How to get an A on your philosophy paper and make Professor Emery extremely happy*

Philosophy paper prompts come in all shapes and sizes. In this class, they will often look like this:

> Author X believes Y. In your own words, what is X's argument for Y? Do you think this is a good argument? Why or why not?

> What is thesis A? In class and in the readings you've seen several arguments for A. Chose what you think is the best argument from that group and reconstruct it here. What is the best objection to this argument? Why do you think that objection fails?

Looks pretty straightforward, right? Unfortunately, it isn't. Writing philosophy papers is *hard*. Really hard. That means you're going to need to work hard to do well. And that you're probably going to get frustrated at some point. That's okay. Take a deep breath. Go for a walk. Watch some youtube clips of puppies sneezing. Then get back to work!

Writing philosophy papers is also a very specific type of writing. Below you'll find some guidelines on how to approach the assignments, common mistakes, how to write clearly, and how grading will work. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to ask!

I   Know your audience

You should write for an audience of philosophers, but philosophers who do not know very much about the topic you are writing about and have not read the papers that you have read.

Why? Well, you have to write for an audience of philosophers because this is a philosophy class. And you have to write for an audience of philosophers who don't know much about the topic and haven't read the relevant papers, because that allows me to evaluate what you know about the topic and whether you have read (and understood) the papers.

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*Seriously. I want you to do well, and nothing makes me happier than when you do. It is going to be hard to get an A on the papers for this class, but that's because writing a good philosophy paper is hard, not because I don't like you/ enjoy making you feel bad/insist on making things more difficult than they need to be.

What does it mean to write for an audience of *philosophers*? It means that you should think of the audience for your paper as a very skeptical one. Philosophers are continually interrogating the reasons for believing the theses placed before them. In other words, they ask "why?" a lot. They aren't going to take anything on faith, or on your authority. You'll need to very clearly explain not only *what* you think but also *why* you think it. You'll need to give lots of examples. And you'll need to make sure that there aren't multiple different ways of understanding what you've written.

If it helps, you can think of your audience as a bunch of jerks, looking for reasons to criticize you or misinterpret your views. But they aren't really jerks, they're just philosophers. They aren't being critical because they want to prove that they are smarter than you or make you feel bad. They are being critical because they are trying to investigate the world in the most rigorous manner possible and while taking as little for granted as they can.

What does it mean to write for an audience of philosophers *who don't know much about the topic and haven't read the relevant readings*? It means you need to explain any relevant background assumptions, examples, or arguments in the literature. It also means that you need define all technical terminology. If your roommate (i.e. a smart person who doesn't know very much philosophy) does not know a term that you are using, or uses it in a different way from the way that we've been using it in class, then it is a technical term. (If you're ever unsure, just ask me! It's not a secret, and I'm happy to give you advice.)

II   Exposition versus analysis

Half to two-thirds of your paper will be exposition, in which you will be explaining other authors' theses or arguments. The other half to one-third of your paper will be your own analysis or evaluation of some thesis or the arguments for that thesis.

The reason why we require so much exposition is that the theses and arguments we will be looking at in this class are really difficult, and a large part of what we're evaluating you on is the extent to which you understand them. It is not because we aren't interested in your own original ideas. We're very interested. Bring them up in class, or post about them on the class discussion board, or come visit us in office hours.

In the expository section you will often be asked to *reconstruct* an author's argument. Philosophers have a very specific procedure for this. See the handout on philosophical arguments that you received earlier in the semester for more details.

Note that the analysis section does not need to be critical (though it can be). Some things that you

can do in the analysis section include:
- Provide a counterexample to a thesis or to a premise in an argument.
- Show that the conclusion of an argument does not follow from the premises.
- Show how a thesis or premise has some as yet undiscussed consequences and explain why you think those consequences are important.
- Offer some further reasons to believe a thesis or premise.

