

Checklist for Writing a Good Philosophy Paper

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Essentials

- The paper addresses every part of the prompt.
- The paper sticks to the prompt. There are no long digressions into parts of the text that are not relevant to the prompt.
- No, really: the paper sticks to the prompt and does not go off topic.
- The introductory paragraph does these three things and nothing more:
 - state the main topic of the paper in 1–2 sentences
 - state the main thesis
 - state a brief outline of the paper.
- The main thesis of the paper is a direct answer to the question stated in the prompt.
- The paper does not go over the page/word limit set by the instructor.
- The text is properly cited according to the standards set by the instructor.
- The paper is properly formatted according to the standards set by the instructor.

Mechanics

- The paper is organized and the overall structure of the paper is easily discernible. This can be checked by making an outline of the paper.
- The paper does not contain any epically long paragraphs.
- Each paragraph of the paper has one main task and makes one main point.
- The paper contains adequate “signposting”, meaning the first sentence of each paragraph clearly indicates the main goal/idea of the paragraph and how it fits into the overall structure of the paper.
- The paper does not contain any long and complicated sentences.
- Each sentence is easy to parse and is free of flowery/highbrow language.
- The paper does not contain a lot of redundant/irrelevant sentences or paragraphs. Some redundancy is okay if it contributes to the overall clarity of the paper.
- The paper is concise and to the point.
- The paper does not contain a lot of rhetorical questions. Ideally, it should contain none.
- To the best of my knowledge, the paper is largely free of typos and grammatical errors.

Content

- I have reread the part of the text that is relevant to the prompt.
- The relevant reading is properly cited in the body of the paper.
- The paper explains the relevant passages in my own terms rather than relying heavily on quotations from the text. Some quotes are okay if they are used to support your interpretation of the text.
- To the best of my knowledge, the paper represents the text in an accurate and charitable way.
- The paper avoids vague, imprecise, and metaphorical language.
- The main claim/argument is stated as clearly and precisely as possible.
- The premises and conclusion of the main argument are made explicit.
- It is clear how the premises of the main argument support its conclusion. If possible, the argument is presented in a logically valid manner.
- As the argument was reconstructed, all of the premises are used in the derivation of the conclusion.
- The paper stays focused on the main question of the prompt and does not take unnecessary digressions into other parts of the text. Seriously, I mean it!

Analysis

- The paper does not merely summarize the reading or text.
- More space is allocated to analysis than is allocated to summarizing the reading or text.
- The paper adequately defends the main thesis as stated in the introductory paragraph.
- The paper considers what I take to be the best objection to the main argument.
- The paper does *not* consider more than two objections to the main argument. Ideally, the paper focuses only on the best objection. The paper only considers more than one objection if there is adequate space to do so.
- The objection I consider either targets one of the premises of the argument or challenges the validity of the argument. The objection is not just that the conclusion is false.
- The objection considered is not stated as a rhetorical question. It is stated in a direct manner.
- The objection considered is presented in sufficient detail. It is not hastily stated in one or two sentences.
- The paper considers what I take to be the best response to the best objection to the main argument.
- The response considered is presented in sufficient detail. It is not hastily stated in one or two sentences.
- The paper states whether I think the response to this objection is successful and why.
- If the paper considers two objections, responses to both objections are considered and in both cases I state whether I think the responses are successful and why.

(This is why it is generally better to focus on just one objection. It is quite difficult to fit two objections, two responses, and two evaluations into a single 3–4 page paper.)