

Professor Smith's Guide on How to Write a Philosophy Paper

or

10 Not-So-Difficult Steps to Clarity of Thought and Orderliness in Composition

Attitude adjustment: Remain calm. This is accomplished more easily if you start working on your paper more than 18 hours ahead of the time it is due. Remember, papers are not assigned to torture students (however fun that might be). They are aids to learning, and learning is fun. (Well, it can be.)

1. **The assignment:** Pay attention to what the teacher says about the paper. Write instructions down with precision and pay close attention to the wording of the assignment. Also listen for hints or clues that the professor may offer about the topic.
2. **The topic:** Sometimes a topic is assigned; sometimes you are required to formulate your own topic. Many have difficulty choosing a topic. Start by having a very generic topic, such as "The Soul in Plato" or "Happiness in Mill," or "Nuclear Deterrence." Begin by trying to narrow your topic. Write down several questions (as many as a dozen) that you think are related to your topic (this is very important and useful). For instance, "Why does Plato think the soul is immortal?"; "What kind of arguments does he use?"; "Why does he think the soul has three parts?"; "How are these parts related to virtue?"; "What images does he use to talk about the soul?"; "What do these images convey about the soul?" Select one of these questions as your focus. The way in which you formulate the question you are going to address will have a great influence on how you work and think. You may think you are interested in the question: "Is nuclear deterrence moral/immoral?" Or more specifically: "How can I persuade others that nuclear deterrence is moral/immoral?" Most of us do have a hidden agenda in our writing; we are not truly open-minded; we wish to prove something to others. There is nothing wrong with that. But we should always remain flexible enough to respond genuinely to the material we read -- we must allow for the possibility that we will change our minds.

Flexibility at every stage is important. If, as you write, you realize you have selected a topic that isn't going to work, look again at your list of questions and see if you are really trying to answer some other question you have stated.

Another way of finding a topic is to consider what sorts of problems the author is trying to solve in his text. Why does he take up the questions that he does; why in the order that he does; what objections to his thesis does he address and how does he deal with them?

Or you might attempt to define the specialized terms in an author. For instance, what role does a "kingdom of ends" play in Kant's ethical thought? Or, why does Socrates approve of the "noble lie"?

Questions should also be formulated about these topics. From the dozen or so questions you formulate, arrange which ones are necessary to your main question as part of your outline, and abandon the rest as irrelevant to this project.

3. **Your thesis statement:** Try to locate portions of the text that speak to the topic. Looking over your reading and class notes should lead you to specific portions of the texts that address your topic. It may even be useful to copy out the texts that you locate and read them several times. Before long, you will begin to find material that helps you address the topic, or you will find an insight that will tie together the passages. You can then formulate a thesis statement that will very much narrow your topic. For instance, if you locate various passages about the soul in the Republic you will find that there are a multitude of possible topics related to the soul. Keeping the topic in mind, and the question you intend to answer in mind, formulate several thesis statements and pick the one that interests you the most or the one that you think you can write most clearly about. Suppose you have been asked to write about the soul in the Republic. You have chosen to ask the question, "Why does Plato speak of the soul in the Republic?" Several such thesis statements might be: "The Republic is designed to explain the parts of the soul and to discover where justice is; "The talk of justice in the state is simply an excuse to do an investigation into the soul." Or, "The immortality of the soul is not an important (or is an important) theme in the Republic; the necessity of being just is demonstrated without reference to the immortality of the soul."
4. **Organizing your material:** Reread the passages that you have selected that are pertinent to your topic and thesis statement. Ponder what they say. Reflect upon them. Try to see what light they shed upon your thesis; how they support your thesis. You may need to revise your thesis; do so. Arrange your passages in the order that you think it would be right to discuss them. Obviously, there should be some logical progression of ideas.
5. **The outline:** Now outline your paper. This is best done by trying to think of three main points that you wish to make (though being open to the possibility that your topic divides more neatly into two or four or more points). For each of the points, try to locate passages that will illustrate or support the claim that you are making. The strongest papers are built upon a close correlation between the claims made and specific passages in the text.
6. **Beginning to write:** If you are having a difficult time getting your thoughts organized, start writing on any point on which you know what you want to say and then build around that paragraph. Then think about what should come before and what should come after.
7. **Supporting your argument:** Try to develop a sense of when it is necessary to cite from the text and when a paraphrase will serve equally well. Generally when a citation is given, it is because there is a need to have in mind the precise wording of the author. Always comment on the passages you cite; draw out the specific understanding you hope for your reader to take from the text. When you paraphrase, in a parenthesis following the paraphrase, cite the text that you have in mind. Citations always strengthen the paper. The more the paper is rooted in the text or texts, the better it is. Whenever you make a claim about an author's view, have in mind a specific text that would support your claim. Refer to that text at least by page number in a parenthesis after your claim.

As you attempt to think through your paper and to make your arguments, think of yourself as trying to defend or explain your thesis to a fairly intelligent individual (perhaps your roommate!). Many of the terms of the author will need to be "translated" for your audience; if your roommate would need an explanation about a technical term, it is most likely wise to include the "translation" in your text. Even if you have learned the proper use of the term in class it is wise to define it to demonstrate to the professor that you do have a grasp of it.

8. **Polishing the paper:** If you have completed a draft and feel uneasy about its logic and structure, read each paragraph and write a sentence summarizing it. Read them in order and see if the line of thought makes sense. Then see if the paragraphs make each of these points clearly; you may want to include your summary sentence as a lead or concluding sentence to your paragraph.

After you have written your paper, go back and rewrite the introduction. All introductions should be considered provisional until the paper is written. See if you have done what you said you were going to do. Maybe you will need to change what you did, or what you say you are going to do. Don't be afraid to write a chatty or imaginative beginning. Pretend you are courting your audience and arrive with a bouquet of roses or something to catch the audience's interest and attention. Beware of lame beginnings: "Nietzsche was a nineteenth century philosopher", and lame endings: "As we have seen, Kant and Mill disagree and it is up to everyone to decide for himself who is right."

9. **Write your papers a few days ahead of time.** Without looking at your paper, try to explain it to a friend. And then reflect upon whether or not your paper really does what you say (and hope) it does. Read your paper aloud, preferably to a friend and try to hear if it is cogent and clear. Proofread carefully and also have a classmate read your paper for typos and do the same for him or her.

Writing is easy; all you do is sit staring at the blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead.

-- Gene Fowler
