

TIPS ON WRITING A PHILOSOPHY PAPER

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1. Constructing a Thesis Statement

A thesis statement is that sentence or two that asserts your position on a given issue, specifically, the position that you will be arguing for in your paper. This thesis statement should appear somewhere in the introduction to your paper. It can be the first sentence, although that's often a rather simplistic and unexciting way to begin your paper. More often, then, a thesis statement should appear at or near the end of the first paragraph or two.

The first step in developing a thesis (once you have decided on a topic) is to determine what your position is. To do this, you will need to thoroughly review all the relevant course materials. In most cases, you will have been presented with a number of arguments on both sides of the issue. Carefully analyze and evaluate all these arguments, taking notes as you do. In the process, you should develop your own take on the issue.

It is imperative that you clearly define your thesis before you begin writing, for it is your thesis that will guide you throughout the entire writing process—everything you write should somehow contribute to its defense. This doesn't mean that your thesis can't be revised, narrowed, or refined during the writing process; it's likely that it will need to be. The point is that you won't even know where to start unless you have at least a working thesis to guide you.

Your thesis should narrow the focus of your paper. Suppose you are asked to write on the mind-body problem. It's important to realize that it won't be possible to address every important philosophical issue concerning such a broad topic in just one paper. You'll need to choose a thesis that narrows the focus to something more manageable. Don't be too ambitious here. You're not going to solve something like the mind-body problem in five, or even twenty, pages. Of course, it's also important not to go too far in the opposite direction. Your thesis mustn't be trivial. Instead, your thesis should make an interesting assertion, one over which reasonable people might disagree.

Your thesis should be quite specific, thereby defining a sharp focus for your paper. Don't make a claim such as "People should donate money to hunger-relief organizations." This is vague. Are you saying that donating money to hunger-relief organizations is moral obligatory, or are you merely claiming that doing so would be supererogatory? In either case, you should state your reasons for making the claim that you do, for your thesis should provide some hint as to what the main argument will be.

To sum up, a thesis statement should:

- Be specific.
- Be narrow enough as to be practicably defended within the length parameters of the assignment.
- Make an interesting claim, one over which reasonable people might disagree.
- Provide some hint as to what the main line of argument will be.

The following are some DOs and DON'Ts.

Don't have a thesis like this:

- × I will argue that act-utilitarianism is the most plausible moral theory around.

NOTE: This is too ambitious. There is no chance of adequately defending such a claim in anything shorter than a series of books. To defend such a claim, you would have to compare act-utilitarianism with Kantianism, rule-utilitarianism, virtue ethics, moral relativism, moral subjectivism, divine command theory, etc. and argue that act-utilitarianism does better than all the others in terms of our standards for evaluating moral theories (i.e., consistency, determinacy, intuitive appeal, internal support, etc.). A more sensible thesis would focus on defending act-utilitarianism against certain specific objections or would argue that act-utilitarianism is more plausible than, say, Kantianism with respect to the determinacy of its verdicts.

- × Death and suffering from a lack food, potable water, and basic healthcare is bad.

NOTE: This is trivial; no reasonable person would disagree.

- × I will discuss objections to moral relativism.

NOTE: It's not enough to say that you will discuss a certain issue; you must state your position on some issue.

- × I believe that the divine command theory is an implausible moral theory.

NOTE: This statement merely reports what one believes; it doesn't assert anything about the plausibility of the divine command theory. A thesis statement must make an assertion about the issue at hand, not about one's beliefs concerning that issue.

- × I will argue that abortion is wrong.

NOTE: This statement isn't specific enough. Your thesis should explain why, on your view, abortion is wrong.

- × I will argue that donating our surplus income to hunger relief organizations would result in more deaths and more suffering.

NOTE: The issue of whether or not donating our surplus income to hunger relief organizations would result in more deaths and more suffering is an empirical issue, not a philosophical issue. You must address some *philosophical* issue. Thus a more interesting thesis would address the following issue: If donating our surplus income would alleviate significant suffering and save lives, would we then be morally obligated to do so?

