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This document contains the following information:

- Helpful hints (oral presentations)
- General remarks
- Helpful hints (writing)
- Note on Quotations and Plagiarism

You will find some of the points mentioned below here: [Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper](#) (From James Pryor at Harvard University). Check especially the longer version of [Peter Suber's guide](#) to writing essays. In addition, you can also check [these links](#). They provide you with further information.

“Helpful Hints & Suggestions” for producing an excellent oral presentation.

- Aim for depth over breadth. Don't list all the topics discussed in the reading for that day (there's no depth here). Don't even summarize the author's position on all those topics (there could be depth here but the time limit will force these readings to be superficial). Decide what the important topics are, using your own standards of importance. Then offer a reading of the author's position on those topics. Master the detail and give us the perspective on the author's position that results.
- Tell us on which topics you've chosen to focus. This will help orient us. Then when you start to give fine-grained detail on the author's arguments and conclusions on those topics, we'll know what to do with them.
- Similarly, tell us what the author's conclusions are on the questions in the day's reading. This will help orient us. Then when you start to give detail on the author's supporting arguments, we'll know where you're going with them.
- Find the key terms and define them. Find the key distinctions and explain them. Find the key arguments and present them. Decide what's primary and what's secondary, and focus on what's primary.
- The point is to help us understand the author, not to offer your own views in place of the author's. Criticism should come out (if at all) in the discussion phase. The presentation is all about what the author said.
- You may consult your notes, of course, but please do not read your presentations. That is not only dull for your audience; it forecloses the opportunity to practice public speaking.

General Remarks

Writing Philosophy, by Prof. Peter Lipton, Department of History and Philosophy, Cambridge University

I. Awkwardness

Awkward writing makes the reader uncomfortable. It is ungrammatical, unclear, choppy, or just too difficult to follow. One cause of awkward writing is not using your own words. Instead, you rely on the phrases and constructions of the author you are discussing. The resulting mixture of your author's style and your own is almost always awkward. Even if you are describing someone else's views, use your own words. The most general and important cause of awkwardness, however, is simply the failure to revise. Most writers produce awkward sentences the first time around; good writers take the time to review their writing and know how to spot awkwardness and how to eliminate it. You should assume that the first draft of each sentence will have to be fixed up. Writing on a word processor may make this revision easier and less time-consuming. The best way to test for awkwardness is to read your draft out loud. Most people have a better ear than eye, and if it sounds good it will usually read well.

II. Empathy

Once you understand something, it is difficult to remember what it was like not to understand it; but you have to do this to get your point across. To write effectively you must put yourself in the reader's shoes. (Pretend that your reader is a friend not in the class rather than the teacher.) The reader cannot read your mind and she hasn't just spent five hours thinking about your topic. So she needs plenty of help. Don't just make your point, explain it. Give an example. Approach it from several angles. Above all, keep your writing concrete, even in as abstract a subject as philosophy, because abstract writing loses the reader. In addition to keeping your reader on board, empathy helps you to figure out what it will take to convince her that what you write is true. You already believe yourself, but your reader needs an argument. Think of yourself as selling your point of view, or as defending yourself in front of a jury.

III. Choreography

An essay is not a list of sentences: it has structure. The structure should be obvious to the reader. Write informative introductions and conclusions. The introduction should not only introduce the topic, it should introduce your argument. That means that you should tell the reader what you are going to prove and how you are going to prove it. Unless the introduction gives the reader a clear map of the essay, she is likely to get lost. Be direct and specific. Replace sentences like "Throughout the centuries, the greatest minds have pondered the intractable problem of free will" with "In this essay, I will show that free will is impossible". The conclusion of the essay should tell the reader what has been accomplished and why the struggle was worthwhile. It should remind the reader how the different moves in the body of the essay fit together to form a coherent argument.

