

# Abbreviations on paper comments

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These are abbreviations I use, when giving comments. It might also be of some use as a guide to things to avoid in your writing.

Updated: March 23

## NC

This is not clear/confusing.

## WYM

What do you mean by this?

## TV

This is vague/philosophically loaded. You need to specify or clarify what exactly you mean here.

## ATR

Adding transitioning sentences would be helpful.

## #WrongTransition

The words or phrasing used to transition from one sentence to the next might not be accurate to represent the connection between the two sentences. **Or at least, it is unclear or confusing what the connection is.** For example, you might start a sentence with “For example...”, but what follows isn’t really an example of anything mentioned in the previous sentence. Or you start a sentence with “Therefore,” but what comes next doesn’t really follow from what was said in the preceding sentence(s). Or you say “In other words,” but what comes next isn’t really a reiteration of the preceding sentence. Those ones are common enough to get their own hashtags.

Look closely at the sentences and think harder about what exactly the connection is between the sentences. Hopefully, upon reflection, you will see why I think that you misrepresented the connection.

## CNS

“Claims not supported” – i.e., you are making claims without providing evidence or arguments that support your claims.

## NTE

You need to say more to explain/support this.

## NRT

How (or why) is relevant to the thesis? You need to explain. Sometimes, it is just not relevant, and you can consider cutting the sentence(s) or paragraph(s).

## NP/NR

This is not helpful/relevant to answer the question.

## SNC

The structure of this is not clear: how does it connect to the previous and later paragraphs/sentences?

## WRS

What role does this part serve in the whole paper?

## DP

This is a different point from what is said before/after this, and it is not clear what their relation is.

## NAS

“Not a sentence” – i.e., this isn’t a grammatical sentence of English.

## NWA

The phrases/words are not appropriate

## CR

“Category error”, such as ‘The number two is blue’, ‘The theory of relativity is eating breakfast’, or ‘Green ideas sleep furiously’. There is a mismatch in connecting things from two distinct categories.

## RR

“repetitive”, i.e. here you’re repeating something you’ve just said, either in the same or only slightly different words.

## ANO

“Arguments, not opinions” – i.e., you are telling me your opinion on something, not giving me an argument.

Example: I do not find Popper’s position attractive.

I don’t care if you find Popper’s position attractive. I care whether you have arguments to establish that his position is wrong, or objections and criticisms to the arguments he makes in favour of his position.

## AS

“Avoid ‘Surely’” – i.e., in general you should avoid the words “surely”, “clearly”, “obviously”. As a rule, they are used (often unconsciously) to paper over weak spots in an argument.

Example: According to Dennett’s intentional stance, thermometers have beliefs in at least a weak sense. But surely thermometers don’t have beliefs in any sense. So Dennett must be wrong.

There's no actual argument being given here for the claim that thermometers don't have beliefs. Maybe it's just intended as a premise. But either way, adding "surely" is just a bit of rhetoric; it's not an argument.

(Conversely, look out for when other people say "surely" – often, it tells you where the hole in their argument is!)

## DoesItFollow?

You've used an entailment term like 'thus', 'so', 'therefore', 'hence', 'this implies...' or 'it follows that...', but what comes after the entailment term doesn't actually follow from what came before it, or at least I can't figure out how it does. I might also leave this comment if you say something like "If X then Y" or "Y, since X" or "X. Accordingly, Y.", and I don't see how X is supposed to support or explain Y or why I'm supposed to infer Y from X.

Alternatively, perhaps you've said that a certain thesis entails a certain thing (e.g., "If hedonism is true, then..."), and I think you need to walk the reader through how to get from the thesis to the alleged consequence. Or perhaps you haven't explicitly told us what that thesis is (see #Statelt), and I'm unable to assess whether it's true that the thesis has that implication.

Get into habit of seeing these entailment terms as "whiplash words". When you're editing your paper, and you see one of these terms, your head should whip back to what was previously said, to check that you're "earned" your 'thus' or 'therefore'.

## #ExplainQuotes

You've included a direct quotation from some author, and I'm suggesting that if you're going to include the quote, then you should do more to explain it.

Perhaps you've included a quotation from some paper you're discussing, and I'm suggesting that you restate the quoted material in your own words and/or explain how it's supposed to relate to what you've said before or after the quote. Unless both the meaning and relevance of the quoted material is crystal clear, it's important to provide some sort of gloss in your own words, in part to get everyone on the same page about what the quoted material is supposed to be saying and how it's supposed to be relevant to what you're saying.

Or perhaps you've included some quoted material that contains jargon or allusions that the reader won't be able to understand without your help. For instance, perhaps you want to quote Garcia in support of your claim that hedonists don't have to deny that knowledge is intrinsically valuable:

(A) According to Garcia, "hedonists and other proponents of the PR-principle are, in this way, able to avoid having to deny that knowledge is inherently valuable."

Having quoted this passage, it is now your responsibility to explain to your readers what Garcia means by 'the PR-principle', and what (in the context of her paper) she is alluding to when she says 'in this way'. You have to do this even if understanding

the PR-principle and “this way” is otherwise irrelevant to your paper. Moreover, because she says ‘inherently’, not ‘intrinsically’, you now have to connect the dots for the reader, demonstrating how her claim about inherent value is related to your claims about intrinsic value, perhaps requiring further textual evidence that she uses ‘inherently’ and ‘intrinsically’ interchangeably.

In principle, you could avoid these issues in (A) with something like this:

(B) According to Garcia, “hedonists ... are ... able to avoid having to deny that knowledge is [intrinsically] valuable.”