Do have a thesis like this:

- ✓ I will argue that even if the fetus is a person with a right to life, abortion is, nevertheless, morally permissible in the case of rape, for the fetus has no right to use the woman's body without, at least, her tacit consent, and this is clearly absent where the woman is pregnant as a result of being raped.

NOTE: The position you take doesn't have to exhaust the topic. For instance, there's nothing wrong with taking a stand on the morality of abortion in the case of rape while remaining neutral about other cases.

- ✓ I will argue that Thomson's argument isn't cogent. I will demonstrate that there are important differences between killing the violinist (in her Famous Violinist Example) and killing a fetus that has been conceived as a result of rape. These differences undermine her argument by analogy for the permissibility of abortion in the case of rape.

NOTE: You don't have to make any positive assertion. A thesis that asserts that some philosophical position is false or that some philosopher's argument is unsound is an interesting and important thesis.

- ✓ I will argue that Arthur's criticisms fail to undermine Singer's central thesis: that we are morally obligated to donate our surplus income to hunger-relief organizations. I will show that Singer can rebut Arthur's objections by....

NOTE: Even if you agree entirely with one of the philosophers that you've read, you can still have something original and important to say. For instance, you could show how that philosopher might rebut criticisms from another.

- ✓ I will argue that Singer's thesis needs to be revised in light of Arthur's criticisms, but only slightly. I will propose the following revised version of Singer's thesis.... And I will argue that this revised version of Singer's thesis avoids Arthur's

objections. Lastly, I will defend this revised thesis against other potential objections.

NOTE: If you can't see anyway to defend a thesis in its current form, you might suggest how that thesis could be revised so as to avoid the objections leveled by another.

- ✓ 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. Nevertheless, I will admit that one serious objection remains, for which I can see no adequate response—namely, However, this does not mean that we should reject the theory, for, as I will show, non-utilitarian theories face the following more serious objection...

NOTE: Often times, you'll find that all the alternative positions face some problem or another. In that case, you can still defend one position over its rivals by arguing that it faces fewer or less serious problems than the others do. Of course, you still need be upfront about the problems that your own favored position faces, and, in light of those potential problems, you may want to make your thesis somewhat tentative: "utilitarianism seems to be the most promising position" rather than "utilitarianism is correct."

2. The Introduction

Get right down to business! Avoid inflated, rhetorical introductory remarks (commonly known as "fluff"). If, for instance, your paper is on abortion, you shouldn't waste limited space with some irrelevant and long-winded spiel about what an important and controversial issue abortion is. Nor should you start your paper off with a sentence like, "Down through the ages, mankind has pondered the problem of...." Nevertheless, you should motivate your paper, explaining what issue or problem that you will be addressing and why it's important—just keep it brief.

An introduction is best thought of as a reader's guide to your paper. It should help make it easier for the reader to follow and understand your paper. It should include an explicit statement of what it is that you will be arguing for (that is, your thesis), and define for the reader any terminology that's needed to understand your thesis. The introduction should also map out the structure of your paper, explaining the order in which you will argue for various points and explaining how all those points come together in support of your thesis. To sum up, a good introduction should: (1) be concise, (2) contain a clear statement of your thesis, (3) introduce, very succinctly, your topic and explain why it is important, (4) indicate, very briefly, what the main line of argument will be, and (5) map out the overall structure of your paper.

Illustration:

The following are two examples of the type of introduction that I am looking for. The first is Mary Anne Warren's introduction to her paper "On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion," *The Monist* 57 (January 1973)—reprinted in Tom L. Beauchamp and LeRoy Walters, eds., *Contemporary Issues in Bioethics*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1989), p. 211:

We will be concerned with both the moral status of abortion, which for our purposes we may define as the act which a woman performs in voluntarily terminating, or allowing another person to terminate, her pregnancy, and the legal status which is appropriate for this act. I will argue that, while it is not possible to produce a satisfactory defense of a woman's right to obtain an abortion without showing that a fetus is not a human being, in the morally relevant sense of that term, we ought not to conclude that the difficulties involved in determining whether or not a fetus is human make it impossible to produce any satisfactory solution to the problem of the moral status of abortion. For it is possible to show that, on the basis of intuitions which we may expect even the opponents of abortion to share, a fetus is not a person, and hence not the sort of entity to which it is proper to ascribe full moral rights.

