

A Simple Foolproof Method for Writing Philosophy Papers

From *About Philosophy* by Robert Paul Wolf, Prentice-Hall, 1975

A philosophy paper is a defense of a *thesis*, in which the thesis is *explained* and *analyzed*, *arguments* are given in support of the thesis, possible *objections* to the thesis are stated and examined, and *responses* are given to the objections. A philosophy paper thus has five parts:

1. The statement of the thesis
2. The analysis and explanation of the thesis
3. The arguments in support of the thesis
4. The examination of objection to the thesis
5. The response to the objections

The simplest and most foolproof way to write a philosophy paper is to organize it in precisely this order: Thesis, Analysis of Thesis, Arguments for Thesis, Objections to Thesis, and Response to Objections. It isn't necessary to stick to this order, of course, and after you get good at writing philosophy papers, you may want to experiment with other system of organization. But if you have never written a philosophy paper before, and you aren't really quite sure what you are doing, it might be a good idea to stick to this structure. It can't lose!

Let's take a close look at each of these five elements in turn.

1. The Thesis :

A philosophy paper is a defense of a thesis, so the first step is to get clear what a thesis is. A *thesis* is a statement that makes some clear, definite assertion about the subject under discussion. For example, if the topic of your paper, the subject under discussion, is *the morality of abortion*, here are some of the many *theses* you might choose to defend:

Abortion is morally wrong under all circumstances.

A woman has an absolute right to decide whether to have an abortion.

Abortion is morally right only to save the life of the mother.

Each of these is a clear, definite statement that takes a position on the morality of abortion, a position that the rest of the paper will attempt to defend.

Let's try another example. Suppose that the subject under discussion is *the existence of a Supreme Being*. Among the theses you might choose to defend are these:

There is no God but Allah.

It is logically impossible for there to be a Supreme Being.

Human beings are incapable of determining whether there is a Supreme Being

Now let's look at some examples of things that look like theses, but aren't:

The scientific status of astrology

Abortion, pro and con

Why I believe in God

These *aren't* theses because they don't *assert* anything. All three of these are what we might call *topics*. You can certainly write a philosophy paper about one of these topics, but you *must* first choose a *thesis* about the topic, a thesis that you will defend in the paper. By the way, watch out especially for fake theses-like the third one. ("Why I believe in God"). A philosophy paper is not a personal report of how you feel or what you believe. It is an *argument* for a thesis.

Those you who [have taken] part in formal debate team competitions... may think that all of this looks very much like a debate. You are absolutely right. Philosophy is very much like debating.

Whatever you do, don't pick a wishy-washy thesis that hedges your bets, like "There is much to be said on both sides of the abortion question,," or "There are good arguments for and against the existence of God." Take a stand, plant your feet squarely on the ground, and argue for your thesis as well as you can.

Since we have already used the example of the morality of abortion, let's continue to use it. For the remainder of this appendix, our thesis will be:

Abortion is morally wrong under all circumstances whatsoever.

2. The Analysis and Explanation of the Thesis

The first step in the defense of a thesis is to explain what you mean by it. Since we are using as an example the thesis "Abortion is morally wrong under all circumstances whatsoever," we must state exactly what we mean by the term "abortion," by the phrase "morally wrong," and by the qualifying clause "in all circumstances whatsoever." This may seem like a trivial exercise to you, but watch out! In philosophy, a lot can get loaded into an innocent-looking definition.

For example, we will want to make it clear that by "morally wrong" we mean something quite different from "against the law" or "legally wrong." It is one thing to argue that abortion, suitably defined, violates some state or federal law in the United States or elsewhere. It is quite another thing to argue that abortion is morally wrong, that it violates some principle that all persons ought to abide by. If we are arguing about the law, we shall have to cite the criminal codes, judicial decisions, Supreme Court opinions, or law books. But if we are arguing about what is right and wrong, then we shall have to appeal to some other sorts of considerations—*unless we want to claim that "morally wrong" and "legally wrong" are one and the same, which would itself be a very powerful, highly debatable claim.*

How shall we understand "in any circumstances"? Are we claiming that abortion is wrong even in cases in which the pregnancy resulted from incest or rape? Do we mean that abortion is wrong even if the fetus cannot possibly survive, and the mother will die without the abortion? Are we claiming that abortion is wrong even if prenatal testing reveals that the fetus has a fatal congenital disease and cannot survive for more than a few hours after birth?

