

Guidelines for Papers

Please consult with me before you start working on your paper, to make sure that the topic you have chosen is in fact suitable for this assignment.

Strategy: As you are working your way through the material covered in our readings and during class discussion, you should take lots of notes and jot down any initial ideas you may have which could prove useful for your paper. Once you have decided which set of issues you want to pursue in your paper, begin to formulate a **preliminary thesis**. Hopefully, you already had something in mind that you wanted to argue for when you picked the particular set of issues you want to pursue in your paper; this could be your preliminary thesis. The next step is to come up with a **preliminary outline** (all of this can of course be changed later on; it's just to get you started). The outline should have roughly the structure of your paper (see below): an introduction, a main body and a conclusion. Since the format for the introduction and the conclusion is more or less set, most of your energy should go into deciding on the structure of the main body of your paper. The main thing I look for is that you succeed in **giving arguments** for your thesis. At any point during this process, it is very helpful to consult with others (fellow students, me, and whoever else will listen).

Spelling/Grammar: Please proofread your paper for spelling and grammar several times before you hand it in. A college-level piece of writing should not contain any mistakes in spelling or grammar, other than the occasional oversight. (If English is not your first language, I will of course take that into consideration when grading your paper.)

Structure: Your paper should have at least three sections: an introduction, a main section, and a conclusion. You may want to divide the main section into subsections, if suitable.

Introduction: Your paper should begin with a short introduction (no more than a few paragraphs). The introduction has two functions. First, say something to motivate the topic of your paper. What is at issue? Why is it interesting? etc. Secondly, towards the end of the last paragraph of your introduction, you should state clearly, in a few sentences, what you are going to accomplish in your paper. Please avoid "grand" introductions of the kind, "Down through the ages, mankind has been puzzled by ...".

Main Section: This is where you argue for the point you want to make. Your paper should have some unity. Be careful to avoid the "laundry list" phenomenon: your paper should not simply enumerate different interesting points you find in the readings. Focus on one issue or a handful of connected issues. Moreover, your paper should not be a mere book report. Of course, part of your job will be to give a correct statement of the views on which you are commenting; but your paper should go beyond that.

Conclusion: Your paper should end with a short conclusion (no more than a few paragraphs). The central function of the conclusion is to summarize the main points of your paper. You may

want to point out interesting implications of the view you were defending or important related questions you had to leave untouched.

Titles: Titles of books are underlined or italicized (e.g., Homer's *Odyssey* or *Iliad*); titles of articles are placed in quotation marks (e.g., G.E. Moore's "Proof of an External World"). Titles of chapters within books also appear in quotation marks. If you are dealing with a title but are not sure whether it's a chapter, an article or a book, either put it in quotation marks or underline or italicize it; but you need to do something to indicate it is a title.

Quotations: While your paper should reveal intimate acquaintance with the readings assigned for the course, you should not devote a lot of space to direct quotations. If you feel that you absolutely need to quote a passage, then make it clear that you are doing so by indenting and single-spacing the passage (for longer quotes). If you are only quoting a few words, simply put them in quotation marks. Please make sure to give the reference (either in a footnote or in parentheses at the end of the quotation).

Charity: Being charitable means that you do not ascribe views to somebody, unless they have *some* measure of plausibility. Treat your target as an intelligent, rational being, who would not assert anything that is obviously false or ridiculous. Being charitable will make your arguments much more interesting.

Clarity: Lay out your arguments slowly, carefully, and systematically. Your paper should go through a few versions before you hand it in. The final product should be clean and easily intelligible. Understanding your paper should not require your audience to be able to read your mind.

Relevance: Given the complexity of the issues involved, make sure that you only mention what is immediately relevant to your point.

Economy: Use your space wisely. Try not to be repetitive. Express your point as concisely as possible. "Economy" often goes along with "Relevance": you might not use your space wisely, because you put down things that are irrelevant. Alternatively, you might say something that is relevant but say it in a particularly long-winded sort of way.

Text: Please look at the readings on which you are commenting very carefully. It is impossible to do well on this assignment, unless you have spent a good deal of time on your readings and the material covered during class.

Methodology: Make sure your strategy is convincing, not just to yourself but to other rational beings as well.

Depth: Delve into the topic as deeply as you possibly can. Try to go beyond the first thing that comes to mind when you start working on this paper. Your goal should be to come up with something interesting and creative.

Academic Honesty: You are encouraged to discuss the assignments (as well as anything else in this class) with your class mates. But the written work you submit must be entirely your own. Of course, copying from Powerpoint slides, handouts, readings, as well as any other material that is not your own, without properly acknowledging your sources, also constitutes plagiarism. Please take academic honesty very seriously; I do and so does the university!

Here are a few more things to watch out for:

- Please make sure to divide your paper into paragraphs.
- Please double-space your paper and leave space in the margins for comments.
- Make sure that your style is not too colloquial (i.e., not too casual or too much like spoken language).
- Please avoid split infinitives (as in “to barely know”).
- Please pay attention to your use of commas.
- Before you start writing, make sure that your paper is going to have a dynamic flow to it, so that the paragraphs aren’t going to be a mere list of independent ideas (connected by phrases like “Yet another idea that is worth mentioning...”).
- Stay consistent in your use of tense (i.e., don’t switch back and forth between past tense and present tense).
- Make sure that you do not spend too much time merely summarizing the views of an author you are discussing. A major portion of your paper should consist in your own thoughts and reactions to the material on which you are commenting.
- Please avoid ending sentences with prepositions (as in “... the argument which so-and-so is responding *to*”; instead: “... the argument *to* which so-and-so is responding.”)
- If you use words like “different”, “separate”, “better”, etc., make sure that it is clear what the *two* things are that you are relating (i.e., “*such-and-such* is different from *so-and-so*”); something is different *from* something else, not different *than* something else.
- Please avoid run-on sentences (i.e., sentences which contain complete sentences as parts).
- Please make sure that your sentences are neither too convoluted nor too short. Try to find a comfortable middle-ground.
- Make sure that your sentences are not incomplete.
- Anytime you are directly quoting a passage, you must include a reference to the source from which the passage in question is taken.
- Please stay consistent in your use of capital letters; if you choose to capitalize something, you must capitalize it throughout your paper.
- Please be careful when you use secondary literature from the internet; there is a lot of bad and sloppy philosophy out there in cyberspace. (When in doubt, ask!)
- You should be suspicious if you find yourself using phrases like “back to the main question”, indicating that you have been pursuing a point which is only tangentially relevant to your main topic.