Writing a Philosophy Paper
C. Eliot (2016)

This handout explains how to write a strong paper and earn a desirable grade. A few sections explicitly offer advice, but otherwise this document should be understood as establishing requirements. Many of them reflect conventions of academic and persuasive writing I want to remind you of; some clarify what is expected in philosophy and in this course in particular. This document is slightly long not because there are a lot of requirements, but because it discusses and justifies most of the requirements. So, overall, this document aims to both work against the unfairness of opaque grading criteria and also contribute to your developing understanding of writing.

The main goal

Philosophy essays aim at advancing understanding. Your task is simultaneously to demonstrate that you understand something and to help your reader understand it. Its structure must be built around arguments, and secondarily the examination of concepts employed in them. Depending on the particular assignment, the arguments and concepts may be primarily another author's or primarily your own. Either way, your task is to present those arguments and concepts accessibly and lead your reader to understanding through a *progressive narrative*—an integrated sequence of ideas and evidence which builds in a continuous and instructive way from one idea to the next towards a conclusion.

Grading

Given that goal, your grade will be a function of the following four criteria. Each reflects a virtue of a paper which helps the reader understand.

1. **Mechanics** at the word and sentence levels (grammar, spelling, capitalization, punctuation, word-choice) - When I read each sentence, does its construction help make clear what it means?

2. **Development** at the paragraph and essay levels (structure, unity, transitions) - When I read each sentence or paragraph, do I understand how it relates to the one before it? When I reach the end of the essay, do I understand how it has built toward a conclusion?

3. **Accuracy** to source material (well-deployed quotations, approachable explanations, plausible interpretations) - Are the philosophical texts presented in a way that would, had I never read them, help me accurately understand their ideas, claims, and logic?

4. **Original analysis** (thoughtful discussion, logically appropriate objections) - When you raise questions, are they aimed at premises and reasoning rather than just at conclusions? Have you exhibited focused creativity in raising questions and objections and in offering possible responses to them?

As I calculate your grade, I will assign a score on a 4-point scale for each of those categories. They will count equally toward your overall essay grade. I will compute that by averaging them.

Formatting requirements

For this course, you should submit your paper online. I do not need a paper copy. You should submit your essay through the `Submit Here` link to be found under the `Assignments` button on the course's Blackboard site. Based on my current grading practice, I ask that you either double-space your paper or single-space and provide very large margins. I will type occasional comments in the spaces you provide.

To facilitate anonymous reading, please write your name at the very end of the paper, below the last line. I will not accept papers with names at the top.

Structure and Style

When you write an introduction, do not start with a grand generalization like "Plato was the greatest philosopher ever." It's a banal way to begin. Moreover, are you prepared to defend it? Your opening paragraph should highlight claims the remainder of your paper works to defend. Move straight to your topic.

Build towards a **conclusion**, usually a concluding paragraph, in which you quickly synthesize the contents and main point of the essay. Do not include ideas in the conclusion which you have not mentioned earlier.

Your tone should reflect the formality of a contemporary academic article like the contemporary articles we have read in the course, without sounding stuffy. You may use contractions, but avoid slang and conversational informality.

Some students imagine that an important criterion for high grades on philosophy papers is sounding 'deep' or profound. It's not. What you write may well be profound, but if you do succeed in expressing something profound, it will be because you had a clear thought and succeeded at expressing it clearly. Sometimes what we think of as *sounding* profound interferes with communicating insights.

Considerations special to philosophy

Most philosophy writing is in the **third person**, except when you want to discuss your own views. In philosophy, it is normal to write in the first person—to write "I," when discussing your ideas. Do not use "we" or "one" or something silly like "the analyst" to refer to yourself. However, do not write in the second person, using "you."

Write in the **present tense** when describing someone's ideas, even if they were written long ago. For example: "Plato argues that artists are dangerous and should be banished." Write mostly in the **active voice**. Using the passive voice often saves you the trouble of attributing ideas and responsibility form them, and that's a weakness. Consider the following: "It is thought that there is no distinction between ethics and morality." *By whom?* "The poor are kept in poverty." *By whom, or what?*

Often philosophical projects require discussing, at least briefly, the meanings of words, or how they are used in some context. When you do so, **do not quote a dictionary**'s definition. When using other authors' terms, say what *they* mean by the term. When not responding to another author, examine how the word is used in the context, and try to define it yourself. If dictionaries helped us philosophically understand "good," "true," "meaning," "knowledge," "mind," and such, we'd all just quit and go home.

Be careful using the terms "valid" and "sound," because they have particular meanings for philosophers. If you're not sure of them, avoid them. "Valid" and "sound" refer to arguments, not statements. "True" and "false" always refer to statements, and never to arguments.

Read and interpret others' ideas charitably. That means that you should consider—at least as a likely possibility—what you think is the most sensible interpretation of what the author intended. Generally aim not to criticize what the author did not intend to mean. Of course, charity should also have limits.

Using sources

Essays in philosophy are not research papers. You will not do well at them by researching well. Your goal is to demonstrate *your* understanding of the texts and arguments from the course and, for some assignments, to offer some creative, reflective thought about them. In the course of doing so, it will typically be necessary to cite short passages from the assigned texts to support your analysis—to show the reader that what you say is being said really is being said. You might also for instance want to quote a confusing sentence before trying to explain what you think it means.

However, an implication of this goal is that you will not benefit from writing what some other source has to say about the material. Telling me what, for example, the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy has to say about your subject is all and only a waste of time and space. I want you to demonstrate that *you* understand, not that they do.