Notice: At this stage we are not *arguing*, we are just explaining what we mean by the thesis. And since it is our thesis, we can interpret it any way we wish. But how we interpret the thesis will shape the rest of the paper, for it will determine what sorts of arguments we give and what sorts of objections we must consider. For example, if we interpret "in any circumstances" to mean "even if the pregnancy resulted from rape," then we will have to consider the objection that a woman should not be required against her will to risk her life. But if we exclude pregnancies resulting from rape, then that isn't an objection against our position, so we don't have to consider it in this paper.

You can begin to see how the paper will be shaped and determined by how we interpret our thesis. That is why explaining and analyzing the thesis is such an important step, one we must take before moving on to the arguments. For purposes of our discussion, let us agree to interpret our thesis in the following way (remember, this is just one of countless possible interpretations—not in any sense the right interpretation, just the interpretation we have chosen in order to write this paper):

"Abortion is morally wrong under all circumstances whatsoever" means

"Terminating a human pregnancy at any stage before birth, so long as the fetus is alive, violates the objective and universal principles of Judeo-Christian morality, and is therefore wrong without exception for rape, incest, danger or the life of the mother, or any other circumstance, including even a circumstance in which the abortion might save the lives of many other innocent people."

Notice that I have interpreted "morally wrong" to mean "contrary to the objective and universal principles of Judeo-Christian morality." Needless to say, that is not the only way "morally wrong" can be interpreted. We might also have interpreted it to mean "in conflict with the Principle of Utilitarianism," or "incompatible with the Categorical Imperative." Let me repeat: *You can choose any thesis you wish, and interpret it in any plausible manner you wish, so long as you make it clear to your reader what you are doing.*

Before moving on to the main body of your paper, which is the Argument for the Thesis, review what you have written. Make sure that you have stated a genuine thesis (not just a topic), and that you have explained clearly what that thesis means. Here, as always, you must try very hard to put yourself into the mind of your reader, and ask whether he or she will understand exactly what your thesis means. Reading what you have written as your reader will read it is actually the hardest part of all writing. You may think you know what you have in mind, but unless you put it down on paper clearly, precisely, and accurately, your reader won't have a clue. One way to check on yourself is to give what you have written to a friend and ask him or her to tell you what he or she thinks you have said. Don't give any hints, and don't argue. If your friend doesn't understand what you have written in the same way

you understand it, then there is probably something wrong with what you have written. (Choose an intelligent friend!)

3. The Arguments in Support of the Thesis

We have come to the heart of the paper—the arguments for the thesis. This is where you show your stuff. You have got to come up with arguments that are designed to persuade your reader that your thesis is true. What is an argument? To put it as simply as possible, an argument for a thesis is a reason for believing that the thesis is true. There are many different sorts of reasons you can give in support of a thesis. In the next few paragraphs, we will take a brief look at some of the most important. Just remember: When you are putting forward an argument in support of your thesis, ask yourself, "If I didn't already believe my thesis, would this reason convince me that the thesis is true? Would it at least make me more inclined to believe that it is true? Would it tend to convince a reasonable reader who is open-minded enough so that he or she is willing to listen to reasons?" If the answer is yes, then you have your hands on a genuine argument. If the answer is no, then leave it out of the paper, and look for a better argument.

Let's take a look at some very simple examples. Philosophy may strike you as pretty difficult, but like many difficult things, it is made up of simple parts. Don't try to be too fancy! Just look for straightforward arguments that tend to support your thesis.

If you are trying to show that abortion is morally wrong, you might begin by arguing that abortion is the taking of an innocent life, and the taking of an innocent life is morally wrong. This is an example of what is perhaps the most widely used form of argument—what we can call *instantiation*. "Instantiation" means "giving an instance of." In this case, we have appealed to the general rule:

Taking an innocent life is morally wrong.

Then we have argued that abortion is an *instance* of this general rule - it is the taking of an innocent life. If we spell out our argument completely, it looks like this:

Taking an innocent life is morally wrong.

Abortion is the taking of an innocent life.

Therefore, abortion is morally wrong.

This argument, in turn, is an instance of a very general form of argument that looks like this:

All A are B (where A = acts of taking an innocent life, and B = morally wrong acts)

C is A (where C = abortion, and A again = acts of taking an innocent life.)

Therefore C is B (i.e., abortion is a morally wrong act).