The most common mistake that students make in the both parts of their papers is making claims without explaining the reasons for those claims. They attribute claims to an author without then going on and explaining *why* the author believes those claims, or they take some position themselves, without explaining *why* they take that position. Remember, you're writing for an audience of philosophers. They don't just want to know what someone say. They want to know what that author thinks. And they really want to know *why* she thinks it.

III   Writing clearly

The arguments and concepts and theses we are learning about in this class are difficult (have I made that point yet?!) You will be evaluated in part on how clearly you can write about them, because that is one way that we can tell that you have understood them. Here is some advice on writing clearly:

Get rid of anything unnecessary. Part of writing clearly is writing concisely. All of the assignments will have length limitations that are strictly enforced in order to encourage this. What is unnecessary? Your ability to tell is part of what you're being evaluated on. But here's one tip: you don't need a wordy introduction or conclusion. If the first part of the prompt says, "What is thesis X" it's fine to start your paper like this: "Thesis X is…."

Make the structure of your paper obvious. Use lots of signposting, e.g. "In this paragraph I'm going to explain so-and-so's reasons for believing thesis X…." "I will now discuss two conclusions that follow from thesis Y." (By the way, it is not true, as your high school English teacher may have told you, that you should never write "I" or "me" in a paper. It depends on the conventions of the particular discipline you're writing in. In philosophy papers it is absolutely fine and indeed very common.)

Use examples! You'll often be dealing with very general, very abstract principles or arguments. Giving a concrete example or two can help the reader understand those principles or arguments.

Use simple vocabulary. Remember, philosophers don't take anything on authority, so fancy vocabulary doesn't impress them. And fancy vocabulary often has the unintended side effect of obscuring your meaning.

Avoid metaphors and similes. They can often be interpreted in many different ways.

IV   The simple stuff

These things seem small but they absolutely matter. The bad news is, if you do them wrong, you'll lose credit. The good news is that it's easy to get them right.

- Include the assignment title and the word count on the top of the first page. Since we grade anonymously, please *do not* put your name on your paper.

- Write in a 12-point standard font (like Times New Roman), with at least 1-inch margins and 1.5 line spacing.

- Make sure you've provided citations for all direct and indirect quotation. I don't care what format you use but the reader needs to be able to quickly find the author, the title of the piece, and the page number.

- Try to avoid spelling, grammar, and other typographical errors. Admittedly, these happen to everyone. But they still make you look unprofessional and unintelligent. A very simple strategy: when you've finished your paper, read it out loud to yourself. Or buy your roommate an ice cream cone in exchange for her reading it for you.

- Answer all parts of the prompt. Students make this mistake surprisingly often!

- Obey length limitations. You will lose points if you do not.

VI   Step-by-step advice

Everyone approaches writing differently. Here is one approach that I highly recommend

1. Start early. Like a week before the paper is due. I know, I know. Almost none of you will do this. But it's the single biggest thing you can do to improve your paper. So, do it!

2. Make sure that you understand the prompt. If you have questions, ask!

3. Write an extended first draft. In particular, write a first draft without worrying *at all* about the length. Put everything you have to say in there. Think there are two different ways of understanding the argument? Write down both. Have several objections to a premise? Explain them all in detail. Have a bunch of very thoughtful things to say in the introduction about the importance of the question you are writing about to the future of human kind. Have at it.

4. Let it sit. Close the draft and do not open it again for 48 hours. (Remember how you were supposed to start early? This is why.)

5. Go back through the draft. Note anything that is unnecessary (like that intro), and cut it. Where you've put forward more than one argument or objection or interpretation, decide which one is most convincing and get rid of the rest.

6. Remember your audience. Go back through the draft again, this time with your audience in mind. Make sure that you've given reasons for any claims that you've made. And make sure that you've defined any technical terminology that you've used.

7. Sweat the simple stuff. Make sure that you've answered all of the parts of the prompt. Check that your citations are in order and your formatting is correct. And proofread. Twice!