

TIPS ON WRITING A PHILOSOPHY PAPER

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1. Constructing a Thesis Statement

A thesis statement is that sentence or two that asserts your position on a given issue, specifically, the position that you will be arguing for in your paper. This thesis statement should appear somewhere in the introduction to your paper. It can be the first sentence, although that's often a rather simplistic and unexciting way to begin your paper. More often, then, a thesis statement should appear at or near the end of the first paragraph or two.

The first step in developing a thesis (once you have decided on a topic) is to determine what your position is. To do this, you will need to thoroughly review all the relevant course materials. In most cases, you will have been presented with a number of arguments on both sides of the issue. Carefully analyze and evaluate all these arguments, taking notes as you do. In the process, you should develop your own take on the issue.

It is imperative that you clearly define your thesis before you begin writing, for it is your thesis that will guide you throughout the entire writing process—everything you write should somehow contribute to its defense. This doesn't mean that your thesis can't be revised, narrowed, or refined during the writing process; it's likely that it will need to be. The point is that you won't even know where to start unless you have at least a working thesis to guide you.

Your thesis should narrow the focus of your paper. Suppose you are asked to write on the mind-body problem. It's important to realize that it won't be possible to address every important philosophical issue concerning such a broad topic in just one paper. You'll need to choose a thesis that narrows the focus to something more manageable. Don't be too ambitious here. You're not going to solve something like the mind-body problem in five, or even twenty, pages. Of course, it's also important not to go too far in the opposite direction. Your thesis mustn't be trivial. Instead, your thesis should make an interesting assertion, one over which reasonable people might disagree.

Your thesis should be quite specific, thereby defining a sharp focus for your paper. Don't make a claim such as "People should donate money to hunger-relief organizations." This is vague. Are you saying that donating money to hunger-relief organizations is moral obligatory, or are you merely claiming that doing so would be supererogatory? In either case, you should state your reasons for making the claim that you do, for your thesis should provide some hint as to what the main argument will be.

To sum up, a thesis statement should: