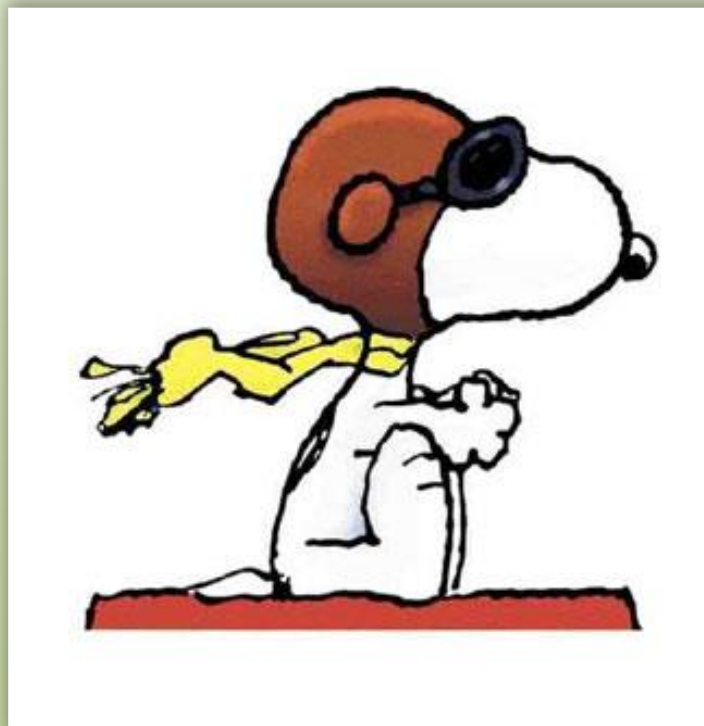


PHILOSOPHY FOR BEGINNERS:

Some guidelines for doing well in a
philosophy course

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Welcome to Philosophy!

Philosophy?

If you are reading this, you probably signed up for a philosophy course and are asking yourself many questions, like Snoopy. So: welcome! And also: hope you enjoy the ride! If you enrolled in an Introduction to Philosophy class, then you will soon find out what philosophy is, and how it helps us to think about the meaning of life, among other timeless questions. In other courses, you will tackle philosophical questions such as: Do we have a moral duty to obey the law? Is patriotism a virtue? (In Social and Political Philosophy.) What is real? (In Metaphysics.) What is knowledge? (In Theory of Knowledge.) What are the ethical responsibilities of healthcare providers? (In Social and Moral Problems in Healthcare.) Is law a branch of morality, or is it nothing more than the commands issued by the sovereign? (In Philosophy of Law.) What makes a philosophical approach or theory a feminist one? (In Feminist Philosophy.) Do some natural objects have value beyond their usefulness to human beings? (In Environmental Ethics.)

“Philosophy” comes from the Greek *philosophia*, which means “love [*philo-*] of wisdom [*sophia*].” To study philosophy is to be perpetually engaged in asking basic questions and working one’s way through the answers, by way of reasoning and argumentation. Philosophy involves thinking and thinking things through, or, as one philosopher put it, “thinking in slow motion” (John Campbell). In philosophy, we carefully and methodically analyze and critique ideas and arguments, even those that seem obvious to a lot of us. We also expand our imagination to see things from different perspectives than our own, and to think about how the world could be different than it is.

The value of philosophy

What is the point of philosophy? Here is how Bertrand Russell, famous British philosopher, logician, and political activist, answers the question (the quote is lengthy but quite neat):

The value of philosophy is, in fact, to be sought largely in its very uncertainty. The man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation, and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the co-operation or consent of his deliberate reason. To such a man the world tends to become definite, finite, obvious; common objects rouse no questions, and unfamiliar possibilities are contemptuously rejected. As soon as we begin to philosophize, on the contrary, we find ... that even the most everyday things lead to problems to which only very incomplete answers can be given. Philosophy, though unable to tell us with certainty what is the true answer to the doubts which it raises, is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom. Thus, while diminishing our feeling of certainty as to what things are, it greatly increases our knowledge as to what they may be; it removes the somewhat arrogant dogmatism of those who have never traveled into the region of liberating doubt, and it keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect.¹

One of the things Russell points out, here, is that we don't engage in philosophy for the sake of the answers it provides, but rather because the process of questioning things and challenging our long-held beliefs is itself valuable.

Socrates (a Greek philosopher considered the forefather of the Western philosophical tradition) goes even further than Russell as he argues that only the examined life—the philosophical life—is worthy, while the “unexamined life is not worth living.”²

In doing philosophy, we develop important analytical, critical and imaginative skills that enable us to view the world afresh—with wonder, clarity, and perspicacity. Philosophy expands the imagination, allowing the mind to project itself beyond, and challenge, what is usually accepted as “natural” or “inevitable” (for example, human selfishness). Philosophy is thus liberating: it tears down the veil of prejudice that tends to cover our view of the world; and it liberates us by showing us the way to a fuller, more meaningful human life.

Why should *you* take philosophy seriously? Philosophy courses strive to give you a taste of philosophical activity and equip you with critical thinking skills that you will keep and cultivate for a lifetime, in your undergraduate career and beyond. Here are the general learning objectives of a philosophy course:

- i. You will grapple with philosophical ideas and arguments in dialogue with one another, and appreciate the value of philosophical questioning;
- ii. You will learn how to read, analyze, and critically assess texts;

¹ B. Russell, *Problems of Philosophy*, chap. XV (1912).

² Plato, *Apology* 38a.

- iii. You will sharpen your ability to effectively articulate and evaluate (both verbally and in writing) a variety of viewpoints for different issues;
- iv. You will develop and refine your own views, and carefully express and defend these views in public and on paper.

You will be able to transfer the knowledge and skills you acquired in philosophy into other courses and learning experiences. In particular, the skills-based learning outcomes outlined above will equip you for the challenges of your co-op and beyond, preparing you to approach projects and assignments with clarity and rigor, to determine priorities and set goals, to synthesize long documents into memos, etc. etc. Philosophy will help your career! You don't have to take it from me: see S. Rupp, [Be Employable, Study Philosophy](#).³ Did you know that philosophy is the [top earning](#) humanities BA?⁴

The process

We learn best philosophy by doing philosophy, through reflection and dialogue. So the success of the class depends to a large degree on your contributions to class discussions. I will not lecture much in class. Instead, I will count on your full participation to discussion. You will thus be expected to attentively read all of the required readings and come to class prepared to actively engage with the material and with each other. The two next sections, "How to learn" and "How to read a philosophy paper," will give you some guidance on how to actively prepare for class, so we can have the best discussions we can possibly have, and so you can do as well as you can in the course.

Perhaps you're not used to participate much in class and you don't like the idea of starting now? Don't panic! As an undergraduate student, I was very shy and I came from a country where students are expected to write down what the professor says without asking questions. So I know the feeling! The bad news is that you will have to contribute too, like everyone else, and that it is going to be a lot harder for you. The good news is that you don't have to say anything brilliant every time you speak up in class; you can just share your confusion and ask basic questions and that would count as valuable contribution to whatever philosophical quest we are engaged in at the moment. Or perhaps a few students and myself are in agreement about something that really doesn't seem obvious to you: speak up! The whole class will benefit.

On a related note: If at any point in time during the course of the semester we begin discussing something that reminds you of, or was something you worked on during co-op, I'd like to invite you to share your experience with the class.

³ http://www.salon.com/2013/07/01/be_employable_study_philosophy_partner/

⁴ <http://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2015/09/philosophy-majors-out-earn-other-humanities/403555/>



How to Learn Better

What is your learning style? You should know the answer to that question! It's not too late to find out, thanks to Marilla Svinicki's learning model (GAMES) and its accompanying test. A psychologist who specializes in undergraduate learning, Svinicki created the GAMES© model in order to guide students to become more efficient learners.

Efficient learners know how to govern their own learning experience. This skill is called 'self-directed learning'. If you were admitted at Northeastern University, then you must already be pretty good at this: for instance, you know to ask questions when there is something you don't understand, you learn from your mistakes, you can improve your performance when given good feedback on an assignment, and you know how to identify gaps in your knowledge and address them. Well, Svinicki's model will help you get better at all of this.

So read the following carefully and take the test to find out what kind of learner you are, and how you could improve your learning methods and become an efficient self-directed learner. You can also take the GAMES© survey [online](#).⁵

Each letter in the acronym GAMES refers to a component of good study behavior. According to Svinicki, "students who follow this model are much more active in their learning and as a result process what they are learning at a deeper level."⁶

⁵

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/?sm=Bh7vAkLy%2fC496w5Cag8zbpEJnEggqLGZ03RMftS189i0%3d>

⁶ M.D. Svinicki, *Learning and Motivation in the Postsecondary Classroom* (Wiley 2004), p. 131.

G stands for goal-oriented study. An important aspect of self-regulation is being able to set appropriate goals and marshal the resources needed to achieve them. Goal-oriented study involves planning before studying—for example, previewing the course material and the problem set and laying out key questions based on the preview. Students who know what they want to accomplish have a better chance of achieving it.

A stands for active studying, which involves the ability to engage in active processing of the material—for instance, paraphrasing or creating one's own examples. Students who can involve their minds as well as their senses are engaged in active studying.

M stands for meaningful and memorable studying, which requires the ability to relate to prior knowledge and interests. This kind of studying involves creating one's own examples, making connections across courses and modules, and expanding on concept details.

E stands for explaining the material in order to learn it. One of the best ways to understand what you know about a topic is to explain it to someone else. This in essence involves putting ideas into your own words. One excellent way to practice this is to form a study group after you have studied alone and take turns explaining the concepts to the others in the group.

S stands for self-monitoring. This is the heart of self-regulated learning. Students need to monitor their understanding and make corrections when they come up short. Self-monitoring can be accomplished by comparing end results with the initial goals set for studying. For instance, students can monitor themselves by making up and answering their own questions, by getting together with other students and trading questions. Students need to implement self-monitoring during learning, not the night before the assignment is due!

GAMES[®]

How well do the following statements fit the way you study?

Mark a 1 if the statement is not at all like you up to a 5 if the statement is very much like you.

NOT like me ←→ Like me

T. I am effective when I study.	1	2	3	4	5
1. I study while watching TV or listening to music.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I work with another student to quiz each other on the main ideas.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I set a specific work effort (time or amount) before beginning to study.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I recopy my notes verbatim to study for a test.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I make vivid images of concepts and relationships among them.	1	2	3	4	5
6. After studying, I meet with a partner to trade questions and explanations.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I do not see connections between various classes I'm taking.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I analyze what I have to do before beginning to study.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I remain aware of mood and energy levels during study and respond appropriately if either gets problematic.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I do not discuss course material with my friends.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I create outlines, concept maps or organizational charts of how the ideas fit together.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I look for real life applications for the things I'm learning.	1	2	3	4	5
13. I set a specific content learning goal before beginning to study.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I am easily distracted when I am studying.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I make a class presentation on the material, if possible.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I take breaks periodically to keep from getting too tired.	1	2	3	4	5
17. I make connections between what I am studying and past classes or units.	1	2	3	4	5
18. When I set up specific times to do my studying, I follow through with them.	1	2	3	4	5
19. I make notes in the margins of the text when I read.	1	2	3	4	5
20. I have a range of strategies for learning.	1	2	3	4	5
21. I learn better when I help someone else understand.	1	2	3	4	5
22. I do not relate course information to my own experiences.	1	2	3	4	5
23. I work through any problems that are illustrated in the text or my class notes.	1	2	3	4	5
24. If my study strategy isn't working, I try another.	1	2	3	4	5
25. I make sure to understand what is expected of me in terms of assignments.	1	2	3	4	5
26. I study for all of my classes in pretty much the same way.	1	2	3	4	5
27. I put course concepts in my own words.	1	2	3	4	5
28. I make sure I can answer my own questions during studying.	1	2	3	4	5
29. I pause periodically to summarize or paraphrase what I've just studied.	1	2	3	4	5
30. I end up waiting until the night before the test to do my readings.	1	2	3	4	5
31. I discuss the course content with anyone willing to listen.	1	2	3	4	5
32. I create my own examples.	1	2	3	4	5
33. When an unclear point finally becomes clear, I notice what made that happen.	1	2	3	4	5
34. The material I am learning in my courses has no relevance to my life.	1	2	3	4	5

35. I figure out why I am learning the material I'm about to study.	1	2	3	4	5
36. I create vocabulary lists with definitions.	1	2	3	4	5
37. When I make plans for studying, I don't hold myself to them.	1	2	3	4	5
38. I make sure to understand what is expected of me in terms of learning.	1	2	3	4	5
39. I do not use study groups to learn course material.	1	2	3	4	5
40. I write down questions I want to ask the instructor.	1	2	3	4	5
41. It turns out that I need more time to do an assignment than I thought.	1	2	3	4	5
42. I make up my own examples for concepts I am learning.	1	2	3	4	5

Determining your GAMES Score

These percentages can be compared with one another. You're calculating how close your score is to the maximum possible points on each scale so it's a percent.

1. Goals

Add 3. _____
8. _____
13. _____
18. _____
25. _____
35. _____
38. _____
Subtract 30. _____
41. _____
Total _____ (max 33)

Divide your total by 33 to get your % of maximum score

2. Active study

Add 11. _____
16. _____
19. _____
23. _____
29. _____
32. _____
36. _____
40. _____
Subtract 1. _____
4. _____
26. _____
Total _____ (max 37)

Divide your total by 37 to get your % of maximum score

3. Meaningful and memorable

Add 5. _____
12. _____
17. _____
27. _____
42. _____
Subtract 7. _____
22. _____
34. _____
Total _____ (max 22)

Divide your total by 22 to get your % of maximum score

4. Explain to someone

Add 2. _____
6. _____
15. _____
21. _____
31. _____
Subtract 10. _____
39. _____
Total _____ (max 23)

Divide your total by 23 to get your % of maximum score

5. Self-monitor

Add 9. _____
20. _____
24. _____
28. _____
33. _____
Subtract 14. _____
37. _____
Total _____ (max 23)

Divide your total by 23 to get your % of maximum score



How to Read a Philosophy Paper

Philosophy is challenging. Sometime soon you're going to begin reading a text for the class and have a hard time making sense of it. Don't panic! This is part of the challenge of learning philosophy. Philosophical essays are difficult—they involve abstract ideas, complicated arguments, and at times technical vocabulary. Understanding them takes time, effort, and concentration; and it almost always involves reading them more than once, even for seasoned philosophers.

Follow the 3-step advice below, and you'll be well prepared for class, i.e., able to get the most out of the lecture and to engage in the discussion. In addition, you'll realize by the end of the semester that your analytical and reasoning skills just got a lot sharper!

Step 1: Skim the article to find its main point and get a sense of its structure

At this stage, you simply want to identify:

- The topic of the discussion: what is this article about?
- The main argument: what is the author saying?
- The general structure of the paper: how is the discussion organized?

The opening and closing paragraphs should be the most useful for these purposes. Try also to get a general sense of what's going on in each part of the article.

Step 2: Now read the article slowly and carefully

You want to clearly uncover the structure of the paper, including the main argument, the supporting arguments, the objections and rebuttals. Keep an eye out for logical connectives, i.e., the words or phrases signposting the connections between different

parts of the discussion.

Examples: On the one hand....on the other hand; hence; thus; therefore; as a result; it follows that...; one may infer...; nonetheless; however; one may object...; despite; and yet...

Read *actively*, underlining in the text:

- (a) The main points and any definitions or distinctions that the author introduces
- (b) The opposing views and objections
- (c) Any problematic claims (e.g., unargued assumptions or ambiguous statements)

You should have some sort of code for emphasizing these different aspects of the article (for instance, by highlighting with markers of 3 different colors).

Take notes as you read: summarize the author's main claims in bullet points, draw arrows to diagram how these claims fit together, and note any questions or criticisms that occur to you. You are encouraged to raise these in class.

Step 3: Think critically about the article

Once you feel you understand the author's argument, spend some time thinking about whether or not it's a good one. The following questions may help:

- Do you agree with the author's conclusion? If not, what do you think is wrong with the author's argument for it?
- What reasons does the author offer in support of this conclusion? Are they persuasive?
- Is each premise of the main argument well argued for?
- Does the conclusion logically follow from the premises? Are additional premises needed?
- Could alternative conclusions also be drawn from the same premises?

Even if you find you agree with what the author says, try to imagine what a less sympathetic opponent might say in response. Then consider what you, or the author, might say back. Take notes and bring these to class for discussion.

NB: The textbook for my Introduction to Philosophy course includes a set of questions for each text, which you are strongly encouraged to work on to prepare for class. Some of these questions will come up in class.



How to Write a Philosophy Paper

Philosophical writing is different from the writing you are asked to do in other courses. So the writing tips and guidelines you've been given by other professors may not apply to writing a philosophy paper. Conversely, while most of the strategies described below will serve you well when writing for other courses (and in graduate school), some of them will not. For instance, using the first person and announcing at the outset your thesis and argument are basic 'dos' of philosophical writing, while they are 'don'ts' in some other kinds of writing.

For a (very useful) sample philosophy paper annotated, go [here](#).⁷ Check it out!

