

Argumentation: Making a Case for your Thesis

Philosophy focuses, perhaps more than any other discipline, on developing and critically examining **arguments**. We use argumentation to support claims, and the central claim of a philosophy paper is its **thesis**. As Jim Pryor (2001) points out, a philosophy paper does not 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 [...] and] offer reasons to believe them.”¹

Ideally, your paper will lead your reader step-by-step to a conclusion they may not have initially agreed with. Your paper could advance a negative position by arguing against a claim and attempting to refute it, but might also take a positive stance by providing new reasons for the reader to accept a position. You should imagine your reader as *open* to accepting this conclusion, but also as needing to be *persuaded* as to why they should accept it.

You will typically be expected to complete the following tasks when writing a philosophy paper:

- Accurately describe the positions of the philosopher(s) discussed
- Consider arguments for and against these positions
- Offer your own argument in support of your position, which might include criticizing or supporting the position of another author
- Consider objections to your position and refute those objections
- Consider the consequences of accepting your position, including whether the position is consistent with other important positions²

YOUR THESIS

A thesis clearly articulates the position you will defend in your paper. It should fit into one or two sentences and be introduced in the introduction of your paper. A thesis also provides direction for your paper. Picking an effective thesis will narrow the scope of your paper, dictate what exposition is required, and be a useful tool in other respects.

And what makes a **good** thesis?

- A good thesis is specific and has a narrow scope.
- A good thesis also (usually) seems modest. This does not mean that your thesis should be so modest as to be inconsequential. However, you can hardly expect to conclusively prove, say, the existence of God in a five-page paper.

There are also different kinds of thesis, including **systematic** and **interpretive** theses.

A **systematic thesis** is usually found in papers on specific philosophical problems (e.g. in a paper about the duty of wealthier people to help people who are worse off). Here is an example of a systematic thesis from Peter Singer (1972):

¹ Pryor, James. 2001. “Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper.”

² Rippon, Arthur. 2008. “A Brief Guide to Writing the Philosophy Paper.” Harvard College Writing Centre.

Argumentation: Making a Case for your Thesis

“If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.”³

An **interpretive thesis** is usually found in papers about the history of philosophy (e.g. in a paper about how we should read Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*). Here is an example of an interpretive thesis from Alan Patten:

In Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, “having at least a *minimal* amount of private property is essential to the development and maintenance of the capacities and self understandings that make up free personality.”

Notice that that an interpretive thesis could become a systematic thesis if we shift our inquiry from a consideration of *how to read* Hegel’s work (interpretive) to a consideration of whether we should accept the argument that Hegel advances (systematic). For another example, you might have two kinds of thesis about Aristotle’s account of the good life: one about how best to read Aristotle, and another about the merits of his view.

Common Problems

Here are some common problems you might encounter when developing your thesis, drawn in part from Douglas Portmore (2012):⁴

1. A thesis that is **too broad** or **too strong** to be defended effectively in your paper:
 - *I will argue that act-utilitarianism is the most plausible moral theory there is.*

As Portmore points out, this thesis “is too ambitious. There is no chance of adequately defending such a claim in anything shorter than a series of books.” Instead, you might try something like the following:

- *“I will argue that many of the objections that have been leveled against act-utilitarianism can be met and that, on the whole, act-utilitarianism is a rather plausible theory [... etc.]”*
2. A thesis that is **empirical** or plainly **descriptive**, and thus not one that a reasonable person would argue against given sufficient evidence:
 - *Susan Okin provides a feminist critique of Rawls’ account of the family; or,*
 - *I will discuss feminist objections to Rawls’ account of the family.*

The first claim about Okin is simply true. The second claim, that you will discuss objections to Rawls’ view, will also be demonstrably be true or false with reference to your paper. Neither of these claims, at face value, requires an argumentative defense.

³ Singer, Peter. 1972. “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 1: 229-243

⁴ Portmore, Douglas. 2001. “Tips on Writing A Philosophy Paper.” Revised 2012.

Argumentation: Making a Case for your Thesis

3. A thesis that is **trivial**, as you can expect anyone reading your paper to agree:
 - *“Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter and medical care are bad”* (though, as we will see, sometimes a seemingly trivial premise can play a significant role in advancing a controversial thesis).

