

Bentley College
Fall semester, 2004
PH 101: Problems of Philosophy
Instructor: Miles Rind
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COMPOSITION GUIDE

Writing assignments are not only a means of assessing the performance of the student: they are also a means of instruction. To be sure, much of the instruction is the self-instruction that comes through the student's efforts in writing the paper; but another part comes through the teacher's comments on the finished product. I have written this guide, first, to make as clear as I can what I look for in a paper; second, to help you to avoid the most common and likely faults of student papers; and third, to make my own job of commenting on your papers easier by allowing me to refer, when necessary, to items in this document.

I. CRITERIA OF EVALUATION

The following are the questions that I typically have in mind when I evaluate a student philosophy paper:

Does the paper fulfill the assignment? If the assignment is to answer a certain question, does it answer that question? If the assignment is a complex one, comprising several component tasks, does it fulfill all of those tasks?

Are its contents strictly relevant to the assignment? Does it get the job done without padding or needless repetition? Are the writer's efforts squarely aimed at the assigned task, rather than being scattered about in shotgun fashion?

Are its claims and its reasoning clear and coherent? Is it clear what claims the writer is making, and what is supposed to justify them? Does the writer offer an argument rather than an account of what he or she "feels"?

Are its claims adequately supported by evidence of the appropriate kind, whether empirical observation, common knowledge, abstract reasoning, or textual fact? Are its premises cogent and its inferences valid?

Does it deal adequately with objections and contrary considerations, especially ones that either are readily apparent or have already been presented in the course, whether in the reading or in class sessions?

Are its sentences and paragraphs well-constructed? Are the sentences correctly formed and punctuated? Do they flow naturally and employ a variety of grammatical structures? Are words and expressions correctly used and spelled? Are the paragraphs coherently structured and arranged?

Is it in the proper form? Does it fulfill the formal requirements stated in section II below? (Failure to fulfill these requirements, especially the requirement that pages be

numbered and stapled together, may be detrimental to your grade.)

Was it submitted at the time and in the manner required? My policy in these matters is stated in the course syllabus.

II. FORMAL REQUIREMENTS

§ 1. Format. All papers should be computer-printed or typed, preferably in 12-point type, double-spaced, with margins of at least one inch all around, so that I have room for writing comments. Paragraphs should begin with an indented line and should not be separated by any additional spacing. (In other words, your papers should *not* look like this document or like web pages.) Use a standard book typeface and plain white paper, printed only on one side.

§ 2. Necessary information. The following information should appear at the top left of the first page (I prefer that you not use a cover sheet):

Student's *identification number* only (no name)

Name of course (code or title)

Name of assignment (e.g., "First paper")

Date of *submission* of paper (not date of completion or due date, if that is different from the date of submission)

Please write your name on the *back* of the last page of your paper. In this fashion, I can grade your papers without being influenced by any knowledge of your identity, but, once I have done so, can then easily record the grades and return the papers to their writers.

§ 3. Which question(s)? If the assignment gives you a choice of questions, you must explicitly indicate which one you are answering. If the assignment gives you several separately numbered questions to answer, you must correspondingly number your answers to each.

§ 4. Title. If the assignment for which the paper is written is highly specific (e.g., requiring you to expound a specific argument or problem), then no title beyond the name of the assignment is necessary. If, on the other hand, the assignment allows you some freedom of topic, your title should make known the specific topic of your paper.

§ 5. Do not hand in a collection of loose or unnumbered sheets. Unless your paper has only one page, number the pages and *staple* (do not paper-clip) them together.

III. SOME RUDIMENTS OF EXPOSITORY WRITING

§ 6. Be sure that you understand the assignment. There is no rule more important than this. Write on what is assigned, and only on what is assigned. If the assignment takes the form of a question, your task is to answer that question. *If you are in doubt as to the meaning of a question, please ask me for clarification*, preferably in class rather than outside of it, and the sooner the better. It may be that I have failed to make something clear, or even that I have made a mistake in the assignment (something that, amazingly, has been known to happen): in either case, it is best that I should know about it, so that I can make the necessary clarification or correction to the entire class.

§ 7. Re-write. There have been writers of genius who did their best work in a single draft, but the chances are that you are not one of them. Use your first draft to work out your own thoughts. You may, if it helps you, include repetitions, changes of mind, loose analogies, vague speculations, invectives against the author you are writing about, or whatever you please. Subsequently, though, you must re-work what you have written to make it presentable to others, and in particular to make it answer to the assignment. Superfluous and irrelevant thoughts and expressions must be stricken, vague statements made precise, expressions of opinion either substantiated or removed, and so on.

§ 8. Proofread. You should also be sure to proofread your paper before submitting it—that is, go over it with a view to correcting faulty sentence constructions, misused expressions, errors of spelling and punctuation, and the like.