The point is that if C is an A, and if all A's are B's, then C must *be a B*. Arguments of this sort are sometimes called *sylogisms*. In the Middle Ages, philosophers spent a great deal of time analyzing such arguments in order to figure out which kinds were good arguments and which kinds were not.

Instantiation, or showing-that the matter under discussion is an instance of a general rule, is a technique of argument that can be used in a very wide variety of circumstances. Notice that if it is **to be convincing to your reader**, then your reader must already be persuaded that the taking of an innocent life is morally wrong. Otherwise, even though your reader agrees that abortion is the taking of an innocent life, he or she won't be led to the conclusion that it is morally wrong. "

A second form of argument, which in a sense is the reverse of instantiation, is *generalization*. Suppose you are trying to persuade your reader that the taking of an innocent life is morally wrong, as a first step toward springing the above argument, and thereby proving that abortion is morally wrong. You might proceed like this (imagine yourself actually talking to your reader):

Will you agree that shooting down someone walking along the street is morally wrong? Yes

Will you agree that bombing civilians who happen to live near a war zone is morally wrong? Yes.

Will you agree that smothering a baby in its crib is morally wrong? Yes.

Can you see that what all these cases have in common, *what makes them all morally wrong*, is the fact that they are cases of taking an innocent life [crucial step here you must get your reader to agree to this]?

Well,... if what makes these three acts morally wrong is the fact that they are cases of taking an innocent life, if that is why they are wrong, then it follows by simple parity of reasoning that any act that is the taking of an innocent life must also be wrong. In other words, Taking an innocent life is morally wrong.

The trick here is figuring out just what it is that all three cases have in common, in virtue of which they are morally wrong. If you fix on some other characteristic, which isn't, so to speak, the *wrong-making* characteristic, then you won't come up with a defensible generalization. For example, the person gunned; down in the street, the civilians near the war zone, and the baby in the crib might all be Americans, or male, or Caucasian, or rich, or they might all have the same astrological sign. But none of those things is what makes the killing of them morally wrong. What makes the killing of them morally wrong is the fact that they are innocent—that is, they haven't done anything to warrant being killed, they just happened to be there. If the person gunned down in the street *isn't* innocent, if she is a serial murderer on her way to commit yet another heinous crime, then maybe it wouldn't be wrong to kill her, for killing her would not be the taking of an innocent life.

So, we now have two kinds of arguments⁷ which you can use singly c. together, in your attempt to convince your reader that your thesis is true: instantiation and generalization.

A third form of argument, especially useful in replying to an opponent's objections, is the *counterexample*. A counterexample is a particular case—an instantiation—designed to show that an opponent's generalization is wrong. Suppose, for example, that your opponent, trying to show that abortion is morally right, argues that a pregnant woman has a right to have an abortion because having an abortion is choosing to do something with your own body, and (here comes the generalization) *Persons have an absolute right to do with their own bodies whatever they choose*. You can try to come up with a *counterexample* to this generalization that will show that it is not in fact a true universal principle.

For example, you might point out that using your hands to strangle someone you don't like is an example of doing with your body (your hands) whatever you choose, and yet your opponent surely will not agree that you have an absolute right to strangle someone you don't like. Now, your opponent may, of course, just reply, with an absolutely straight face, "Of course you have a right to strangle someone you don't like," but that is not likely!

More probably, your opponent will point out that this is an example (strangling someone) that involves inflicting injury on someone else in addition to doing what you choose with your own body, and that makes it different from abortion. In this case, your opponent is appealing to a slightly different principle, namely, *Persons have an absolute right to do with their own bodies whatever they choose, so long as they do not injure others*.

Now you can respond by pointing out that abortion *does* involve injury to another person, namely to the fetus. This is an example of yet a fourth technique of argument, which we can call *counter-instantiation*—showing that a case is not an instance of the generalization your opponent has cited, but is in fact an instance of a different generalization. Your opponent can now respond that a fetus is not a person, and hence that abortion doesn't fall under the generalization you have just invoked.

Notice that this last move—arguing that the fetus isn't a person— involves two more kinds of arguments that play a role in philosophical debates: *citing facts* and *drawing conceptual distinctions*. When your opponent says the fetus is not a person, he or she may be calling attention to facts (the fetus is not biologically fully developed, it cannot live independently of the mother's body, etc.) that tend to show that it is in fact different from the things we usually call persons. This is an example of citing facts. In addition, your opponent may be pointing out that the concept *person*, which plays a central role in the generalization you have invoked, cannot properly be applied to a fetus. This is an example of drawing a conceptual distinction.