ARGUMENTATION

Once you have picked a working thesis, you should consider how you will show the reader they should agree with your position. To convince the reader, you will need to **argue**. Your argument should consist of a set of reasons that support your thesis. Your explanation of these reasons and your defense of them against possible objections will make up the body of your paper and will organize the paper.

Here’s a simplified version of an argument from Peter Singer’s “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” (1972) which is characteristic of a **systematic** thesis:

- P1:** Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter and medical care are bad.
P2: If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, [...] then we ought, morally, to do it.
P3: It *is* in our power to prevent the suffering and death of those at great distances away from us.

Conclusion (Thesis):

We ought to morally to prevent the suffering and death of those who lack food, shelter, and medical care, even if they are at a great distance away.

Each of the premises (P1-P3) will require some explanation and support, even though P3 is an empirical claim. While P2 will appear to be an acceptable moral doctrine to many readers, accepting it together with P1 and P3 has very significant ramifications for how we think about spending our money and time. Thus, it is important that Singer makes a convincing case for why his reader should accept P2, even if they would have readily accepted it initially. By using modest premises to support a challenging and surprising moral claim, Singer’s paper models our suggestions above.

Notice that Singer’s argument differs from a **statement of opinion**. When asked, one might say: “I think we should prevent suffering if we have the power to do so.” This statement concerns the speaker’s own state of mind, and is either true or false: either the speaker does think we should prevent suffering if we have the power to do so, or they do not think so. Rather than stating an opinion, the work of a philosophy paper is to lay out **reasons** for accepting a view and, importantly, to show why those reasons should be accepted or rejected. The goal, in other words, is not simply to declare what you think, but rather to persuade the reader that they should agree with your claim(s).

Recall that we also discussed **interpretive** theses above. Supporting an interpretive thesis will require somewhat different kinds of reasons from those used to support a systematic thesis. In paper that supports an interpretive thesis, you will likely spend

Argumentation: Making a Case for your Thesis

more time pointing to passages in the text and arguing for why one should read them in a particular way. You might also piece together passages in the text to **infer** what the author meant but did not say explicitly, or to **clarify** something the author did say. You may also use interpretive claims to support a systematic thesis.

SUPPORT AND CRITIQUE

Papers in philosophy are comprised of more than a short set of premises and a conclusion. In addition to these, philosophers spend considerable time making clear precisely what the reader should take these premises to be and why they should accept them. When writing philosophy, it is especially important that you take care to provide **support** for the claims you make in your paper.

A philosopher will attempt to persuade the reader to accept the core claims of their paper by making **supporting arguments**, by introducing **thought experiments** and **examples**, and by explaining each part of their argument in enough detail to avoid misunderstanding. Clarifying one's points and the assumptions one is making is especially important to block possible counterarguments to your position. The author might also make comparative comments to show why their view should be distinguished from others' and why their view is better than others'.

In your philosophy assignments, supporting your claims will require a mix of your own independent argument and your treatment of course texts that espouse one or another relevant position. Where you refer to the ideas of others, it is essential that you show your reader why your discussion of those ideas is accurate with citation, paraphrase, and (sparingly) quotation. Where you introduce independent premises and claims (e.g. when you introduce a moral principle), it is essential that you show the reader why they should accept these too, rather than taking them as unsupported assumptions.

Now that we understand that much of a philosophy paper involves clarifying and supporting premises and conclusions, it should become clear how you should approach **criticizing or defending the philosophical views of others**. If you were to write a paper critical of the position we attribute to Peter Singer above, you could do so by criticizing the reasons Singer provides in support of his premises, or by showing why a reader should not accept the argumentative value of a significant thought experiment he introduces. Alternatively, if you were to write a paper that aimed to *affirm* Singer's conclusion, you could provide new reasons why the reader should accept Singer's position that were not considered in the original article, or defend his position against more recent attempts to argue against it.

COUNTERARGUMENTS

As your paper leads your reader to the thesis you would like them to accept, you might be struck by worries about how effective one or another part of your argument is. Worries about the strength of your argument are **objections** that you will need to defeat or minimize with a **counterargument** to convince your reader of your thesis. As far as possible in your philosophy assignments, you should strive to think of the most significant counterarguments to your position and defend your thesis against them.