Composition: On the Structure and Style of Philosophy Papers

As an academic discipline, philosophy emphasizes **clear** and **explicit** prose. This means we aim to make a philosophy paper's structure, argumentative moves, and assumptions obvious to the reader. At any point in your paper, it should be clear to your reader what has happened thus far, what will happen next, and in general how the parts of your paper connect with each other and help support your **thesis**.

BODY PARAGRAPHS

Recall that a philosophy paper aims to lead the reader step-by-step to a conclusion (your thesis) they may not have initially agreed to. Writing such a paper will be easier to do if you have a clear idea of just what steps (and half-steps, quarter-steps) you hope the reader will make along the way. There are different ways you might lead your reader to your thesis, and you will use body paragraphs to accomplish the steps you choose.

Ideally, your paper will proceed such that each section provides **additional reason** for the reader to accept your thesis. This means that the structure of your argument should dictate the structure of your paper—the number, content, and arrangement of your body paragraphs should follow from your argument, and not the other way around.

You might use a body paragraph to do one of the following tasks, among others:
- Explain an important idea, concept, or argument relevant to your paper
- Introduce an argument of your own
- Defend your view against a possible objection
- Draw out a consequence of your position, or of the position you are criticizing

In each of your body paragraphs, you should aim to accomplish just **one** main philosophical task relevant to advancing your thesis. To do this effectively, you should typically use the first sentence as a **topic sentence** that orients the reader to what philosophical work you intend to do in the paragraph. The topic sentence of a paragraph relates to the paragraph much as the thesis of a paper relates to the whole paper. You can therefore use a clearly articulated topic sentence to check the focus and relevance of what you say in each body paragraph. When editing, try reading just the first sentence of each paragraph in your essay and determine whether a reader could follow the structure of your argument by doing so.

Thinking of each body paragraph as accomplishing a distinct task (or a distinct part of a larger task) will usually require breaking up each of the sections of your paper into two or more paragraphs, resulting in more paragraphs than the "five-paragraph essay" you may have encountered elsewhere. This is preferable, as it splits each part of the work you do in the paper into manageable pieces. This will also help you keep track of **what you are telling the reader** and **why**, which will help you avoid repeating the same points unnecessarily.

Dividing the work you are trying to do into manageable, topical chunks, will usually require you to split up a section of your paper where you treat one task at length, say when you reply to an important objection. If you expect one task to take considerable space in your paper, split that section up into smaller argumentative parts and arrange

your paragraphs accordingly. Unlike using one massive paragraph that stretches more than a page, using smaller task-oriented paragraphs will help you and the reader remain clear about how your argument is proceeding.

INTRODUCTIONS

The first paragraph of your paper is your introduction. You should first introduce the problem you hope to solve (i.e. the question or concern that your thesis will help address), then state your thesis (i.e. the answer you propose to the problem you raise), then explain the main steps of the argument that you will advance to support your thesis. If your introduction is effective, by the end of it your reader will have a clear sense of what will occur over the course of your paper and will know what you are trying to convince them of.

You may be tempted to begin with broad, sweeping contextual comments, for instance about history or the author's biography. However, you should avoid this to save space for the work you will do in the body paragraphs. When possible, get straight to the point.

CONCLUSIONS

Much like your introduction, the conclusion to your paper should normally be one paragraph in length. Its main aim is to briefly sum up what your paper accomplished. You will do this by reminding the reader about the problem you set out to address, the answer to that problem which you provided (your thesis), and the argumentative moves that you made to show why yours is the best answer.

In addition to reminding your reader what you have accomplished, you may also take the opportunity to remind the reader of the **scope** of your paper and the conclusions you draw in it. In a paper where you propose a novel reading of Plato's *Symposium*, for instance, you might remind your reader that you have been defending an *interpretive* thesis about *how to read* Plato, rather than defending Plato's position itself—unless, of course, you have done both. You may also take the opportunity to point out where your paper raises new questions which will need to be addressed elsewhere.

While you will remind the reader of what you have argued over the course of your paper, you should *not* introduce new arguments or reasons in support of your thesis in the conclusion to your paper. If you are worried that a reader could take your conclusions in a direction you do not support, you should make space to consider this problem in the body of your paper rather than in your conclusion.

OUTLINES

Once you have settled on the thesis of your paper, but before you start writing, it will be helpful to create an *outline* of what you hope to accomplish in the paper and how the steps of your argument will be divided. Once you have come up with a thesis, you should be able to settle upon the main subsidiary jobs you would like to accomplish along the way to establishing that thesis. Then, split those jobs up into smaller tasks that will be accomplished one paragraph at a time. Ideally, your outline should read like

an argument from start to finish, with the topic sentences of each paragraph leading the reader from one step of your argument to the next.