3. The Body

The body of your paper should include: (1) an exposition of the views, concepts, and arguments to be discussed, (2) your own arguments in support of your thesis and claims, and (3) a consideration of objections and counterarguments along with your responses to them.

Each body paragraph should present only a single idea or set of related ideas, and each should bring your reader one step closer to accepting your thesis and the cogency of your arguments. Because each body paragraph should play a part in the defense of your thesis, you should be mindful of the overall organization of your body paragraphs. A good way to test the strength of both your topic sentences and your argument as a whole is to construct an outline of your paper using only your paper's thesis statement and the topic sentences contained in the body of your essay. This outline should contain the logical core of your paper's argument, and it should follow a clear logical pattern.

The first step in writing an effective body paragraph is the construction of its topic sentence. Just as your thesis statement acts as the controlling idea behind your entire paper, a topic sentence acts as the controlling idea that binds together the sentences within a paragraph. The sentences within a paragraph should explain, develop, or support the idea/claim that was introduced in the topic sentence. (Although most paragraphs should have a topic sentence, not every paragraph needs one. For instance, a topic sentence won't be needed in a paragraph that continues to develop an idea that was introduced by the topic sentence of the previous paragraph. And although a topic sentence needn't always appear as the first sentence in a paragraph, it is often most effective when it does.)

4. The Conclusion

The basic purpose of your conclusion is to restate your thesis and summarize your argument, but it should not just be a copy of your introduction. In your conclusion, you should make a final effort to convince the reader that you have both established your thesis and offered a cogent argument in its defense. The conclusion is also the place to discuss the implications and/or limitations of your argument. For instance, you might explain what the practical and/or theoretical implications of your argument are. You might also point to some questions that your argument raises or to some of the issues that your paper leaves unresolved.

5. Making the Structure of Your Paper Perspicuous

5.1 The structure of the paragraphs within your paper: A good paper will have a logical and perspicuous structure. You need to organize your points and arguments in a logical fashion and at the same time make that organization apparent to your reader. Each paragraph should have a clear place in the overall argument.

The key to having your essay follow a logical structure is to make an outline before sitting down to write. It's difficult to give any more specific advice, since the best logical structure for your essay will depend on the particularities of your argument. But there are two obvious points that you should be aware of: (1) make sure you explicate a view or argument, clearly and charitably, before criticizing it and (2) explain key terms, concepts, and examples before employing them.

I cannot over emphasize how important it is to make the structure of your essay perspicuous to your reader; your reader shouldn't have to work to figure it out. So start with a good introduction, one that maps out the general structure of the essay, and then, in the body of your paper, employ transitional words and sentences to keep your reader on track.

Use transitional phrases, such as:

I will begin by...

Before I say what is wrong with X's argument, I will first...

At this point, we need to consider the following objection...

In this section, I will...

In the next section, I will...

Having argued for the view that... , I now wish to consider rival views.

Although I have shown..., I still need to prove...

Next, I will offer support for what is perhaps my most controversial assumption, that...

I have argued that..., but someone might object...

Further support for this claim comes from...

These transitional phrases go a long way towards making the structure of your paper perspicuous. To illustrate, consider the following paper fragment:¹

...We've just seen how X says that P. I will now present two arguments that not-P.
My first argument is...
My second argument is...
X might respond to my arguments in several ways. For instance, he might say that...
However, this response fails, because...
Another way that X might respond to my arguments is to claim that...
This response also fails, because...
So we have seen that none of the responses open to X succeed in rebutting my argument. Hence, we should reject X's claim that P.

Notice how easy it is to identify and follow the structure of this paper. You want your paper to be just as easy to follow.

You might also consider dividing your paper into sections (and possibly even subsections), using informative headings to help guide your reader. This too can help make the structure of your essay perspicuous.