Think of your essay as composed of a series of descriptive and argumentative moves. Each major move deserves a paragraph. Generally speaking, a paragraph should start with a transition sentence or a topic sentence. A transition sentence indicates how the paragraph follows from the previous one; a topic sentence says what the paragraph is about. Both types of

sentence are really miniature maps. In the middle of a paragraph you may want to give another map, explaining how the move you are making here is connected to others you have made or will make. The order of your paragraphs is crucial. The reader should have a clear sense of development and progress as she reads. Later paragraphs should build on what has come before, and the reader should have a feeling of steady forward motion. To achieve this effect, you must make sure that your sentences hang together. Think about glue. You can get glue from maps, from transition sentences and words, and especially from the logic of your argument.

IV. Originality

There is room for originality even when you are out to give an accurate description of someone else's position. You can be original by using your own words, your own explanations, and your own examples. Of course in a critical essay there is much more scope for original work: most of the arguments should be your own. This worries some beginning philosophy students, who think they don't know how to come up with their own arguments. Do not deceive yourself: Plato did not use up all the good and easy moves, nor do you have to be a Plato to come up with original philosophy.

It is difficult to teach creativity, but here are three techniques that may help. First, make distinctions. For example, instead of talking about knowledge in general, distinguish knowledge based on what others tell you from knowledge based on your own observation. Often, once you make a good distinction, you will see a fruitful and original line of argument. Second, consider comebacks. If you make an objection to one of Plato's arguments, do not suppose that he would immediately admit defeat. Instead, make a reply on his behalf: the resulting 'dialectic' will help you with your own arguments. Lastly, play the why game. As you learned as a child, whatever someone says, you can always ask why. Play that game with your own claims. By forcing yourself to answer a few of those "why's" you will push your own creativity. The technique of the why game suggests a more general point. Often the problem is not lack of originality; it is rather that the originality is not exploited. When you have a good point, don't throw it away in one sentence. Make the most of it: explain it, extend it, give an example, and show connections. Push your own good ideas as deep as they will go.

“Helpful Hints & Suggestions” for producing an excellent piece of writing (with some examples):

General points

- avoid using the second person pronoun “you” when describing a philosophical position; instead use, e.g., “one” or “people” or “human beings”
 - i one can become happy, according to Aristotle, only if one exercises virtue (good)
 - ii people (or human beings) can become happy, according to Aristotle, if they exercise virtue (good)

iii you can become happy, according to Aristotle, only if you exercise virtue (no good)

- avoid using *personal* descriptions in scholarly papers (exception: introduction, see below)
 - i. "I feel that" (no good)
 - ii. "I wonder if" (no good)
 - iii. "I believe that" (no good)
- when presenting claims of someone other than yourself, it is helpful to indicate this once in a while (though you do not have to do this for every claim)
 - i According to Aristotle, happiness is the ultimate and final good for man
 - ii Virtue, in Aristotle's view, requires one to hit the middle mark – or mean – between excess and deficiency, both of which are vices, in all of one's actions
 - iii Aristotle claims that man is a social animal
- make sure that your nouns agree in number
 - i when one achieves happiness, one is most fully human (good)
 - ii when one achieves happiness, they are most fully human (no good)(this advice also holds regarding agreement in number between nouns and verbs)
- begin each paragraph with an appropriate opening sentence, which serves to introduce what you aim to write about in that paragraph; in some cases this will require some sort of transition phrase or sentence that announces that you intend to shift themes
 - i. In contrast to Aristotle's position, which argues that virtue is relative to each man, Kant claims that morality is and must be entirely universal.
(Importantly, this sentence successfully announces that you will begin to discuss Kant's claims, and thus it provides a transition to your next topic)
- begin your paper with an introduction that lays out what you hope to accomplish in your paper. A good introduction contains the topic, a problem/question, a thesis/solution, issues and the order of your paper.

