Notes on Writing a Philosophy Paper

Handout Outline:

§1 Preliminary Remarks

"What is written without effort is in general read without pleasure" – Samuel Johnson (taken from 'McCarthy')

Some of you have written college level papers before, and some of those may have been philosophy papers. Others have not written either. This handout is designed to reach the latter student in as concise a way as possible without boring the former, and perhaps while offering some helpful advice to those practiced at the art of composing good collegiate essays.

There are four key steps to writing a good essay of any length:

(1) *Read* first – including the texts and prompts that form the basis of the essay;
(2) *Outline* – or not – at least attempt to outline to ensure you know what you are missing by not outlining;
(3) Only *write* after the first two points;
(4) *Revise*, with particular focus on spelling, grammar, punctuation, and formatting (including citations).

§2 Proper Reading

Believe it or not, reading is the first step towards writing. In fact, properly reading the material the first or second time around will save you time, agony, and anguish when it comes time to write. Carefully reading the writing prompt will also greatly assist you in the process.

Like sports, hobbies, music, cooking, or just about anything that is worth doing well, there are two general components to proper reading: practice and the right tools for the job. The correct tools for the job of reading carefully are different for different people, yet there are some guidelines.

To read well, you need a pen, pencil, highlighter, or some combination of the three. Also, you need a nice environment. This could be a coffee shop, a library, a desk in your house, a sofa, etc. The important point is to be aware of how well you are able to follow the narrative of your text depending on your environment, mood, and so forth.

If you find something works well, consider duplicating it the next time you read. Some things to consider are: Should you listen to music, and if so, is it distracting to have lyrics (as opposed to purely instrumental)? Do you prefer an austere desk and chair with just a lamp or a comfy chair with lots of pillows? Do some combinations of the aforementioned put you to sleep? What about coffee or tea?

Once you have the tools for the job then it is time to *read*. In a philosophy course you must be able to find and follow an author's *argument*. To do that you will need to be on the lookout for places where the author states his or her argument and its supporting premises. As you move through the text, you should identify these features by underlining, highlighting, or circling them. Once this has been achieved you should then take notes on what is important for both the author and you. If a point is underscored by the author, note it in the margins. If you think something is especially interesting, troublesome, or important, make a note of it. Doing this allows you to quickly situate yourself in the text when you are writing about it (usually at a later time) and it also reminds you of what you thought without requiring another reread.

Some questions you should be asking yourself about the text as you go are:

- What does the author mean?
- Is what he/she says true? (Why or why not?)
- What is his or her argument?
- What does the argument assume (implicitly or explicitly)?
- What evidence is offered to support his or her claim(s)?

One last note on reading: it is best to allow some time between reading and writing, yet not too much time. Two good rules of thumb are to read the material at least 24 hours before you write on it then set it aside, and to write about something no later than two weeks after you last read or discussed the topic.

§3 Writing

Outline*:* When beginning a paper, it is good to say to yourself: "to outline or not to outline, that is the question." Each paper you set out to write has different requirements, depending on the length of the paper and the complexity of your claims. In this course, the papers are short, and the claims should be straightforward, meaning NOT complex. Outlining is a good way to ensure that your claims are warranted and that you feel as though you have enough support to advance your claim. For this reason alone it can save you much time.

Style: Before writing a paper, you should consider what the appropriate style should be for the sort of paper you are writing. In this course you will write *philosophy* papers. The correct style is *analytic*, meaning that you will be analyzing the text, or 'breaking it down' into its parts and then saying something about each of them separately as well as together. The parts of the text will be its argument(s), claim(s), and conclusion(s).

After having identified and understood the parts of your paper-to-be and how they work together as a whole, you will need to relate this content and organization to your reader. You may think of writing as being in a dialogue or conversation with an 'ideal reader', someone who has read the readings for the course and has an opinion on the topic at issue. Keep the reader interested by guiding her through the questions you had that led you to your argument. Also, consider the merits of some objections to your analysis. Finally, remember to avoid being boring. Use transition phrases and avoid redundancy both in your words and in your ideas. A corollary of this is: *if something is worth saying, say it once, say it well, and then move on to the next thing worth speaking of.*

Content: There are three components that any analytic paper should have: a *thesis*, *argument*, and *supporting material* (i.e. references to the text or other sources of evidence). Your thesis should state the claim *you* are making, given what you have discovered in the text. The argument follows your thesis exactly but adds considerable exposition and evidence. The evidence is what you have found in the text to support your thesis. Note that the evidence is both a component of the argument and something that exists outside of the paper. You are *incorporating* the evidence and making it your own by how you *use it* in service of your argument. Yet, the textual support exists on its own and thus your particular usage of it needs to be justified by you, in your prose, and it may be questioned.