Illustration:

- I. Introduction
- II. Singer's Argument for an Obligation to Assist
- III. Why We Should Reject His Initial Assumption
- IV. How Singer Might Respond
- V. Conclusion

5.2 *The structure of the sentences within your paragraphs:* Not only should the paragraphs within an essay cohere, but so should the sentences within each paragraph. They should flow smoothly from one to the next. There are a number of ways to achieve this: (1) Repeat key words and phrases. It is important to be consistent when referring to key concepts and theories. This consistency and repetition will help bind the paragraph together. (2) Use pronouns to refer to what was mentioned earlier in the paragraph. If you say "This is true because...", the reader is forced to recall what "this" refers to. The pronoun, thus, causes the reader to sum up, quickly and subconsciously, what was said previously (what *this* is) before going on to the *because* clause. Of course, it must always be perfectly clear to what the pronoun refers. If the "this" is ambiguous such that it could refer to either one of the two things that you mentioned in the previous

¹ I borrow this from James Pryor's "Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper."

sentence, then the reader will have to pause to figure out which it is, and that's bad. (3) Create parallel structures. Parallel structures are created by constructing two or more phrases or sentences that have the same grammatical structure or use the same parts of speech. Parallel structures help the reader see that the paragraph is giving a number of illustrations of the same general idea. (4) Use transitional or bridging words to help the reader follow the logical structure of the paragraph.

Here are some examples of such transitional words:

- To show addition: and, also, besides, for one, in the first case, first, second, third, finally
- To offer support: because, since, for, given
- To conclude: so, thus, therefore, hence, consequently, accordingly, it follows that, for this reason, from this, as a result, it would seem then
- To illustrate: e.g., for example, for instance, to illustrate, a case in point
- To specify: i.e., that is, viz., namely, specifically
- To intensify: moreover, furthermore, mainly, principally, above all, after all, what's more, more importantly
- To emphasize: certainly, indeed, in fact, of course
- To compare: likewise, similarly, by the same reasoning
- To contrast: yet, but, rather, still, although, while, nevertheless, regardless, despite, even so, in spite of, however, whereas, even though, by contrast, on the one hand...on the other hand...
- To refocus: in any case, at any rate, in a word, in short, to sum up, to return
- To indicate supposition: assume, suppose, let's assume, let's suppose
- To concede a point: of course, doubtless, it cannot be denied, while recognizing, the fact remains

Illustration: Look at the following paragraph:²

The ancient Egyptians were masters of preserving dead people's bodies by making mummies of them. Mummies several thousand years old have been discovered nearly intact. The skin, hair, teeth, fingernails and toenails, and facial features of the mummies were evident. It is possible to diagnose the disease they suffered in life, such as smallpox, arthritis, and nutritional deficiencies. The process was remarkably effective. Sometimes apparent were the fatal afflictions of the dead people: a middle-aged king died from a blow on the head, and polio killed a child king. Mummification consisted of removing the internal organs, applying natural preservatives inside and out, and then wrapping the body in layers of bandages.

Though weak, this paragraph is not a total washout. It starts with a topic sentence, and the sentences that follow are clearly related to the topic sentence. In the language of writing, the paragraph is unified (i.e., it contains no irrelevant details). However, the

² From Charles Darling, *Guide to Grammar and Writing*, at <http://webster.comnet.edu/grammar/index.htm>.

paragraph is not coherent. The sentences are disconnected from each other, making it difficult for the reader to follow the writer's train of thought.

Below is the same paragraph revised for coherence. (Italics indicates pronouns and repeated key words, bold indicates transitional words, and underlining indicates parallel structures.)

The ancient Egyptians were masters of preserving dead people's bodies by *making mummies* of them. **In short**, *mummification* consisted of removing the internal organs, applying natural preservatives inside and out, and then wrapping the body in layers of bandages. **And** *the process* was remarkably effective. **Indeed**, *mummies* several thousand years old have been discovered nearly intact. *Their* skin, hair, teeth, fingernails and toenails, and facial features are still evident. *Their* diseases in life, such as smallpox, arthritis, and nutritional deficiencies, are still diagnosable. **Even** *their* fatal afflictions are still apparent: a middle-aged king died from a blow on the head; a child king died from polio.

The paragraph is now much more coherent. The organization of the information and the links between the sentences help readers move easily from one sentence to the next. Notice how this writer uses a variety of coherence devices, sometimes in combination, to achieve overall paragraph coherence.