10 steps to writing a good philosophy paper:

- Pre-Writing Stage

Step 1: Start early

Writing a good philosophy paper takes a great deal of preparation. Don't wait until two or three nights before the paper is due to begin. You should start thinking about and writing your paper well before it is due. Make sure you understand the assignment; and think carefully to identify the pertinent questions raised by an issue.

Step 2: Identify the relevant material

You will be judged partly on your ability to demonstrate that you understand and can think critically about the material discussed in class.

⁷ http://prezi.com/z4h1_fwilbxj/a-sample-philosophy-paper/

- If you are not given a bibliography, you need to sketch one yourself. You will find useful resources in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu/>), the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/>), and PhilPapers.org. *Philosophy Bites* will likely have a (bite-sized, c. 15 min.) podcast on your topic.
- Read the literature that accompanies the topic, following the 3-step advice on how to read philosophy papers above.
- Look through your lecture notes and course readings to isolate philosophical texts that are relevant to the topic. Reread them carefully and, if you haven't already done so, make notes in your own words on the main points and arguments covered.

Step 3: Outline your arguments

Go back to your paper topic and consider what your thoughts on it are, now that you have read the relevant material. Decide on a thesis (or hypothesis if you're not sure where you'll end up) and think of the main argument(s) you will put forward in its support.

- Jot down the argument(s) for your thesis in short, succinct sentences.
- Imagine how an opponent might respond to them, note down those objections, and respond to them in turn.

STEP 4: CONSTRUCT A PAPER OUTLINE

The merits of your paper will greatly depend on its overall clarity, which in turn depends on its structure. So your outline is really IMPORTANT: the writing process will go smoothly as long as you have a solid, fairly detailed outline.

Different paper topics will invite different structures. If your paper topic consists of 2 or 3 separate questions, sometimes it will be best to respond to those questions in the order given in the topic, other times it will be best to rearrange the order. Sometimes you will decide to respond to points made by an author as you introduce them; other times you will find it best to outline an author's position in its entirety, and then go on to evaluate it in the following paragraph.



I will ask you to submit a paper outline if you are to select your own topic (the syllabus will feature the Snoopy icon on the left). But you should work from an outline no matter what your assignment is. The outline has 6 categories:

- 1) **Topic:** What is the question that you will attempt to answer in your final paper?
- 2) **Motivation:** Why is this question significant? Here you can: offer some background on the issue, explain what's at stake, and/or shed light on the

existence of a tension between different principles (e.g., physicians' responsibility to the public and patient's autonomy).

- 3) **Thesis:** What will be your position? (Or what conclusion do you hope to arrive at?)
- 4) **Arguments:** How will you arrive at this conclusion? What arguments will you consider? Which argument do you find the strongest?
- 5) **Objections:** What objections to your arguments will you consider/ do you anticipate?
- 6) **References:** List your bibliography, including the texts we read in the course that could be relevant or helpful.

• Writing Stage

Step 5: Write a draft of your paper

Once you've written an outline for your paper, then you are ready to sit down and compose a first draft. You should aim for the following general structure:

i. Introduction.

A good introduction should be concise and to the point. It ideally contains the following three elements: (1) a paragraph describing the problem, question or issue your paper addresses (i.e., the topic and motivation which you detailed in your outline), (2) a sentence stating your main thesis, (3) a couple of sentences mapping out the argumentative structure of your paper in some details (don't just say: I'll first present my arguments, and then I'll respond to objections. Try and be precise, saying, e.g.: I'll argue that society should allow physician assisted suicide because it is necessary to respect patient autonomy; I'll then examine the common objection that physician assisted suicide violates physicians' imperative to 'do no harm'). You should write (3) after you finished writing the body of the paper.

ii. The body of the paper.

This will standardly include: (1) a brief exposition of the concepts, positions, and arguments you aim to discuss, (2) your own arguments in defense of your thesis, and (3) a discussion of potential objections to your thesis along with your responses to them.

Here ask yourself the following questions: In what order should I explain the various terms and positions I'll be discussing? At what point should I present my opponent's position or argument? In what order should I offer my criticisms of my opponent? Do any of the points I make presuppose that I've already discussed some other point, first? And so on.

iii. Conclusion.

The conclusion should restate your paper's thesis, and summarize the main argument(s) you have used to support it. It should also open up to a related, important question to leave the reader hungry for more.

You should keep electronic copies of the various drafts of your paper: they will help you regroup if you're feeling lost as you are composing the paper.

