How to Write a Philosophy Paper

Definition: "A philosophy paper is a defence of a *thesis*, in which the thesis is *explained* and *analysed*, *arguments* are given in support of the thesis, possible *objections* to the thesis are stated and examined, and *responses* are given to the objections" (Wolff)

- **1. The statement of the thesis:** "A *thesis* is a statement that makes some clear, definite assertion about the subject under discussion." (Wolff)
- topics are subjects about which theses may be proposed; they
 are not theses themselves; so don't merely state the topic of
 your paper; open your paper by saying what your thesis on
 that topic will be.
- e.g. a topic: Dow Corning's response to the information that its silicone breast implants were likely harming their women customers

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Definition: A *philosophy* paper is an *argument* for a *thesis* on a philosophical *topic*

A possible thesis: (I shall argue that) Dow Corning acted immorally because it failed in its manufacturer's duty of care to users of its breast implants.

2. The analysis and explanation of the thesis.

Here, you briefly explain how you are going to use key terms in your thesis. We often need to do this because people may use different definitions of such terms.

The manufacturer's duty of care is ... Breast implants are ...

Dow Corning is ...

3. The arguments in support of the thesis: "If I didn't already believe my thesis, would this reason convince me that the thesis is true? Would it at least make me more inclined to believe that it is true? Would it tend to convince a reasonable reader who is open-minded enough so that he or she is willing to listen to reasons?" (Wolff) Since your paper is defending a value claim, your argument should include an account of all the empirical facts relevant to the case. It should also try to make clear how moral principles apply to the facts to generate your conclusion. More specifically, your paper should give a fully detailed explanation of the manufacturer's duty underlying your argument. You should also explain how this duty is supported (subsumed) by the higher order principles of chapter 2 (of Velasquez): Kant, utility, specific principles of justice, and so on.		
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4. The examination of objections to the thesis. (An objection says the thesis is false, implausible or unproved, for certain reasons. Generally speaking, these objections should attack premises of your original argument, or it should seek to show that your conclusion doesn't follow from your premises.)		
In your paper, you are to assume that the facts are as presented in the case study.		
Objections may involve relevance issues—does the manufacturer's duty you are using really apply in this case? E.g., is Dow Corning truly responsible or are there mitigating factors that lessen or remove its responsibility? (See Velasquez, pp 41-45 on criteria affecting moral responsibility) The most probable line of attack an objector will take here is to argue		
against your value principle in favour of another (e.g., the <i>laissez-faire</i> view of manufacturer's duties). This means that the debate between you and your opponent is a value principle <i>conflict problem</i> .	4	

You should <i>clearly and fully</i> explain your opponent's principle and its underlying assumptions as it applies to this case. That respects your opponent and also allows you to show in your "response" that it doesn't really trump your principle. (Again, where students often fall down in their papers is to give overly brief, cryptic accounts of the relevant moral principles.)	
5. The response to these objections. You need to be able to show that the objections themselves are false, implausible or irrelevant.	
This last step is the real measure for a very strong paper. If you can do a fair job of presenting the other side, and then of showing that, even so, it does not undermine your position, you have made a very strong case for your view.	
Of course, the "other" side will try to respond, but that's their paper!	

Criteria for paper:	(emailed to me by	y midnight Dec.	5)
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- 1. About 2500 words (8-10 pages), 12 pt. font, double-spaced.
- 2. Proper citation: Whichever method of acknowledging sources that you use, you *MUST*:
- (i) enclose within quotes **and** provide page references to any material that you take word-for-word from any source you use;
- (ii) provide page references for any paraphrase you make of some source material (a paraphrase is a *complete* rewriting of the original, and not simply replacing a few words. Merely replacing a few words is really a quote, and has to be treated as such.

Failure to meet these criteria adequately (as checked by Turnitin.com!) will result in a failed paper, and possibly a letter on your file.

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