Example 1:

[W-Part, Topic] In the chapter "The Meaning of Words" of his book *What does it all mean?* (1987) Thomas Nagel raises the question of how meaning and words are interrelated. [Thesis] In this paper I will explore how Nagel's questions can be discussed within the framework of René Magritte's picture *This is not a pipe* that he painted in 1938. [Outline] In a first step, I shall give an overview about Nagel's chapter, in a second step I shall explore Magritte's picture, before I conclude with the thesis that Magritte and Nagel both hold that words (and pictures) are not mere representations of objects. In other words, Magritte shows what Nagel argues for.

Example 2:

[TOPIC] Human education is one of the central thematics that Plato discusses in book seven of his work *Republic*. It is commonly called *Cave Allegory*. [THESIS] In my paper I

will claim that Plato has a specific conception of the relation between life and truth, namely Plato thinks that through education our lives become guided by truth, whereas if we are uneducated we remain “prisoners.” Through ongoing education - which ends with death - mankind frees itself. I will support this thesis by a detailed interpretation of four central elements that are part of the Allegory. [OUTLINE, ISSUES] In a first part of this paper I will give an interpretation of the initial situation by which our lives are characterized (cave), in a second part I will explain the crucial moment of “release,” in a third part I will give an overview of the development of a soul that is “moved” by education, and I will finish my paper by giving an exploration of the central motivation of the development, which is truth.

- make sure to cite all claims & thoughts that are not your own, whether you quote them directly or you simply paraphrase them (thus, all examples in bulleted points # 1, 2, & the last part of 4 above would require a citation, at least the first time that you present them)
 - i. Kant claims that he did not discover the moral law, but that it is already inscribed within all human beings, even though they may not be able to articulate it.
 - Cite this either as: (Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals, vi) or, since we are only dealing with one Kant text, (Kant, vi). (note that if we were dealing with more than one text from the same author, you would need to cite the text in the first way)
 - Though this sentence is not a quote, because it clearly states information that did not come from me, I must cite it.
 - If you deal with a certain section of a text within one paragraph, you may wait to cite it until the end of that paragraph, at which point you may cite even a small range of pages from which the information came)
- Example: blah, blah, blah.....paragraph ends, (nichomachean Ethics, 29-32), or, (Aristotle, 29-32).

(However, if you do actually quote – *which you should do only with relevance* – you must cite the text directly following the end of the quote, and you must place the quoted text within quotation marks, whereas with paraphrased information, you need not place text in quotation marks)

Unexplained, Unsubstantiated, and Irrelevant Statements. It is not enough simply to make a statement in a scholarly paper, you must explain the statement and make it clear to the reader how the statement is relevant to the topic of the paper. If you are writing on the ideas of a particular philosopher, you must not only be concerned with what the philosopher says, but why he or she says it, and why you are reporting it in your paper. It would be of little help to a reader of a paper on Descartes' concept of nature, for example, to be told that Descartes believed that God exists if nothing is said about the strategy he uses to prove God's existence and Descartes' theism is never connected to his concept of the natural world. Likewise, if you

offer your own opinion on a particular issue in a paper, it is not sufficient simply to state your opinion--you must also give your reasons for having the opinion you have.

When writing a paper, then, you should adopt the following rules of thumb:

- (1) never raise a topic unless you are prepared to provide as full an explanation as is necessary to show its relevance to the subject matter of the paper, and
- (2) only offer your own opinion when you are prepared to provide an argument or give some reasons in support of it.

Raising Unanswered Questions. It is the writer's task in a research paper to offer some conclusions concerning the subject matter of the paper, whether it be a philosophical issue or the views of a particular philosopher. The writer fails in this responsibility when he or she raises questions in a paper while offering no suggestions as to how these questions might be answered. You should not, then, ask a question of your reader unless you are prepared to answer it.