With the ellipses and the bracketed replacement of ‘inherently’, you avoid having to explain the jargon, allusions, and terminological discrepancies. But the downside of (B), apart from being an eyesore, is that it’s suspicious: when readers see all these ellipses and brackets, they wonder what you’re hiding, and whether you’re manipulating the quote to say something it really isn’t saying.

In many cases, providing the needed reiteration and explanation of a quote is more trouble than it’s worth—because it ends up introducing redundancies and unnecessary complications into your paper—and the best option is simply to remove the quote.

## #QuoteRule

You’re relying too much on direct quotation. For instance, perhaps you’ve quoted some unremarkable sentence from an article you’re citing, leaving readers to wonder why you aren’t able to just say it in your own words. Or perhaps the quoted material does more harm than good, because it contains unclarity or jargon or because there are mismatches between the terminology you use in your paper and the terminology used in the quote (see #ExplainQuotes).

A rule of thumb is to directly quote from a book or article only in the following three situations.

First, you plan to circle back and scrutinize the exact wording of the quoted passage.

Second, you’re explaining some author’s view, and you suspect that readers will suspect that you’ve mischaracterized that author’s views—perhaps because the view you’re attributing to them sounds crazy, or because you know that the author is widely misunderstood, or because your response to the author is so powerful and obvious that readers will suspect you must be misinterpreting them. In such cases, the quoted material serves as evidence that the attribution is accurate.

Third, you’re trying to motivate your project. For instance, if your paper is devoted to addressing a certain objection, a few concise quotes from key figures in the debate advancing the objection can help demonstrate the significance of your paper. Otherwise, it’s typically best to avoid direct quotation and instead put things in your own words, providing citations as necessary in the footnotes.

## AAT

“And another thing” – i.e., you are laying out a series of points in a very unstructured way.

Example: One objection to Fodor’s position is ...

Another objection is ...

Another objection is...

This is very unstructured and doesn’t help the reader know what to expect. It’s much better to say something like “There are three main objections to Fodor’s position. Firstly .... Secondly .... Thirdly ....”.

## IH

“Irrelevant history” – i.e., the essay makes an irrelevant historical observation

Example: The first person to entirely reject Hume’s position on induction was Popper, who...

How do you know he was the first? Have you done a systematic literature search? – almost certainly not. These kind of historical comments are very difficult to get right unless you know the subject very well – but in any case, why bother? It doesn’t (or shouldn’t) matter to your argument whether Popper was the first to do whatever he did; what matters is what his point actually is and whether it is correct.

## Int

“Intuition” – i.e., you are arguing (or claiming) that something is unintuitive and so should be rejected, or is intuitive and so should be accepted.

Example: Scientific realism accords better with our intuitions about the relation between our theories and the world

So what? Why is being intuitive any kind of guide to truth? (Now, maybe there are some areas of philosophy where we can argue that intuitions are relevant – Ethics, maybe? But at least in philosophy of mind, or science, or physics, or maths, there doesn’t seem to be any good reason to think that our intuitions are truth-tracking.)

## NAD

“Not a democracy” – i.e., philosophical disputes are not resolved by majority votes.

Example: Most philosophers are unconvinced by Popper’s arguments.

Are you sure? I bet the reading didn’t include a statistically significant opinion poll. But even if it did, who cares? What matters are what the arguments for and against Popper’s view are, not the percentage of people convinced by them. This is philosophy, not sociology.

## NN

“Name names” – i.e., don’t use the locution “some philosophers say” and similar without saying who you mean.

Example: Some philosophers argue that realism can be defended from the pessimistic meta-induction by careful consideration of the history of theory change.

Who? If you actually are thinking of a particular person, say who. Otherwise, it’s better to say something like “One possible defence of realism is...”. What matters is the argument, not whether some people are making it.

## S/P

“Sentence/Proposition” – i.e., you are confusing a sentence (which is something uttered or written in a language) with the proposition that the sentence expresses.

Example: Consider the claim that “There is no king of France”.

“There is no king of France” is a sentence. One utters that sentence to express the claim that there is no king of France. (This is not a terribly important issue, just pedantry.)

## Sep

Separate your criticisms of an argument from your presentation of an argument. That is, use one (or more) paragraph(s) to explain the point. Don’t begin criticising the point until a new paragraph (or, at the very least, a new sentence!) Doing it all in one paragraph tends to lead to dismissive, over-quick commentary on a point.

Example: Van Fraassen responds that theories are selected by a Darwinian process; however, this doesn’t explain how there come to be so many successful theories.

Van Fraassen’s point may be wrong, but you’re not plausibly going to do it justice unless you take time to explain it properly, and then move on to give proper consideration to its weaknesses.

## SN

“Says nothing”: i.e. you have written something that adds nothing to your actual argument.

Example: This argument is valid. However, we do not have to accept its conclusions unless we agree with its premises.

Well yes, obviously. That’s true for any argument at all. You don’t say anything useful by pointing it out here.

## SQ

“Scare quotes” – i.e., you have put something in scare quotes, which usually you shouldn’t.

Example: A belief only counts as knowledge if it is both “justified” and true.

Do you actually mean justified? If so, say it. If not, work out what you do mean and say that. Scare quotes are a device used (often unconsciously) to hedge and so avoid getting clear on what you mean.

(Incidentally, the above paragraph actually contains a use-mention error; it’s difficult to avoid it without creating confusion!)

## U/M

“Use/Mention” – i.e., you are confusing the use of a term with the mention of it.

Example: David is an example of a five-letter word

“David” is an example of a five-letter word; David is not a word at all, he’s a philosophy tutor.