A top-down view of a person's hands typing on a silver laptop keyboard. The laptop is on a wooden desk. To the left, there is a white notebook with a pen and a pair of glasses. A cup of coffee is partially visible at the top. A dark grey semi-transparent box with white text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

WRITING A  
PHILOSOPHICAL  
ESSAY

# WHAT IS A PHILOSOPHY PAPER?

It consists of **a reasoned defense of some claim.**

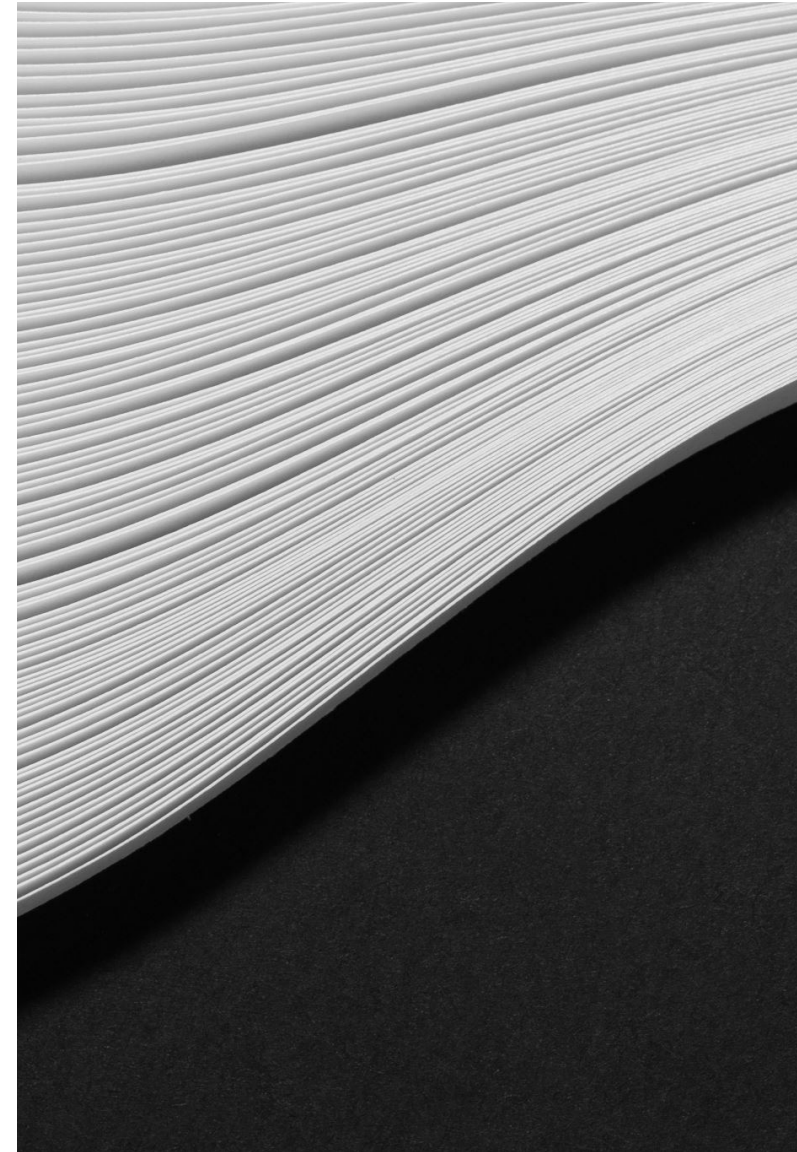
It must **offer an argument.** It can't consist in the mere report of your opinions, nor in a mere report of the opinions of the philosophers we discuss. You have to defend the claims you make. You have to offer reasons to believe them.

So, you can't just say:

*My view is that P.*

You must say something like:

*My view is that P. **I believe this because...***



# WHAT DO PHILOSOPHY PAPERS AIM TO DO?

Criticize that argument; or show that certain arguments for the thesis are no good.

Defend the argument or thesis against someone else's criticism.

Offer reasons to believe the thesis.

Offer counter-examples to the thesis.


Contrast the strengths and weaknesses of two opposing views.

Give examples which help explain the thesis, or which help to make the thesis more plausible.

Discuss what consequences the thesis would have, if true.

Revise the thesis in the light of some objection.





# THE CURSE OF KNOWLEDGE

# THE THESIS STATEMENT

Have a clearly stated thesis.

Your thesis statement should state your argument succinctly in one sentence.

Good papers have one and only one thesis.

Be sure this thesis is the same at the beginning and the end of the paper.

