

# CSSA Philosophical Writing Workshop for COMP2620

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# Introduction

- I'm Harrison :P
- President of CSSA, Sept. 2023 - Present
- Have a puppy called Molly
- Studying Advanced Computing (R&D) / PPE
  - Lots of writing, especially in philosophy & political science!
  - PHIL coursework doing / have done: 1004, 1005, 2290 + this one!



# Plan for today

- Qualities of good philosophical writing
- Structure: paragraph level & paper level
- Concocting counterarguments & rebuttals
- Planning: The power of an outline
- Formatting

# Qualities of good philosophical writing

Writing should possess:

- Clarity
  - Keep it clear.
  - Technical jargon has a place, but explain it and use it only when needed.
- Precision
  - keep it focussed
  - If you feel like you can't express it better, you're probably on the right track
- Concision
  - Keep it brief
  - Argue one point, argue it well

Adapted from <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

# Basic structure of a philosophical paper

- Introduction
- Interpretation and analysis of your position
- Consideration of counterarguments
- Conclusion

We use Bostrom's paper on the Simulation Hypothesis as a case study.

<https://simulation-argument.com/simulation.pdf>

# Introduction

- State your thesis (the argument you are putting forth)
- Define technical or ambiguous terms you use
- Motivate the thesis
- Set out how you will proceed in your argument

Read the introduction of Bostrom. How has he done these things?

# 1. State Thesis & 2. any technical terms, if needed

Bostrom:

“Therefore, if we don’t think that we are currently living in a computer simulation, we are not entitled to believe that we will have descendants who will run lots of such simulations of their forebears”

Bostrom doesn’t state technical terms in his introduction, but he does introduce *substrate-independence* before the main body of his argument.

You need your reader to know what you’re arguing for.

### 3. Motivate the thesis

Bostrom:

“Apart from the interest this thesis may hold for those who are engaged in futuristic speculation, there are also more purely theoretical rewards. The argument provides a stimulus for formulating some methodological and metaphysical questions, and it suggests naturalistic analogies to certain traditional religious conceptions, which some may find amusing or thought-provoking.”

He tells us why the debate is worth having. Why is this important?



## 4. Set out how you will proceed (i.e signposting)

Bostrom:

“The structure of the paper is as follows. First.... Second... .Then follows the core of the argument ... and a section providing support for [assumption]. Lastly, we discuss some interpretations of the disjunction, mentioned in the abstract, that forms the conclusion of the simulation argument”.

Don't leave the reader wondering where you'll be taking your discussion. Signposting helps the reader to follow the premises and understand your argument better.

# Body

This is where you defend your reasoning and establish the link to your conclusion. One way you might like to structure your paragraphs is to have a sentence or two for each of the below:

- Topic: What is the key point that you are trying to make with this paragraph?
- Evidence: What are you basing this point off. Why should we think this is relevant or useful?
- Evaluation / Analysis: What are the implications? Why is this the case?
- Linking: Link to the next paragraph or back to your main point

How does Bostrom do it?

## Body - Bostrom example

What force could bring about such convergence? One can speculate that advanced civilizations all develop along a trajectory that leads to the recognition of an ethical prohibition against running ancestor-simulations because of the suffering that is inflicted on the inhabitants of the simulation. However, from our present point of view, it is not clear that creating a human race is immoral. On the contrary, we tend to view the existence of our race as constituting a great ethical value. Moreover, convergence on an ethical view of the immorality of running ancestor-simulations is not enough: it must be combined with convergence on a civilization-wide social structure that enables activities considered immoral to be effectively banned.

# Constructing Counterarguments

Counterarguments are a big component of marks in papers, so it's important to get them right. Here's some ideas on how to generate counterarguments:

- An objection that premise P is false because X?
- Have you shown something different to what you have claimed?
- Can you show that premises and conclusions aren't necessarily linked?
- Is there an issue with the definitions you have used?

# Counterarguments - False Premise

Suppose we've made the following argument:

*P1. Inductivism relies on itself for justification.*

*P2. Science is built on inductivism*

*C. We cannot have scientific knowledge*

Our objection might be that science is built on something else, so the argument doesn't necessary hold.

To rebut: show evidence on why science might reasonably be built on inductivism, i.e defend truth of P2

# Counterarguments - Argument isn't complete

Suppose we've made the following argument trying to justify the mis- and dis-information bill currently before parliament.

*P1. Disinformation meets a standard of harm.*

*P2. Government should regulate excessive harm*

*C. The bill is justified in existing for disinformation.*

An objection might be that we haven't considered the case of misinformation. We can rebut this clarifying our thesis, i.e that we only care about disinformation in this instance.

# Counterarguments - Non sequitur

*Consider the following:*

*P1. Dogs are the most cute things on campus*

*C. Molly should be appointed CSSA Mascot.*



A counterargument might be that the conclusion doesn't follow.

We can rebut this by pointing out we have some implicit premises in our argument, and explaining why we think they hold, e.g being the most cute thing on campus is a desirable trait for CSSA mascot because...

