

## *Writing a Philosophy Paper: Dos and Don'ts*

*Do:*

**Be clear.** Be as simple and straightforward as you can.

*Example of unclarity:* "Piety or impiety as an abstract concept cannot be encapsulated into a single yes or no situation, rendering Euthyphro's definition insignificant."

*Example of clarity:* "The problem with Euthyphro's answer to the question "What is piety?" is that he only gave an example of piety, not a definition of it."

**Be brief.** Long meandering sentences/paragraphs are telltale signs of unclarity and make it harder to follow your reasoning. Cut the fluff and get to the point!

**Use signposts.** Give your reader an idea of where you're going at the beginning of each paragraph.

*Examples:* "To explain the argument, I need to first explain the distinction between X and Y...", "I will now explain why Descartes thinks that P...", "One problem with this argument is...", "Plato could respond to this objection as follows..."

**Be explicit and precise.** Banish all vagueness. Make your reasoning exact, unambiguous, and gapless.

**Use examples.** This can really help clarify your writing and bring an abstract point down to earth.

**Be charitable.** Don't write as though the philosopher you are criticizing is dumb (even if they are!).

**Answer the prompt.** This is perhaps the worst mistake you could make on a philosophy paper. Make sure you have directly stated your answer to every part of the prompt.

*Don't:*

**Simply state your opinions.** Philosophy is a reason-based enterprise. Give reasons!

**Presuppose too much.** Your intended audience is someone who is good at reasoning but does not necessarily know anything about the topic you're discussing.

**Vary your word choice.** Don't "thesaurize." Just use the same terms throughout.

**Write epically long paragraphs.** Think about what the purpose of the paragraph is. Make exactly *one* point in each paragraph. If a paragraph is more than half a page, you should probably split it up.

**Go off topic.** Keep your eye on the target. Avoid unnecessary screeds or tangents.

**Use a lot of quotes.** Anyone can quote stuff. That is not impressive. Quoting does not show you understand anything. Explain things in your own words. (Sometimes direct quotes are appropriate and can be used as support for your interpretation of the text; just use them sparingly.)

**Say it is "subjective" or "relative".** These are perhaps the most deplorable words students ever use. They exude obscurity and absurdity. They are lazy terms that are either incoherent or void of content if not used with caution. Unless the prompt is explicitly about the relativity or subjectivity of some concept, use these abominable words at your own peril.

**Make grand sweeping claims about the history of philosophy that you cannot possibly defend.**

*Examples:* "For two millennia, philosophers have assumed that there are only two truth values.", "Kant is perhaps the most famous philosopher in all of philosophy.", "The oldest problem in all of philosophy is the problem of consciousness."