Well, you are beginning to get the idea. In this central part of your paper, your job is to produce arguments in support of your thesis, using instantiation, generalization, counterexample, counter-instantiation, citing of facts, drawing conceptual distinctions, and any of the other forms of argument you can find. The success of your paper, to a very considerable extent, will depend on how well you can think up arguments in support of your thesis.

There is no set of rules that will produce good arguments. This is a skill you have to learn through practice. Just keep one idea clearly in mind: What makes an argument a good one is its ability to persuade an intelligent, reasonable reader or listener who doesn't already agree with your thesis. If you test arguments against that standard, you will be able to judge whether they are good.

4. The Examination of Objections to the Thesis

This is the part of your paper in which you put yourself into an imaginary opponent's shoes and try to figure out what objections he or she might raise to your thesis. The techniques you use in this exercise are precisely the ones we have just been looking at in the previous section: instantiation, generalization, counterexample, counter-instantiation, and so forth. The trick—and it is a very difficult trick—is to think up the *strongest* objections you can to your thesis. Don't just put up some cream-puff objections that anyone can knock over!

This is hard to do because by the time you have written the third part of the paper—the arguments for the thesis—you will probably have convinced yourself that you are right. Try to think of this part of the paper as damage control, or setting up a defense perimeter, or taking out insurance. If you can come up with some really strong objections to your thesis, and *still* succeed in defending the thesis, then you will probably persuade your reader, because you will have thought of the objections that the reader has in mind as he or she reads your paper. There is nothing that wins a reader over more completely than to have the author say, "Now you may be thinking to yourself, but what about this, and this, and this" when that is just what the reader is thinking, and then having the author come up with really plausible replies.

So, play Devil's advocate for a bit, and think up the best objections you can to your own thesis.

5. The Response to the Objections

And finally, having thought up some dandy objections, answer them! Once again, you are going to use the techniques of argument we discussed above (notice that most of your paper—Parts 3, 4, and 5—consists of arguments; that is what philosophy is all about).

And then you are done! You have stated a thesis, analyzed and explained it, argued for it, considered objections to it, and responded to objections. That *is* a philosophy paper. Not so hard after all, is it?

Notice, by the way, that this method tells you what to put into the paper, what to leave out, what to do next, and when you are done. Should you cite a fact? Yes—if it serves to strengthen your thesis or weaken your opponent's objection; otherwise no. Should your paper have footnotes? Well, if you cite a fact, put in a footnote stating the source of your knowledge of that fact (unless it is a well-known fact that any reader can be expected to know it. If you refer to Washington, D.C., as the nation's capital, don't put in a footnote to the encyclopedia!).

How do you know how long to make your paper? The simple answer is just long enough to state a thesis, explain it, defend it, and respond to objections to it. If your instructor assigns a paper of, say, three pages in length then you must choose a thesis that can be adequately explained and defended in three pages. If the assignment is for a ten-page paper, then choose a thesis that calls for that much explanation and defense. Don't pad! Don't add paragraphs or pages just to bulk up the paper so that it feels weighty. As Abraham Lincoln said when someone asked him how long his legs were, "Jus long enough to reach the ground."

But what about an assignment to discuss or criticize someone else's views. For-example, suppose your assignment is to write a paper critically analyzing some view of the relation between mind and matter, or to write a paper about Kant's Categorical Imperative. These topics may look very different from the topics we have been talking about. Can the method I have just laid out be used for these assignments as well?

Absolutely. Suppose the assignment is to write a paper on Kant's Categorical Imperative. The first thing you must do is to decide what you are going to try to show about the Categorical Imperative. In other words, you must *choose*

your thesis. For example (and this is, I ought to warn you, a pretty wacky example), you might decide to defend the thesis that Kant's Categorical Imperative is identical with the Principle of Utilitarianism. (I don't think anybody in the world thinks that this thesis is true—I warned you it was pretty wacky.) Now that you have your thesis, the next step is to analyze and explain it. That means explaining how you understand the Categorical Imperative, stating what you take to be the Principle of Utilitarianism, and then explaining what you mean when you say that the two are "identical."

