

How to Write a Philosophy Paper
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Emerson 006

Defend an interesting thesis.

What's a *thesis*?

- A thesis is a claim that can be correct or incorrect.
 - *I exist.*
 - *There are no moral facts.*
 - *A thesis is a claim that can be correct or incorrect.*
 - *A hotdog is a sandwich.*
 - *It is not the case that a hotdog is a sandwich.*
- Provide the reader with an obviously marked thesis statement early on in the paper. Your reader should know from the beginning what conclusion your paper is working toward.
- Use precise language and avoid vague expressions.
 - Bad: *In this paper, I explore theories of hedonism.*
 - Better: *In this paper, I argue that the claim that "to be good" means "to be pleasurable" is false.*

What makes a thesis *interesting*?

- The thesis answers (or is otherwise responsive to) the prompt.
- The thesis isn't obviously true.
- The thesis advances the discourse on the relevant topic (in a specific, perhaps minute way).
- The thesis is original. This does NOT mean that your thesis needs to offer an entirely new approach to a given topic or a never before defended answer to a given question.
- Examples of an original thesis include:
 - a. Raising a new objection to an already established theory:
I argue that the pragmatic judgments that Richard Joyce appeals to in defending his fictionalist account of morals is undermined by the same argument from evolution that Joyce raises against realist moral theories.
 - b. Responding to an objection in defense of an established theory:
In his essay "Color and Illusion," C.L. Hardin argues that proponents of dispositionalist theories of color fail to provide any justified means of specifying normal observers and standard conditions. I argue that neo-Aristotelian naturalism provides us with a plausible account of both standard conditions and normal observers that Hardin ignores.
 - c. Interpreting difficult or vague arguments or passages from other philosophical works:
I argue that – once we have closely considered relevant sections of the Apology, Phaedo, and Republic III – we can plausibly understand Socrates' position in the Apology and the Phaedo in such a way that there is no tension between the two texts.

What does it take to successfully *defend* a thesis?

- To defend a thesis is to give reason(s) to believe the thesis. The argument for your thesis should be *clear* and *persuasive*.
- Two components of clarity:
 - Structural clarity
 - Explicitly state your thesis early on. Your reader should have *no doubt* what your thesis is.
 - Provide a “roadmap” somewhere at the start of your paper explaining the key steps of your argument.
 - Guide your reader through each step of your roadmap. Explicitly signal when you move from one step to another, and explain how each step supports the overall argument.
 - Content clarity
 - Define or explain every technical term or concept you introduce.
 - Be consistent with important terms, even if that makes your essay repetitive-sounding.
 - Avoid irrelevant arguments. Every step in your argument should contribute, directly or indirectly, to establishing your thesis.
- Persuasive:
 - The argument is not logically fallacious.
 - The argument at no point assumes what you are trying to prove.
 - Premises are either obviously true (or obviously very likely to be true), or are supported by plausible evidence and/or arguments.
 - Any obvious problems or objections to the argument are addressed (if there is space).

Exposition

- Often, you will need to explain and interpret another author’s position. When you explain another’s position, your exposition should be *selective*, *clear*, and *accurate*.
- Selective:
 - You only address parts of the other thinker’s position that are relevant to your thesis.
 - The connection between this thinker’s views and your thesis is already obvious or is explained in the paper.
- Clear:
 - All technical terms in the thesis are explicitly defined
 - Any relevant arguments put forth are presented clearly *as arguments*: the conclusions and premises are clearly identified and explained.
 - If the position admits of multiple interpretations, one interpretation is explicitly chosen over others, and either a justification is provided for this choice or the assumption of that choice is stated explicitly.
- Accurate:
 - The exposed position really corresponds to the position put forth in the relevant text.

Citation

- Provide internal citation *whenever* you quote *or paraphrase* from another source.
 - Include a page number in the internal citation.
 - Provide enough information for a reader to find your specific source.
- Follow any specific course citation standards.

Other Advice

- Read and read again
 - Philosophy papers are often shorter than what you might read in other humanities courses, but they often much denser.
 - With your first read through, focus on getting a foothold in the paper's argument. What is the main thesis? What are the key premises the author relies on to defend that thesis? Are you convinced?
 - On successive readthroughs, analyze the paper more closely. How does the author support her key premises? Does the author rely on assumptions? Are these assumptions warranted? If you are not convinced by the argument, why? Is one (or more) of the premises false? Or, even if all the premises are true, does the conclusion still not logically follow?
- Philosophy punishes procrastination.
 - Leave yourself time to reread relevant material before and during the writing process.
 - After you have finished writing out the text of your paper, let it sit for a night and come back to it later. Can you still follow your own arguments easily?
- Outline
 - Both for your sake and your reader's, it is important that your paper have a clear structure. Outlining your paper before you write it can help.
 - Work backwards; your first bullet point should be a clear and concise (one to two sentences) thesis statement.
 - Then, dedicate a bullet point to each of your main premises.
 - If any of these premises require further support, include it under the relevant premises.
- Seek feedback
 - At its core, philosophy is a team effort. No good philosopher works completely alone.
 - Go to TF office hours (or email them for a meeting). All TFs have years of academic experience, are well acquainted with course materials, and are there to support you.
 - Go to professor office hours.
 - Ask friends or roommates to read over your writing.
 - Sign up for a meeting with the DWF: <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/phil-dwf>