6. Demonstrating Mastery of the Pertinent Philosophical Material

A good philosophy paper will demonstrate mastery of the pertinent philosophical views, concepts, and arguments. To demonstrate mastery, you must do more than just regurgitate what you have memorized from the lectures and readings. Regurgitation doesn't even demonstrate understanding let alone mastery. (This is why I suggest that you use quotes only sparingly, and that when you do use them you always explain what the quoted passage says in your own words—see the section entitled “Quoting” below.) Furthermore, there's a difference between merely understanding a topic and mastering it. For you can understand some material without being able to convey that understanding to others. To have mastery is to have the ability to teach that material to others, to be able to explain the material articulately using your own words, descriptions, and examples, such that even someone with no prior knowledge or understanding of the material could understand it. Once you've mastered a topic, you should understand it well enough to go beyond what you have read about it. You should be able to present and defend your own views on the topic. The key, then, to demonstrating mastery is to show that you can explain things in an illuminating way, using your own words and using your own *original* examples and descriptions.

7. Arguing for Your Position

Writing a philosophy paper involves more than simply stating your opinions. You must support your views by presenting arguments in favor of them. You should also try to

defend your views against potential criticisms. That is, try to anticipate what objections might be raised against your views and demonstrate both that you are aware of these possible objections and that you can respond to them – more on this later.

A philosophy paper should be rationally persuasive. And if your arguments are to be persuasive, they must not rest upon unsupported, contentious claims. Instead they should ultimately rest upon assumptions that even a reasonable person of the opposing view would accept. So if, for instance, you want to argue that abortion is morally wrong, you shouldn't begin by assuming that the fetus has a right to life. Realize that such an argument would unlikely persuade anyone who is “pro-choice.” After all, the view that the fetus has a right to life from the moment of conception is precisely what most pro-choice advocates would contest. Of course, you can argue that the fetus has a right to life; you just shouldn't assume it.

The point is to avoid making any assumptions that someone of the opposing view is sure to reject. You should think of your paper as an attempt to persuade someone of the opposing view, and if you are to have any chance of persuading such a person, you must first find some common ground from which to build your arguments. A good example of what I have in mind here is Judith Jarvis Thomson's arguments in “A Defense of Abortion.” In this paper, Thomson argues that abortion is morally permissible where the woman is pregnant as the result of being raped. Now what makes Thomson's arguments so compelling is that they are based on assumptions that even the most extreme anti-abortionist (i.e., one who holds that abortion is always wrong) would likely accept.

Thomson asks you to imagine waking up some morning to find yourself connected to an unconscious violinist suffering from a potentially fatal kidney ailment. Suppose that last night the Society of Music Lovers kidnapped you and, without your consent, surgically connected the violinist to your circulatory system in a desperate attempt to save his life. You now face the following choice. You can remain connected to the violinist for nine months by which time the violinist will be able to survive on his own, or you can unplug yourself from the violinist in which case the violinist will immediately die.

Thomson assumes that in this situation you are under no obligation to remain connected to the violinist for the nine months. You may unplug yourself from the violinist even if this entails killing him. Now this assumption seems relatively uncontroversial; it is one that even a pro-lifer would likely accept. But from this seemingly benign assumption, Thomson is able to argue that abortion is sometimes permissible even if the fetus has a right to life, for the violinist surely has a right to life and yet it is permissible for you to kill him. And aborting a fetus whose existence is due to rape is, in all morally relevant respects, analogous to unplugging yourself from the violinist (or so Thomson argues). Thus Thomson concludes that it is permissible to have an abortion in certain circumstances (i.e., the case of rape) even if the fetus has a right to life from the moment of conception.