# Counterarguments - Issues with definitions

*Consider the following:*

*P1. Sentience is a precondition for moral agency*

*P2. AI is not sentient*

*C. AI cannot be a moral agent*

*Moral agent: an agent that has moral understanding.*

We might not like this conception, because e.g a person crashing a car has the same impact as a self-driving car crashing if they crash in the same spot. We can develop a counter argument about what it means to be a moral agent based on this new idea of moral agency. To rebut this, we have to defend the reasonableness of the definition.



# Conclusion

Finish by explaining what you think your argument has established.

Bostrom:

*A technologically mature “posthuman” civilization would have enormous computing power. Based on this empirical fact, the simulation argument shows that at least one of the following propositions is true: (1) The fraction of human-level civilizations that reach a posthuman stage is very close to zero; (2) The fraction of posthuman civilizations that are interested in running ancestor-simulations is very close to zero; (3) The fraction of all people with our kind of experiences that are living in a simulation is very close to one.*

# Examples of great philosophical writing

Short and sharp pieces on contemporary moral philosophy. Approx ~1100 words

Courtesy of the Ethics Centre

- Taking the cynicism out of criticism: why media needs real critique  
<https://ethics.org.au/why-media-needs-real-critique/>
- Why fairness is integral to tax policy <https://ethics.org.au/why-fairness-is-integral-to-tax-policy/>
- Corporate whistleblowing: Balancing moral courage with moral responsibility  
<https://ethics.org.au/corporate-whistleblowing-balancing-moral-courage-with-moral-responsibility/>

Let's discuss one of these. Can you identify the premises and conclusion of the argument? Can we sketch out the structure of the paper?

# The Process

Now we know how the paper is structured, we need to develop an outline!

1. Write out your argument in premise-conclusion form.
2. For each premise, write a few reasons why you believe them to be true, and a possible objection
3. Brainstorm objections to your argument, refine your argument based on these objections until you're happy.

Now we have the basic argument structure down, we can organize the paper.

Some questions to consider:

- In what order are you explaining the terms or arguments you're discussing?
- When are you introducing opposing theories?

# Sample outline

I like to use LaTeX / Typst so I can work directly off the outline using comments. Here's a sample refined outline based off a previous essay on the disinformation bill:

- Introduction
- Introduce the bill and the stakes behind why this is a controversial topic (free speech vs hate speech).
- Introduce Harm Principle, discuss different standards of harm (restrictive vs permissive).
- Justify restrictive standard of harm (b.c. a harm in restrictive -> harm in permissive).
- Manipulation of people's worldview through disinformation violates autonomy, which violates the 'free and autonomous rational agent' precondition of the restrictive notion of the Harm Principle.
- Therefore, disinformation bill justified.
- Objection 1: more general rationale for misinformation is not justified.
- Response: misinformation is ill-defined. I only ever claim to justify disinformation case.
- Objection 2: Formulation of harm principle is too restrictive
- Response: If we weaken the formulation, the argument still holds.
- Evaluation of Mill's position on free speech: reasonable, but needs further fleshing-out. A double-edged sword that can justify against his intent.
- Conclusion

Outline highlights the major 'beats' of the paper: where key ideas and concepts are introduced along with notes on what point you'll be making in each section.

# Formatting

References - use author-date styles like Harvard / APA

- In LaTeX, APA is two lines.
  - Can get Harvard off my Github template.
- In Typst, Harvard & APA are both one line

```
\usepackage[australian]{babel}
```

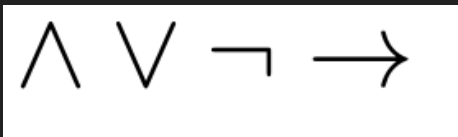
```
\usepackage[backend=biber,style=apa]{biblatex}
```

A4 size paper, 12pt font

Headings help with signposting and organization, but aren't strictly necessary.

Give your paper a title: in COMP2620 you will already have date and UID on the front of the assignment, so no need to double-up.

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  \lnot % \neg  
  \to % \rightarrow  
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and or not arrow.r  
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```

# Resources

LaTeX-Template: <https://github.com/HarrisonOates/Latex-Template>

Writing guides:

- [https://philosophy.fas.harvard.edu/files/phildept/files/brief\\_guide\\_to\\_writing\\_philosophy\\_paper.pdf](https://philosophy.fas.harvard.edu/files/phildept/files/brief_guide_to_writing_philosophy_paper.pdf)
- <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>
- [https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Philosophy/Critical\\_Reasoning\\_and\\_Writing\\_\(Levin\\_et\\_al.\)/01%3A\\_Introduction\\_to\\_Critical\\_Thinking\\_Reasoning\\_and\\_Logic/1.07%3A\\_Creating\\_a\\_Philosophical\\_Outline](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Philosophy/Critical_Reasoning_and_Writing_(Levin_et_al.)/01%3A_Introduction_to_Critical_Thinking_Reasoning_and_Logic/1.07%3A_Creating_a_Philosophical_Outline)
- <https://www.anu.edu.au/files/guidance/documents/Essay%2520Writing%2520Booklet%2520%2528FINAL%2529%2520Web%2520Version.pdf>