One exception to this prohibition is when you want to compare your interpretation and analysis and conclusions to another source's. But because of the problems I mention in the next section, with figuring out what sources are good ones, I discourage you from invoking other sources this way without checking with me ahead of time about whether it would be useful to do so.

Unfortunately, this situation produces a temptation for some students: "I won't get points for citing what an internet source says," they think, "so maybe I can use what this website (or book, etc.) says without mentioning

it." This thought is most likely to occur when the material is difficult and when you are busy and tired. But listen: it is a BAD IDEA.

When you intentionally use other people's words *or* ideas without citing the source, it is called "*plagiarism*." Even copying a part of a sentence from anywhere without putting it in quotation marks counts as plagiarism. So does reading about the topic and then presenting the ideas you learn from reading without including a footnote or endnote to what you read.

Even one small instance of plagiarism will automatically earn you an F on your paper *and* for the course. An F can ruin your GPA. It's not worth it. If you feel you are in such difficult circumstances that you would consider plagiarizing, come chat with me about what we might do about the circumstances instead. It's easy not to plagiarize; just write your own ideas and cite any sources. In most cases, you won't need to use any sources other than those assigned, anyway.

Using online sources

Texts discussing philosophy vary widely in quality. You need to be aware of this variation as you select sources in the rare case you seek them. For non-experts, it can be difficult to tell the quality of research sources, and we are *all* non-experts in most fields. But there are some indicators of potential quality. Books and journal articles have typically been *peer-reviewed*, which means that experts in the field have reviewed them and endorsed their quality. Most websites are not peer-reviewed. It is very easy to be misled by them. I strongly discourage you from using material that's not peer-reviewed to learn philosophy. Regardless, if you do, you must note those sources at the end.

How to cite sources

Some of you, reading the above, will worry that it is possible to plagiarize accidentally. Once you understand some basic ideas about citation and use, there is no danger of accidental plagiarism. Here are the two crucial things to do in order to cite properly and avoid plagiarism:

1. For this course, you need not include a bibliography listing assigned readings for the course, because I know what they are. However, **if you have used any sources other than our course texts**, at the end of the paper you will need to **include a list of works cited**. The list need not be on a separate page. Any standard citation format will be fine as long as it communicates all the information needed to find each source. You can easily generate citations using the EasyBib module available through the Hofstra Library website, or just imitate a style like the following:

   FOR AN ARTICLE:
   Martha Nussbaum. 1988. Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13(1): 32–53.

   FOR A BOOK:
   Hardin, Garrett. 1993. *Living within Limits: Ecology, Economics, and Population Taboos.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

   FOR A WEB PAGE:
   Kraut, Richard. 2013. Plato. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* `http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato/`. [Include a date if there is one; if not, that's okay.]

2. For *both* reading assigned for the course and outside sources, **in-text citations are necessary**. These can take the form of footnotes, though it is even easier just to include the page number, and in some cases the author's name, in the text. There are two good ways to mention other people's words and ideas in your papers.

   (a) One possibility is to **quote the text directly**. Quoting is particularly useful when the author has a nice turn of phrase that makes the point clear. You should use quotations in moderation, however, because offering a quotation does not demonstrate that you understand what's being said. Therefore,

almost always accompany quotations with at least several lines of explanation of what's meant by them. Never let your point rest entirely on a quotation. Quotations of more than about a hundred words in your essay should be separated from your text as **indented blocks**, without quotation marks. An excellent way to use shorter quotes is to incorporate them into the flow of your own sentences. Here is an example:

> Singer not only takes this practice to be wrong, he moreover believes that anyone whose response to it "was not one of repugnance would be an unpleasant sort of person" (278).

Here is an example where the author's name is not clear. If it is not entirely clear which source you are referring to, include the author's name (not the editor's or translator's) in the in-text citation or footnote, like this:

> Some philosophers have even argued that anyone having such a response must be "an unpleasant sort of person" (Singer, 278).

Note that citation comes inside the period, but outside the quotation mark, so that it is very clear what it refers to.

(b) Another possibility is to **rewrite what the source says** in your own words. This helps demonstrate that you understand their ideas. Such summaries should always include the exact **page numbers** of their sources, and, if it is not clear from your writing, the **author's name**. The author's name is not needed in this example because it is clear that it is John Rawls:

> Rawls believes that inequalities are acceptable in society, but only when the existence of those inequalities benefits the members of society who are worst off (260).

How much do you need to rewrite? Sometimes you will use phrases which are under discussion, like "the greatest happiness." These should be attributed to some author at first, and then may be used subsequently, in isolation, without attribution. Otherwise, sentences must be written such that the structure and word choices in the sentence are identifiably your own. Remember, even when you have re-written material in your own words, the source and source page *still* must be cited! Failing to acknowledge the sources you have used for ideas or ways of presenting ideas is plagiarism just as much as using text verbatim is. If you were using Blackburn's discussion of Rawls to understand Rawls's views, for instance, the example above would have to be cited like "(Blackburn, 174)," with a listing of the Blackburn source in a footnote, endnote, or works cited list.

Finally, very specific, widely-available and unoriginal information like the birth and death dates of a philosopher do not need to be sourced. However, any information which is the discovery of, or original to, some source or researcher, is theirs. And so, too, is any way of representing a philosopher or any account of what a philosopher claimed. Therefore, either of the following is enough for plagiarism: (i) using information (other than the most basic, universally-acknowledged facts) or language or ideas from another source without mentioning that you have used that source; or (ii) using the same without acknowledging it in paragraph in which you do so, or without putting quotation marks around direct quotations.