§ 9. Write to be read. A well-written paper is one that reads well, and the pertinent kind of reading is reading *aloud*. The following exercise, which I recommend for use in revising your first draft, provides a test of readability. As you read over the draft of your paper (out loud, if possible), imagine that you had given it to a student in this class to read aloud to another student in the class, where the first student is a competent reader and both students have kept up with the reading assignments. Ask yourself: would the first student be able to read the paper aloud without getting confused by sentence structures, or giving the wrong emphasis to a construction, or having to go back to re-read sentences in order to understand them? And would the second student be able to understand what you meant to say in writing the paper from listening to the first one read it? If the answer to both these questions is “yes,” then you have achieved perfect readability. I do not expect you to achieve such perfection, but it is the ideal toward which you should strive. Certainly you should avoid putting words to paper in such a way that no one besides you can make grammatical sense of them or follow your argument.

§ 10. Be clear, concise, and to the point. If you do not have a clear understanding of the point that you are trying to make, neither will your reader. One precise statement is far better than three vague ones at the same point. Do not waste space with airy statements about the historical significance of the author you are writing about, how the question that

you are dealing with has been disputed for centuries, and suchlike mush. (You should especially guard against this temptation in your opening paragraph.)

§ 11. By your (written) words shall ye be judged. The fact that you were thinking certain thoughts at the same time as you were writing certain words does not make it the case that you have expressed your thoughts in writing. You must say (in written words) what you *mean*. I will make what allowances I can for verbal and grammatical slips, but in general I will grade your work according to what you have written, not according to what you might have been trying to say.

§ 12. Provide textual support. When making interpretative claims about a text, you must provide evidence, either by citation or by quotation. (Citation consists in specifying where a passage may be found; quotation consists in actually providing the passage. Quotations must be accompanied by citations, but not conversely.) This evidence must come from the text itself. *Statements made about a text by another person, such as the editor of a volume or even your instructor, have no value as support for your interpretation.* Quotations must be indicated by quotation marks, or, if you are quoting a passage of more than a few lines, indentation. The source of every quotation—both the text and the location (usually the page number)—must be clearly indicated. Remember also that unless you are quoting a short statement or phrase whose meaning is quite obvious, you must explain its meaning in your own words. Be sure to make clear when you are presenting your own views and when you are presenting those of the figure you are writing about.

§ 13. Are you asking me? Assertions are best expressed by declarative sentences, not interrogative ones. Rhetorical questions should be employed sparingly, if at all. In general, don't ask a question unless you want an answer.

IV. ABOUT WRITING PHILOSOPHY PAPERS IN PARTICULAR

§ 14. Argument, not opinion or “feeling.” Most philosophical writing consists in the presentation of arguments. An argument is an attempt to secure assent for some conclusion by giving compelling reasons. It is not an expression of opinion. Least of all is it an expression of how the writer “feels” about something. So if I ask you to argue in defense of a philosophical position of your own, you are failing to do that if you tell me what you “feel”; and if I ask you, say, what Hume's argument for a certain claim is, you are not answering the question if you tell me that Hume “feels” this or that.

§ 15. Order of reasoning. The order of an argument may not be the order in which statements appear in the text, and not every statement that appears in the text is necessarily part of an argument. If I ask you to present Mill's argument for a certain claim, you must discover for yourself what the order of his reasoning is. Do not write: “Mill says this, and then he says that.” What matters is not the order in which Mill (or whoever) says things,

but the order in which one claim depends on another. Philosophers will usually indicate this by the use of such words as “therefore,” “thus,” “then,” “consequently,” and similar expressions (called *inference indicators*). But note that the justification for a claim may appear in the text *after* the claim itself, in which case the justification will generally be indicated by such expressions as “for,” “since,” “because,” and the like.

§ 16. Objections and replies. Philosophical argument often proceeds through the presentation and refutation of objections. Good philosophical writers anticipate the objections that readers will make, and reply to them in advance. So when you have an objection to some philosopher’s argument, it pays to look into the text again to see whether he has anticipated this objection and already replied to it. If he hasn’t, you should think about how someone defending the philosopher’s position could reply to your objection. If you are presenting your own argument, you should give thought to the objections that might be raised against it.

§ 17. No external authorities. In philosophy, there are no external authorities. If you make a claim, you must justify it, or admit that you have no justification for it (which, as a rule, is an embarrassing position to be in). This holds not only for your own philosophical arguments but also for your claims about the arguments of the philosophers you write about. The fact that somebody makes a certain claim about the text, even if it is somebody who knows the texts better than you do, and *even if it is your instructor in this class*, is no justification for the claim itself. To acknowledge that you have borrowed a claim from someone else is perfectly in order; but it is no argument.

§ 18. Don’t try to argue from the dictionary. A dictionary is an attempt by a human being or a crew of human beings to explain how the words of a language are, or historically have been, commonly used. Unless (as is not likely to happen) the question that you are dealing with is a question of the use of words, dictionary entries are simply irrelevant. If two philosophers disagree, say, over what justice is, their dispute is not settled, and usually not even clarified, by invoking a dictionary definition of the *word* “justice.” Philosophical questions rarely turn on the definition of words, and even when they do, what is in dispute is almost always the technical definition of a term for philosophical purposes, not the description of its common use outside of philosophy. Use the dictionary to instruct yourself in the use of unfamiliar words, not as a basis of argument.