

SOME RULES OF THUMB FOR WRITING PAPERS

Here are a few suggestions about writing papers. Please read through them before you write the first paper.

1. State the main thesis of your paper at (or near) the beginning: say, in the first paragraph. It is not bad to say something like: "I will argue that"
2. Stay focused. Your papers should critically assess some important aspect of one of the theories we have been discussing. Before you get to the evaluation you will need to describe the relevant aspect (s) of the theory you are assessing. But do not try to provide a comprehensive overview of the theory. Instead, guide your presentation by the particular problems that animate your paper. For example, if you are writing on John Rawls's "difference principle," you should not try to sketch his theory of the original position and the argument for the principle within the original position. Confine yourself to the aspects of Rawls's view that are of immediate relevance to his account of fair distribution. Anything else will be a distraction.
3. Take the views you are discussing seriously. The political philosophers we are reading are not fools. If, as you describe the relevant parts of their views, you find yourself attributing foolish views to them, assume you have misinterpreted. (Perhaps you have not. But treat "misinterpretation" as the default setting.) Specifically, ask yourself how the philosopher you are criticizing would respond to your criticism. Try to get "inside" the conception you are discussing; develop a sense of its internal integrity, and see if you are able to understand how someone (other than a moron or a sociopath) might have come to hold the views in question. The books and articles we are reading are the product of sustained reflection, over a long period, by very smart people. The authors often distributed drafts of their manuscripts to other smart people, and then tried to incorporate responses to the objections they received. The result is not that their views are right, or genuinely coherent, or nice. But you can be sure that they have greater depth and coherence than one notices on first reading.
4. No vague and sweeping generalities: "Rawls's theory of justice is the most important recent contribution to the perennial human search for the ideal society." "Since Plato, philosophers have sought out the meaning of justice." "For thousands of years, human beings have searched for truth. "Philosophy is based on reason, not rhetoric." Such remarks add nothing; indeed, they subtract by distracting from the issues at hand. Moreover, they suggest that the writer is looking for a way to fill pages. Just get right to the point.
5. Write clearly. That's easier said than done. But you can make a first step by writing short sentences, avoiding page-long paragraphs, and being careful to signal transitions. Operationally: If a sentence goes on for more than (say) 5 lines, find a way to divide it up; if a paragraph goes on for more than 20 lines, find a way to divide it up; if one section of a paper seems disconnected from the previous one, put in a sentence or two of connective tissue. Moreover, put things as simply as you can. Writing philosophy does not require elaborate formulations, esoteric words, purple prose, neologisms, or inversions of the natural order of words. Your writing should draw the attention of readers to the ideas you wish to express, not to the words you have chosen to express those ideas.
6. Include some stylistic variety. For example, do not start every sentence with the subject. Moreover, stay away from passive constructions: instead of "The wheel was invented by Joe," why not: "Joe

invented the wheel." And don't have too many sentences that begin "It is..." or "There is..." Though such constructions are sometimes appropriate, overusing them slows things down.

7. Support assertions. When you attribute views to the person whose ideas you are addressing, indicate the evidence for the attribution by noting relevant passages. But you need not include quotations. As a general matter, you should only quote a passage if the passage plays an important role in the paper (say, it is a passage that you will want to be able to refer back to at various points in the argument), or if you think that there is some controversy about whether the philosopher actually held the view that you are attributing to him or her. Do not submit a paper that strings together lots of quotations.

8. When you finish writing, read your paper out loud. If it does not sound right, it will not read right.

Applying these rules of thumb will require that you spend some time editing your papers after writing a first draft. But the additional time will be worth it. Your papers for this course will be better than they would otherwise be, and you will eventually start to edit as you write.

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