they should not replace them.” — Steven Lee

CITATIONS AND PLAGIARIZING

The style of citation in a Philosophy essay is generally up to the professor’s preference, so be sure to find out exactly what the professor is asking for. Please review the responses below as guidelines, but be sure to check with your professor, too.

HWS Faculty Respond to Using Citations:

“Citations are about consistency. As long as you have them and use them properly, it is okay. Philosophy is more about linkaging and critiquing than having research from specific articles.” — Steven Lee

“Make sure to paraphrase and use the author’s name. For example, ‘Professor Lee says/believes ____.’ Whenever brainstorming, make sure to always include the author’s name so you don’t have to go back and fish for it.” — Steven Lee

“As far as citations, students should use any standard format (MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.) as long as it is consistent. Citations must include basic things like the author, title of the work, and where to find the work.” — Rodmon King

“You should be consistent with your citations and be sure to include enough information to locate the text used (i.e. author, title, place of publication, etc.).” — Professor Frost-Arnold

HWS Faculty Respond to Plagiarizing:

“Give credit where credit is due every single time. It is easy when you identify your sources constantly. That way you don’t have to think about whether or not you plagiarized. Think about the concept and then identify the person in the paper by saying something like ‘Plato said...’” — Carol Oberbrunner
“Plagiarizing is related to the use of ‘I’ statements. It is okay to use a preexisting concept, but make sure to use a modern or original example to explain it. Usually plagiarizing occurs when students don’t quote or don’t use a citation. If a secondary source is used, list it in the Works Cited.”—Greg Frost-Arnold

“It isn’t necessary to cite when you’re writing general observations made in class, but you should be sure to attribute the professor or class. It is best to focus on the argument and leave out the historical context of the argument.”—Eric Barnes

“Plagiarism is one of the main things students struggle with in my classes. One way that can be useful to avoid it is to do the following: include the whole quote in your first draft and wait to paraphrase until the second draft. This encourages students to take the time to analyze the quote, find its importance (i.e. what it claims), and then paraphrase the quote’s meaning in their own words.”—Rodmon King

WORKS CITED


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