You should also avoid asking rhetorical questions, that is, making statements or claims expressed in interrogative form. Often inexperienced writers will ask a rhetorical question when they feel unsure of a claim that they wish to make in a paper. Thus instead of writing, "His theory of forms determined, in significant ways, the solutions Plato offered to the moral issues and dilemmas of his day," a tentative writer might make the same point in interrogative form by writing, "Wasn't it the theory of forms that determined, in significant ways, the solutions that Plato offered to the moral issues and dilemmas of his day?" Attempts to avoid the criticism of readers in this manner usually fail: it is clear in these instances, despite the evasive wording, that a claim is being made, and the interrogative form only serves to give the reader the impression that the writer has not thoroughly researched the paper topic.

Frequent Quotations. Quotations should be used only as a means of supporting views, ideas, interpretations, etc., that you have already explained in your paper in your own words. They should never be used as a substitute for your explanation. Consequently, you should never write your paper by simply compiling a series of quotations. The bulk of the text of your paper should be your own writing, not quotations from primary and secondary sources.

Unfair Criticism. The rule that a writer should follow in criticizing the views of a philosopher is often called the "Principle of Charity." According to this principle, before offering a criticism of a philosopher's views it is considered good practice for the writer to provide a sympathetic account of those views. Without such an account the reader cannot judge whether the criticism of a philosopher offered by a writer is cogent, or whether it is based simply on the writer's misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the philosopher's views. At times writers will deliberately misrepresent the views of a philosopher so as to make those views easier to attack. This is considered a fallacy of reasoning called a "Straw Man Argument," and should always be avoided.

Make the structure of your paper obvious (important!)

You should make the structure of your paper obvious to the reader. Your reader shouldn't have to exert any effort to figure it out. Beat him over the head with it.

How can you do this?

First of all, use connective words, like:

- because, since, given this argument
- thus, therefore, hence, it follows that, consequently
- nevertheless, however, but
- in the first case, on the other hand

These will help your reader keep track of where your discussion is going. Be sure you use these words correctly! If you say "P. Thus Q." then you are claiming that P is a good reason to accept Q. You had better be right. If you aren't, we'll complain. Don't throw in a "thus" or a "therefore" to make your train of thought sound more logical than it really is.

Another way you can help make the structure of your paper obvious is by telling the reader what you've done so far and what you're going to do next. You can say things like:

- I will begin by...
- Before I say what is wrong with this argument, I want to...
- These passages suggest that...
- I will now defend this claim...
- Further support for this claim comes from...
- For example...

These signposts really make a big difference. Consider the following two paper fragments:

- ...We've just seen how X says that P. I will now present two arguments that not-P. My first argument is...
- My second argument that not-P is...
- X might respond to my arguments in several ways. For instance, he could say that... However this response fails, because...
- Another way that X might respond to my arguments is by claiming that...
- This response also fails, because...
- So we have seen that none of X's replies to my argument that not-P succeed. Hence, we should reject X's claim that P.
- I will argue for the view that Q.
- There are three reasons to believe Q. Firstly...
Secondly...
Thirdly...
- The strongest objection to Q says...
- However, this objection does not succeed, for the following reason...

Isn't it easy to see what the structure of these papers is? You want it to be just as easy in your own papers.

A final thing: make it explicit when you're reporting your own view and when you're reporting the views of some philosopher you're discussing. The reader should never be in doubt about whose claims you're presenting in a given paragraph.

You can't make the structure of your paper obvious if you don't know what the structure of your paper is, or if your paper has no structure. That's why making an outline is so important.

Be concise, but explain yourself fully To write a good philosophy paper, you need to be concise

but at the same time explain yourself fully. These demands might seem to pull in opposite directions. (It's as if the first said "Don't talk too much," and the second said "Talk a lot.") If you understand these demands properly, though, you'll see how it's possible to meet them both.