Paper Sections*:* Your paper should have three sections, an *introduction*, the *body* of the paper, and a *conclusion*. Each of these sections contains one or more of the three elements discussed above.

Introduction: Your introduction is not supposed to be focused solely on the subject matter you are writing about. Relating just a bit of *background* is often important and stylistically useful. The introduction should strive to motivate interest in the reader to hear your claims. Like any good story, a paper has a good beginning as well as a good punch line. Think of the introduction as the beginning, where you tell the reader what you will be saying, why you are saying it, and what support you will use in order to be persuasive.

Somewhere in the introduction your *thesis* should be clearly stated in the form of a sentence or two. Exactly where it shows up in the paragraph will depend on your writing strategy. Somewhere after the thesis, you should *forecast* to the reader in no more than three sentences what the ensuing arguments will be, how they will be organized, and what sort of evidence you will use to support them.

Even though you have a fair amount of work to do in the introduction it should be no longer than roughly ten sentences, so you will need to be precise and concise. Generally the introduction should read like a map of the essay, with particular focus on the exciting bits, and how they support your thesis.

Body Section: The function of the body section is to add supporting details to your thesis. It should not contain any entirely new claims, but instead should deepen and sharpen the claims already advanced in your introduction and thesis. This is *exposition*. If the thesis is the brain of the paper, and the argument is the skeleton, the body paragraphs 'put meat onto the bones.'

In the body section you should clearly state each of the premises in your argument and the *support* you have for the truth of those claims. You will probably also want to consider some premises from the text(s) you are analyzing and provide support for your interpretation of that text. Finally, you should also state and respond to objections to your argument. Once you have done these things, you are ready to conclude your essay.

Conclusion: Your conclusion is just as import as your introduction. Similarly, it should reiterate the central *thesis* of the paper. Only, it should also state how the evidence given in the body paragraphs supports the central claim of the paper. The conclusion should also discuss how well argued the paper has been and why certain objections that may be raised against it should not be fatal to the claim advanced.

It is common to conclude by offering some brief forward-looking statements or questions. This is not necessary, but is an interesting and satisfying way to end the essay. It allows the writer to show not only what was gained in the analysis but also what was lacking and remains left to be completed. No essay can possibly accomplish a complete analysis, so loose ends are part of the process. This approach to ending the essay allows you to specify what these might be and maintains the interest of the reader, which you have been cultivating thus far.

Citations: Correct citations are a must when writing a paper. Each time you quote or paraphrase material you will be expected to correctly attribute it. Generally footnotes, endnotes, or parenthetical attributions are all equal options for doing this. (The preferred citation style for this course can be found in §6 below.) Generally, the *Keys for Writers* guide (cited below) is a complete resource for any questions about citations.

§4 Revising

Spelling, Grammar, & Punctuation: It should go without saying that correct spelling and grammar are essential. Do not rely on spell checking software, as it often misses common spelling mistakes or misspells technical jargon (e.g. scholarly words). This advice is especially pertinent for grammar checkers, as they are often wrong, not to mention just weird. Grossly improper grammar or spelling will result in a grade reduction. McCarthy (cited below) offers some sound advice on spelling and grammar, including:

- Do not use a word unless you are sure you know what it means.
- Avoid sentence fragments.
- Before you begin peppering your paper with colons and semi-colons find out how they ought to be used. If you are not sure about the use of the lowly comma, further research is also in order.
- The normal practice when writing an expository essay is to employ the so-called historical present. For example, instead of writing "Aristotle argued that pleasure alone would not satisfy a decent human being," write "Aristotle argues that . . ."
- Maintain control of verb tenses; do not jump around from past to present to present progressive.
- In American English, periods and commas always appear inside of quotation marks (even if the quoted passage does not itself include a period or comma), whereas colons, semi-colons, question marks, and exclamation points go outside them, unless they form part of the quotation.