Thinking of paragraphs as task-oriented steps toward establishing your thesis should make outlining your philosophy paper easier, because you will need to complete some tasks before others, and that gives you your order. For example, you will want to provide some exposition of a complex argument before you say why the argument is ill-conceived.

If you do not settle on a coherent structure in advance of writing, you risk writing a paper that is rambling and hard to follow. Outlining your paper should also help you catch where you might be making jumps in your argument that are too big—you might find that your argument isn't as convincing when you break it apart! You might also find it helpful to refer to your outline as you write the paper, revising it as your ideas develop, to help keep the structure of your overall argument clear in your mind.

WRITING TIPS
As is raised above, philosophers tend to value clear and explicit prose. To achieve this, philosophers make significant use of **signposting** and **precise** expression.

Signposting
Signposting is the practice of saying explicitly what is happening in your paper and how it connects to other parts of your paper. Here is an example from Karen Bennett (2017):

> "*In this section I will sketch some familiar relations that seem to be good* prima facie *candidates for counting as forms of building. This list is not intended to be exhaustive; it is just a handful of relatively central notions.*"[1]

By signaling the philosophical moves your paper makes in this way, you make your reasoning readily accessible to your reader, and help your reader to remain oriented. In this example, Bennett signposts twice: first to tell the reader what will occur in the section follow, and again to point out to the reader what she **not** trying to do—she is **not** trying to give an exhaustive account of building relationships in metaphysics, but **does** want to talk about the ones that come up the most. By clarifying this point, Bennett prevents her reader from overestimating the scope of her project.

Precision
Imprecise phrasing can make parts of your paper **vague**, **ambiguous**, or commit you to **more than you are ready to defend**. As your philosophy papers and exam answers will usually require you defend a thesis through argumentation, it is important that you carefully phrase each piece of your argument.

Vagueness is the problem of a phrase being imprecise such that the reader cannot make heads or tails of *any* commitment or claim you might be making. E.g.:

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[1] Bennett, Karen. 2019. *Making Things Up*. New York: Oxford University Press. 8.

"We may grant money a certain kind of power."

In the example above, it is not clear what, precisely, the author means by "a certain kind of power," (which power, exactly?) and under what conditions "we may grant" this. As in the example above, **modal** adjectives (e.g. certain, probable), verbs (e.g. may, could), and nouns (e.g. possibility, requirement) are common causes of vagueness in philosophical writing, though precise use of modality can improve clarity.

As with vagueness, your reader can also be confused by **ambiguity** in expression. Ambiguity occurs when your phrasing or word choice create multiple possible interpretations. Be especially careful of **structural ambiguity**, which occurs when the structure of a sentence suggests multiple meanings (e.g. "flying planes can be dangerous").

It is also possible for your phrasing to be **too strong**. Rather than making unclear what the reader should take your claim to be, you might use an expression that commits you to much more than you intend to argue. Pay close attention to the way you phrase your claims, and make sure that what you *say* you show in the paper aligns with what you *do* show.

PROOFREADING TIPS

Given the emphasis on clarity in philosophical writing, it is essential that you proofread your work before submitting it. Proofreading will help you to catch confusing or awkward turns of phrase, grammatical and spelling errors, places where you may have missed an opportunity to unpack a significant assumption, opportunities to make the same point more clearly and concisely, among other things. Here are three tips for proofreading:

1. Read your paper out loud.
   By reading your paper out loud to yourself you will quickly pick up on the kinds of mistakes that will confuse an unfamiliar reader. This will be even more effective if you have an audience, or if you have someone else read your paper to you. You might also try recording yourself reading your paper and then playing it back.

2. Set the paper aside.
   Much like reading your paper out loud, setting your paper aside (the longer the better!) and then returning to it will give you a chance to get some distance from your writing, and hence to gain a new perspective on it. When you return to your paper with fresh eyes, you will almost always notice things you did not before. The more you can take your mind off the paper at hand, the better you will be as a proofreader.

3. Get someone else to read your paper.
   Much like 1. and 2. above, having a different person read over your assignment before submission will help catch confusing turns of phrase or errors. Sometimes it will be helpful to have the reader be someone familiar with the course material. However, someone unfamiliar with the course material can also be helpful for identifying places where what you say is unclear or requires elaboration.