Now you are going to have to produce some arguments in support of your thesis. Some of your arguments will be textual citations from Kant's writings (citations of fact) to show that your interpretation of his Categorical Imperative is the correct one. Some of your arguments will be conceptual analyses designed to clarify the relationship between these two apparently different principles. And so forth.

When it comes to considering objections, your number one objection will of course be that Kant himself believed his Categorical Imperative to be absolutely opposed to the Principle of Utilitarianism. So you will, in effect, have to argue against Kant in your reply to objections.

But you get the point. Even when you are writing a paper in which you are supposed to discuss or analyze or criticize some philosopher's position, you can still use the five-step method set out above.

I can't guarantee that you will get an A if you follow this method. That depends on how *well* you do at following it. But I am willing to bet that if you study; this appendix carefully and follow the five-step method intelligently, you won't fail! And I guarantee it will help you to clarify your ideas, sharpen your arguments, and thereby improve your philosophizing.

A Few Tips, Hints and Warnings

The basic instructions for writing a good philosophy paper are now in your hands, but it might be helpful for me to give you a few tips, hints, and warnings designed to help you avoid some of the most common mistakes and problems.

1. Let me start with a piece of advice that is not so much a tip or hint as it is the Prime Directive (as they say on *Star Trek*). *Write clear, grammatical, correctly spelled, proper English prose* (unless you are writing Spanish, or Hebrew, or Cambodian, or German, or some other natural language, in which case write *that* language clearly, grammatically, correctly spelled, and properly).

There are two reasons why it is important for you to make sure that you use language in a grammatically correct fashion. First of all, writing correctly is like playing in tune on a musical instrument, or learning the rules of a sport. You can't interpret a piece of music if you can't even play the notes properly, and you can't play baseball if you don't even know that a batter gets three strikes. Written language has rules just like music or baseball, and learning them is the first step in writing well.

The second reason why writing correct prose is so important in a philosophy paper is that until you can write in a grammatically precise and correct fashion, you will not be able to state a thesis for defense, or put together an argument in support of a thesis. Incorrect grammar obscures an author's meaning. Indeed, if you aren't careful to write clearly, you may fool yourself as well as your readers. You may not know what you yourself mean by your thesis or your arguments, in which case you won't be able to tell whether you have made a case for your thesis at all.

2. Don't wander from the basic outline when writing your paper, and don't mix together materials that belong in different parts of the paper.

Once you have stated your thesis, start to explain and analyze it. Leave out anything that doesn't help to explain or analyze your thesis. You may be eager to get to your argument because you may have a really good idea you want to try out. Wait for it! Once you get to the argument stage, don't drift off into expressing opinions or telling stories that don't advance the argument. Make sure both you and the reader know, at every stage, what you are doing, where you are going, and how what you are saying connects up with your central task of defending your thesis.

3. Try to use language as precisely as possible. Vague words like "stuff" or "thing" are evidence of a sloppy mind. Your prose should be proper to the subject—not forced or stilted, not full of words you wouldn't ever use except in a philosophy paper, but nevertheless carefully chosen. Think how inappropriate it would be for Dan Rather or Tom Brokaw to start the evening news by saying, "Hey, like the guys in Washington did⁷ like, a lot of weird stuff today, ya know?"

4. Asking a question without answering it is *not* an appropriate way to give an argument. For example: "What would happen if every woman who wanted an abortion got one?" is not an argument. "If every woman who wanted an abortion got one, millions of innocent lives would be lost" *is* an argument, or rather it is part of an argument. The whole argument might look like this:

It is wrong to cause the loss of millions of innocent lives.

If every woman who wanted an abortion got one, millions of innocent lives would be lost.

Therefore, it would be wrong for every woman who wants one to get an abortion.

Similarly, "What right does the state have to tell a woman she can't have an abortion?" isn't an argument. But "The state has no right to tell a woman she cannot get an abortion" *is* an argument. And so forth.

5. It is perfectly all right to use an argument from a lecture you have heard or a book you have read. Arguments are a little like arithmetical formulas. I don't know who first said "Two plus two equals four," but it is there for anyone to use. However, when you adopt an argument as your own, you take responsibility for it. By including it in your paper, you are saying that you believe it is a good argument. Even if you footnote it indicating where you first encountered it, it is still on your neck! So use any *arguments* you like, so long as you are ready to stand behind them. And remember: An argument either stands on its own feet, or it doesn't stand at all.

You don't make a bad argument better by pointing out in a footnote that a famous philosopher used it.