- We tell you to be concise because we don't want you to ramble on about everything you know about a given topic, trying to show how learned and intelligent you are. Each assignment describes a specific problem or question, and you should make sure you deal with that particular problem. Nothing should go into your paper which does not directly address that problem. Prune out everything else. It is always better to concentrate on one or two points and develop them in depth than to try to cram in too much. One or two well-mapped paths are better than an impenetrable jungle.
- Formulate the central problem or question you wish to address at the beginning of your paper, and keep it in mind at all times. Make it clear what the problem is, and why it is a problem. Be sure that everything you write is relevant to that central problem. In addition, be sure to say in the paper how it is relevant. Don't make your reader guess.
- One thing I mean by "explain yourself fully" is that, when you have a good point, you shouldn't just toss it off in one sentence. Explain it; give an example; make it clear how the point helps your argument.
- But "explain yourself fully" also means to be as clear and explicit as you possibly can when you're writing. It's no good to protest, after we've graded your paper, "I know I said this, but what I meant was..." Say exactly what you mean, in the first place. Part of what you're being graded on is how well you can do that.
- Pretend that your reader has not read the material you're discussing, and has not given the topic much thought in advance. This will of course not be true. But if you write as if it were true, it will force you to explain any technical terms, to illustrate strange or obscure distinctions, and to be as explicit as possible when you summarize what some other philosopher said.

Note on Quotations and Plagiarism

- You should cite your sources whether you quote or merely paraphrase them. A citation can be a footnote, an endnote, or a parenthetical note within your main text. It should identify the author and work from which the cited idea or language is taken, and usually the publisher, date, and pages as well. Citation formats vary from discipline to discipline. In literary studies, for example, the generally accepted citation style is MLA (Modern Languages Association) style, which calls for parenthetical page references and then a Works Cited rather than a Bibliography. Here are some examples of how to include texts in an MLA-style Works Cited:

Book:

Author's last name, first name. Title. Place of publication: publisher, year.

Article in a journal:

Author's last name, first name. "Title." Periodical Title Volume # (year): page range.

An example from an article in a collection of essays:

Fisher, Sheila. "Leaving Morgan Aside: Women, History, and Revisionism in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." *Medieval English Poetry*. Ed. Stephanie Trigg. London: Longman, 1993. 138-55.

An example of a book:

Baker, Houston A., Jr. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984.

An example of an article in a journal:

Lyne, William. "The Signifying Modernist: Ralph Ellison and the Limits of the Double Consciousness." *PMLA* 107(1992): 319-30.

- Quotations must be marked by quotation marks or by indenting, and they must include a citation to avoid plagiarism. You can quote whole sentences, useful phrases, or striking terms, depending on your purposes and style. But whenever the language is not your own, you must mark it as a quotation.
- Paraphrases must still cite the original to avoid plagiarism. The original author gave you both an idea and an expression of an idea. Even if you borrow only the idea without the expression, the author still deserves credit.
- Research in which you consult and learn from sources of all kinds is compatible with a strict watchfulness for plagiarism. If you borrow something from another, you should cite that person, and follow the rules about quotation and paraphrase. After a point, you will have thoughts of your own that are difficult to trace back to any particular source or inspiration. They are your own, and need not be cited. It has been said that good scholars are like bees: they collect pollen from all over, but they turn it into their own honey.
- Similarly, you should not be afraid to seek or accept legitimate help from tutors and friends. If a friend reads your paper and gives you helpful criticism, or if a tutor helps you with your writing, you can benefit from that help without stepping over the line of plagiarism. The best way is to hear the criticism, the suggestions, or the principles of your "critics," to understand them, and to revise your paper in light of your understanding. Whether a paragraph rewritten with the help of a friend or tutor is really your own can be a very difficult question requiring fine judgment. It is your responsibility to use your judgment to prevent overeager helpers from depriving you of authorship.
- To **plagiarize** is to borrow the ideas or language of others without giving appropriate credit, and to present them as your own. As an academic crime it ranks with the falsification of scientific data. It is dishonest, misleading to the reader, unfair to the

original author, and it subverts the goals of education and scholarship. Because it is a serious violation of academic integrity, plagiarism is punished at virtually all educational institutions.