

PHIL 449 – Overview of a Four-Sentence Paper¹

A four-sentence paper has the following structure:

1. [The author(s)] argue _____, because _____.
2. I respond _____, because _____.
3. One might object that _____.
4. I reply that _____.

Your job in a four-sentence paper is to fill in the blanks. Here is an example:

1. Some people argue that philosophy courses should focus on the Ancient Greek philosophers because they are better philosophers than contemporary philosophers.
2. I respond that contemporary philosophers are better philosophers, because they make the structure of their arguments more explicit and are more careful when it comes to drawing conceptual distinctions.
3. One might object that the Ancient Greek philosophers must be better philosophers because they are more widely known and studied.
4. I reply that a philosophers can become widely known and studied for other reasons besides being good at philosophy; for example, they might have just been the first person to discuss a given topic.

Your paper does not need to be literally four sentences long. For example, Sentence 4 could be two sentences, grammatically. But your paper should be very short and concise. Try to fit it into four sentences if you can.

Grading Four-Sentence Papers

You can earn one point for each sentence of the paper. You will earn a point for Sentence 1 if it does all of the following things:

- States the author's view accurately—that is, it attributes a view to the author that the author actually holds and expresses in their paper.
- States the author's view clearly and concisely. This means it is easy for the reader to understand and it is focused on one specific point.

An unclear version of Sentence 1: “Some people argue that Ancient Greek philosophers can play a role in philosophy education.” What role do the Ancient Greek philosophers play? What does it mean to say that they *can* play this role vs. that they *actually* play this role?

A version of Sentence 1 that lacks concision/focus: “Some people argue that philosophy courses should focus on the Ancient Greek philosophers because they are

¹ This handout is adapted from Danny Weltman's adaptation of Dennis Earl's article “The Four-Sentence Paper: A Template for Considering Objections and Replies.”

better philosophers than contemporary philosophers and, unlike contemporary philosophers, they actually lived their philosophy, so studying them connects us to the past in a way that reveals some of the limitations of contemporary thought.”

- Provides a supporting reason that the author gives for their view.

For example, if Sentence 1 above were “Some people argue that philosophy courses should focus on the Ancient Greek philosophers,” that would not be adequate, because you have not said why they argue this. (If they have more than one reason, just pick one).

You will earn a point for Sentence 2 if it does all of the following things:

- States your response clearly and concisely.
- Raises a relevant response. The response should directly contest the view stated in Sentence 1 by providing a reason to reject the view.

An example of an irrelevant response: “I respond that Ancient Greek philosophers are already taught in most philosophy courses because they are popular with students.” This is irrelevant because it’s compatible with the view it’s supposedly contesting.

- Provides a supporting reason for the response that helps it contest the original view.

A (subtle) example of a questionable supporting reason: “I respond that contemporary philosophers are better philosophers, because they have had the opportunity to learn from earlier philosophers and build on their work.”

You will earn a point for Sentence 3 if it does all of the following things:

- States the objection clearly and concisely.
- Raises a relevant objection that directly contests your response stated in Sentence 2.
- Raises a plausible objection that someone would reasonably consider.

An implausible objection: “One might object that the Ancient Greek philosophers must be better philosophers because people from Greece are better at all activities.”

- Raises an original objection that doesn’t just restate Sentence 1.

For example, this would not be an original objection: “One might object that the Ancient Greek philosophers produced much better philosophical works than contemporary philosophers.”

You will earn a point for Sentence 4 if it does all of the things that Sentence 2 does, but focuses on Sentence 3 rather than Sentence 1.