# INTRODUCTION

Be brief (i.e. one paragraph). You do not need your entire paper in the introduction.

Don't wax poetic about the state of philosophy or knowledge more generally.

3 main objectives:

i. Briefly motivate the problem (1-3 sentences)

ii. Thesis Statement – What are you arguing in your paper (1 sentence)

iii. Statement of Procedure – How you will argue for your thesis (2-3 sentences)

- E.g.: Plato argues X. I contend that X fails because \_\_\_\_\_. My argument against X proceeds in three sections: After first articulating Plato's argument for X (§1), I show that X \_\_\_\_\_ [why you think X fails—be specific] (§2). I then offer a response on Plato's behalf to my argument in §2, and I show that this reply ultimately fails (§3).

# STRUCTURE

(A VERY ROUGH GUIDELINE)

- a) **Exegesis.** Explain the view in question.
- b) **Objection(s).** Offer an objection to the view set out in (a).
  - a) Do not throw the kitchen sink at a view.
  - b) One or two well-articulated objection(s) that are fully defended make for the strongest papers.
- c) **Rejoinder.** Consider the best possible reply to the objection.
- d) **Analysis.** Does the response in (c) succeed? Does the view in (a) need to be modified in light of your argument in (b) and (c)?
- e) **Conclusion.**

# SIGNPOSTING

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# PARAGRAPHS

- Every paragraph should advance a piece of your argument.
- Make it clear what you are attempting to show in each paragraph.
- Try to focus your argument within each paragraph in order to clearly highlight the distinct claims you are making to advance your overall thesis.
- Note that paragraphs are not entire sections of your paper.

# SUPPORTING YOUR ARGUMENT

- Support your claims with textual evidence, **clearly cited**.
- Both **direct quotations** and **paraphrasing**.
- When explaining the overall argument of an author's work (the exegesis), **try to paraphrase** the argument as much as possible.
- Failure to cite arguments or statements that are not your own is plagiarism, **even when it is unintentional**.



# ANALYSIS OF QUOTATIONS

The strategic use of quotations can drive home important points in your paper.

But quotations do not stand alone.

You must guide your reader through the interpretation.

Explain your interpretation and how it advances your argument.



# BE MODEST

A good philosophy paper is (typically) modest and **makes a small point.**

But it makes that point **clearly** and **straightforwardly**, and it offers good reasons in support of it.

Don't try to accomplish too much in your paper.

The result is usually a paper that's hard to read, and full of inadequately defended and poorly explained claims.

Don't try to establish any earth-shattering conclusions in your short paper.

# QUESTIONS TO KEEP IN MIND

- What conclusion does the author wish to reach?
- Why is that conclusion interesting?
- What is the argument, and is it valid?
- Should the premises of the argument be accepted?
- If we accept the argument and conclusion, what else follows?

Prewriting

1

# PRYOR'S 'THREE STAGES OF WRITING'

Drafting

Revising

3



# STAGE 1: EARLY STAGES

*Pre-drafting:* involves taking notes on readings, sketching ideas, trying to explain the main argument, and outlining.

- **Start early:** philosophical problems require extended reflection and preparation
- Discuss the issues with others
- **Outline:** a good outline can be 80% of the work.



## STAGE 2: WRITE A DRAFT

Use simple, straightforward prose.

Make the structure of your paper extremely obvious.

- Use transition words
- Signpost: remind the reader where you were, and where you're going.
- Be explicit about when you're reporting your own view vs. someone else's view

Be concise, but explain yourself fully.

- Focus only on the problem you're addressing.
- Give examples; say exactly what you mean.
- Imagine that your reader is *lazy, stupid, and mean*.



## STAGE 2: WRITE A DRAFT

### Use plenty of examples and definitions

- Examples can make a point less abstract and help you define central notions.
- Don't vary vocabulary solely for sake of variety.
- Use words with precise philosophical meanings.

### Present and assess views of others

- Make sure you understand exactly the position you're criticizing. Articulate it clearly and accurately.
- Be charitable.
- Only summarize parts of views that are directly relevant to your task.
- Recall: direct quotes should be used sparingly and with explanation. Paraphrase and cite.



## STAGE 3: REWRITE, AND KEEP REWRITING

**Fresh eyes:** Write your paper early enough for you to **set it aside for at least a day** so that you can read it with fresh eyes and make sure that your argument is clear.

Ask yourself questions like:

- Is this sentence clear and concise?
- Does this paragraph advance my argument?
- Do the transitions between these sentences (or paragraphs) make sense?
- Are any technical terms defined?
- Did I fully address the essay question?