8. *Criticizing an Argument*

Don't treat the philosophers or views that you're discussing as if they were stupid. If they were stupid, we wouldn't be discussing them in the first place. So even if you are subsequently going to criticize an argument, state it first in a fair and sympathetic manner, making clear why a reasonable person might be led to think in such a way. In some cases, it may even be necessary to make charitable revisions to an argument. That is, sometimes an argument is flawed in a way that can be easily fixed. In that case, you should explain how the argument can be revised and then focus your criticisms on this stronger, revised version of the argument. For instance, consider the following objection against Thomson's violinist example. Some people argue that Thomson's violinist example isn't analogous to pregnancy because being hooked up to the violinist for nine months is a greater burden for the person kidnapped than pregnancy is for an expectant mother—at least, a pregnant woman can walk around and go places, whereas the person hooked up to the violinist is confined to a hospital bed. But it seems that Thomson could easily revise her analogy and still use it for the same effect. After all, even if we suppose that the violinist is very small and could be carried on one's back for the nine months, it still seems permissible to disconnect yourself from him.

The point is you don't want to take the weakest argument for an opposing view an attack that. Rather you want to think of the strongest possible argument for an opposing view and show that even that argument fails. Only then will you have convinced others that the opposing view is indefensible.

It is important to keep in mind that it is never the case that the only problem with an argument is that its conclusion is false. If the conclusion is false, then either (a) one or more of its premises are false or (b) its reasoning is faulty such that the conclusion doesn't follow from the premises. Thus, if you disagree with the conclusion of an argument, you *must* find fault with either its logic or with one of its premises, and you need to be explicit about which it is and why.

9. *Considering Potential Objections*

After offering reasons for accepting your thesis, you need to consider potential objections. These objections come in two varieties, and you must consider both. First, there are objections to your argument, which can be directed against either your reasoning or your assumptions. Second there are objections to your thesis. The first sort of objection is directed against the reasons you give for your thesis, while the second sort is directed against the thesis itself.

To deal with the first sort of objection, you will probably need to offer sub-arguments (i.e., arguments that defend certain steps or assumptions made in your main argument). But first you'll need to ask yourself, to which of my assumptions and to which of the steps in my argument is someone of the opposing view likely to object. You'll need to offer counter arguments against such objections. Ultimately, the argumentative steps and assumptions you rely on should be acceptable to your opponent. This part of your

essay is absolutely essential. For if you fail to consider and rebut such objections, then you will have failed to make a satisfactory positive case for your thesis.

The other type of objection is directed against your thesis/conclusion. You should ask yourself the following questions: Does my conclusion have any controversial implications? Can I think of any counter-examples to my conclusion? And, most importantly, **DON'T IGNORE YOUR OPPONENT'S COUNTERARGUMENTS**. If you make a claim that one of the philosophers we've discussed has argued against, you absolutely *must* address that argument—see the section entitled “Criticizing an Argument.” In other words, if your thesis is P and one of the philosophers we've discussed has argued not-P, then you *must* show where that philosopher's argument for not-P goes wrong. If you don't, you will receive a poor grade. Of course, if you don't think that you can adequately rebut the argument, then you need to change your thesis to something you can defend.

10. Your Audience

In your paper, you must demonstrate that you have mastery of the philosophical issues and arguments that you are discussing. The best way to go about doing this is by pretending that you are writing, not for your instructor, but for someone who knows absolutely nothing about philosophy or the course that you're taking. So, as James Pryor puts it,

Pretend that your reader has not read the material you're discussing, and has not given the topic much thought in advance. This will of course not be true. But if you write as if it were true, it will force you to explain any technical terms, to illustrate strange or obscure distinctions, and to be as explicit as possible when you summarize what some other philosopher said.

In fact, you can profitably take this one step further and pretend that your reader is *lazy*, *stupid*, and *mean*. He's *lazy* in that he doesn't want to figure out what your convoluted sentences are supposed to mean, and he doesn't want to figure out what your argument is, if it's not already obvious. He's *stupid*, so you have to explain everything you say to him in simple, bite-sized pieces [while also illustrating your points with helpful examples]. And he's *mean*, so he's not going to read your paper charitably. (For example, if something you say admits of more than one interpretation, he's going to assume you meant the less plausible thing.)³

11. Writing Clearly and Precisely

Refrain from using stuffy words and long-winded sentences. Avoid pretentious prose such as, “alas,” “deem,” “quest,” “ponder,” “propound,” etc. Being clear is far more important than appearing to have a sophisticated writing style. Avoid using vocabulary that you are unaccustomed to using in ordinary conversation. Too many students think that being philosophical involves being convoluted and obscure. Quite the opposite, simplicity and clarity are the ideals of philosophy.