Formatting: For this course, essays must be typed, double-spaced, and prepared for *blind review*. This means that only the title page should contain information identifying the author. Essays should be written in 11- or 12-point font, either Arial, Palatino, or Times New Roman (I prefer Palatino). Include page numbers on the bottom right hand corner of your page, beginning with the first page. Margins should be 1 inch all around. Print your paper on plain white paper only. And no plastic sleeves or protectors, your paper will be in good hands with me.

Bibliography: A bibliography is required and is not included in the page count. I suggest the *Keys for Writers* for information on proper bibliographies, however there are many resources available for this information. Also see the Appendix below.

Title Page: Include a title page with the title of the course, your name, the date, and the title of your paper. This information should be centered and coherently organized. Because of this you will not need any creative spacing on the first page of your paper; the first page should begin with a reiteration of your title, followed by the beginning of the introduction. The title page is also not included in the overall page count.

§5 Concluding Remarks

Writing should be fun. It is your opportunity to show what you know, ask questions that are not in the typical test format, and answer them satisfactorily. Writing is also difficult and requires practice. The above guidelines are mostly just notes and, irrespective of what has been said, there is no one true way to write a paper. A good writer realizes the limitations to some approaches, the strengths to others, and tailors his or her strategy accordingly.

Good luck. Have fun. Be articulate.

References

This handout was composed with the help of the following sources and my own reflections on years of writing good (and not-so-good) philosophy papers.

- "Notes Toward the Writing of a Philosophy Paper." John C. McCarthy. Internet source: http://philosophy.cua.edu/Faculty/jcm/ (scroll to the bottom of the page, click on the link with the title in quotes above.
- *Writing Philosophy: a student's guide to writing philosophy essays.* Lewis Vaughn. Oxford University Press. New York, New York. 2006.
- *Keys for Writers: a brief handbook 2nd Ed.* Ann Raimes. Houghton Mifflin Company. New York, New York. 1999.
- See also: http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html and, http://www.pitt.edu/~bwr6/teaching/Guide.pdf

§6 Appendix: Proper Citation Style for HPS 0613: Morality and Medicine

In-text citations should be: ([Author(s)] [Publication Year], [Page Number]). So, all in texts citations should have the author, the year the cited work was published, a comma, and then the page number(s) of the quotation or paraphrase.

> *E.g.*: In Suppes' article, he makes the following claim: "x, y, and z" (Suppes 1967, 56-57). Yet, this claim is not nearly as interesting as the claim made by Da Costa and French that neither x, nor y, nor z, are the case (Da Costa and French 1990, 261).

Note that in this example the period that ends the sentence comes after the parenthetical citation; it does not go inside the quotations or at the end of the paraphrase. If you have to cite an article with more than two authors you should use "et. al." – as in (Suppes et. al. 2002, 55).

For the case of the Presidents Council on Bioethics, in this course you can just cite the author as "PCBE" for in text citations. So, you would say: The council claims that "an embryo is not just a hunk of cells" (PCBE 2002, 231).

Bibliographies should follow these examples:

Single authored work:
Schaffner, Kenneth (1993), *Discovery and Explanation in Biology and Medicine*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press

(Dual Author) Journal article:
Da Costa, Newton C. A. and Steven French (1990), "The Model-Theoretic Approach in the Philosophy of Science." *Philosophy of Science* 57: 248-265.

*Work in an edited volume:***
Suppes, Patrick (1967), "What is a Scientific Theory?" In S. Morgenbesser (ed.), *Philosophy of Science Today*. New York: Basic Books, 55-67.

Work from the Internet:
The President's Council on Bioethics (2002). *Human Cloning and Human Dignity: An Ethical Inquiry*. Available at: http://bioethics.gov/reports/cloningreport/index.html

Newspaper article:
Seelye, Katherine Q. (2001), "The President's Decision: The Overview; Bush Gives his Backing for Limited Research on Existing Stem Cells." *The New York Times*, August 10, 2001 (Late Ed.), Section A; Column 6; Page 1.

**When citing sources from Pence's *Classic Works* this is the format that should be used. Cite the author of the work and Pence's book as the edited work from which they are taken.