³ See his “Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper.”

You should choose your words very carefully. Ask yourself: Does what I've written precisely express the thoughts that I mean to convey? Do not leave something unclear and just assume that your reader will be able to figure out what you mean. For instance, don't write something like "Abortion is the same thing as murder." Abortion and murder are not the same thing. If abortion and murder were the same thing, then one could say that Jack the Ripper aborted many women. But, of course, this is absurd. Jack the Ripper murdered many women but aborted none. Of course, most people would understand that what you meant was that abortion is a form of murder. But whether or not your reader is able to figure out what you meant is irrelevant, because either way it is bad writing.

You will find that philosophers write with a degree of precision that goes well beyond that which is customary in ordinary conversation, and I will expect the same degree of precision in your essay. The best way to ensure that you write clearly is to keep your prose simple and direct. Don't try to make your writing "colorful." For instance, don't use metaphors—just plainly say what it is you have to say. And avoid overstating what you have to say. Overstatement is common in everyday conversation but unacceptable in a philosophy paper. For instance, in conversation someone might say, "Everyone in the tropics is so relaxed." But, of course, not everyone living in the tropics is relaxed. So be careful when using words like "every" and "all."

And avoid the following pitfalls:

- **Bad Diction:** This is where a word is used inappropriately.
 - Example: "Rachels's argument is false." (Statements, claims, beliefs, etc. can all be true or false, but not arguments. Arguments are valid or invalid, sound or unsound, cogent or not cogent.)
 - Example: "Utilitarianism believes that the right act is the one that produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number." (Utilitarianism is a view, not a conscious entity. Thus utilitarianism is incapable of the mental act of *believing*. So you must revise this sentence. In its place, you could say, "Utilitarians believe..." or "Utilitarianism is the view according to which...")
- **Vagueness:** This is where one fails to express what s/he means precisely.
 - Example: "Abortion is not the best solution to an unwanted pregnancy." (Does this mean that although you think that abortion is morally permissible, you believe that it would be preferable for women with unwanted pregnancies to carry them to term and put their unwanted children up for adoption? Or, does this mean that you simply think that abortion is morally wrong?)
- **Ambiguity:** This is where one uses a word that can have more than one meaning but fails to specify which meaning is intended.
 - Example: "A fetus is an innocent human being." (By claiming that a fetus is human, are you merely claiming that it is a member of the species *Homo sapiens*? Or, are you claiming that it is human in the morally relevant sense of that term, the sense in which we think you and I are human but someone in a persistent vegetative state is not?)

12. Quoting

Do not rely on quotations as a means of making your points. You should, rather, explain things using your own words. The ability to explain someone else's position using your own words demonstrates to the reader that you have a clear understanding of that person's viewpoint. You should also avoid close paraphrasing for the same reason.

Use quotations only in order to support a particular interpretation of a text. So don't quote unless you intend to discuss the quoted passage and how it supports your interpretation of the text. Perhaps the only other exception is where you want to quote the precise definition of a word, as it is given by one of the philosophers that you're discussing.

13. Plagiarism

"Plagiarism is the act of using another person's ideas or expressions in your writing without acknowledging the source...to plagiarize is to give the impression that you have written or thought something that you have in fact borrowed from someone else.... Other forms of plagiarism include repeating someone else's particularly apt phrase without appropriate acknowledgment, paraphrasing another person's argument as your own, and presenting another's line of thinking as though it were your own."⁴

If you are at all unclear about what counts as plagiarism, then you should see your instructor because plagiarism often carries severe penalties, ranging from an F on the assignment to expulsion from the university.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I cannot claim credit for many of the ideas contained within this guide. Many of them have come from the other guides that I've looked at—I've listed them below. I have also borrowed from handouts used by colleagues at both the University of California, Santa Barbara and the College of Charleston. I have tried to give credit where credit is due, but I may have left some people out. My sincere apologies to those individuals and my thanks to the authors of all those guides.

OTHER GUIDES TO WRITING PHILOSOPHY

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