Step 6: Set your paper aside

Set your paper aside for a day or two. This step is very important, as it will allow you to come back to your paper with a fresh perspective and more critical eye.

Step 7: Read and revise your paper

You should expect to go through at least two drafts of your paper before submitting it. (Just to give you some perspective, a paper I publish will have gone through more than a dozen drafts.) Don't be afraid to revise your paper dramatically if you find you have changed your mind, or have missed an important point the first time around.

Step 8: The SIM test

The SIM test goes like this: Try to visualize SIM, a Stupid, Inattentive, and Mean interlocutor. SIM is ignorant, has mediocre mental capacities and focus, and is very unsympathetic to your position. Now imagine you read your essay out loud to SIM:

- SIM is ignorant, so you have to make sure that you mention important background facts, and explain every technical concept or distinction you introduce.
- SIM is stupid, so you have to explain everything you say to him in simple, bite-sized pieces. What is dubious or obvious to you is not so to SIM: in particular, SIM doesn't get rhetorical questions, i.e., questions whose answer is so obvious that it is not worth stating.
- SIM has trouble keeping focused and he doesn't want to figure out what your convoluted sentences are supposed to mean, or what your argument exactly is, if it's not already obvious.
- SIM is 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.

If SIM understands your paper, you are ready for step 9.

Step 9: Format your paper

Format your paper according to the instructions provided.

Step 10: Proofread your paper

Thoroughly check the footnotes and edit your paper for grammar and spelling. A poorly edited paper seriously compromises its grade, because it suggests that you skipped a number of the steps above and doesn't predispose your reader/grader to be charitable with you.

You can take the final draft of your paper to Northeastern University's [Writing Center](http://www.northeastern.edu/writingcenter/)⁸, which provides free one-on-one tutoring services.

⁸ <http://www.northeastern.edu/writingcenter/>

General guidelines for philosophical writing

- *DO:*



Use simple straightforward prose

Keep your sentences and paragraphs short; and *use everyday words*. Don't write using prose you wouldn't use in conversation: if you wouldn't say it, don't write it. Don't begin your paper with pseudo-eloquent claims such as "Since the dawn of time, people/philosophers have pondered the question..." (which is most likely false and sounds silly).



Support your claims

Assume that your reader, much like SIM, is constantly asking such questions as "Why should I accept that?" If you presuppose that he or she is at least mildly skeptical of most of your claims, you are more likely to succeed in writing a paper that argues for a position. Substantiate your claims whenever there is reason to think that your critics would not grant them.



Anticipate objections

It is essential to demonstrating the strength of your position that you consider the objections against it and show how they can be overcome, and that you present these objections *in their strongest possible form*.



Make the structure of your paper crystal clear

Don't make the reader do all the work in figuring out how the various parts of your argument fit together. Instead, make it easier for them by dividing your paper into sections and subsections, using headings or numbers, to help guide your reader through the paper. You should also use signposts such as logical connectives (see p. 2 *supra*) and phrases like:

- I will begin by...
- As I shall argue, ...
- Before I say what is wrong with this argument, I want to...
- These passages [quoted] suggest that...
- Further support for this claim comes from...

- A good illustration of this point is...
- Before evaluating this argument in detail, I will...
- One may object that...
- In response to this objection...

You may use the first-person pronoun, I, freely, especially to tell the reader what you're up to (e.g., "I've just explained why... Now I'm going to consider an argument that..."). One more thing: make it explicit when you're reporting your own view and when you're reporting the views of your opponent or some philosopher you're discussing. The reader should never be in doubt about whose claims you are presenting in a given paragraph.



Use examples

Often the best way to convey a point to your reader is to illustrate it with a vivid example. Take the distinction between "malum in se" and "malum prohibitum": "malum in se" refers to things that are just wrong in and of themselves, while "malum prohibitum" designates things that are prohibited by law but would otherwise be morally permissible. The distinction makes sense, but it is instantly *illuminated* by the use of examples. Rape is malum in se: it is morally wrong whether the law prohibits it or not; overparking on campus is a malum prohibitum offense: it violates the letter of Northeastern's Parking and Traffic Regulations.



Provide complete references

Every passage you paraphrase or quote, and every source of information you use, should be referenced in a footnote (I prefer them to endnotes, so I can see the reference on the same page). Footnotes make it easy for your readers not only to see what sources you used, but also to find them. They contain the essential details of the work (such as the author, title of book or article, year of publication, journal, publisher, translator) so as to facilitate identification of the text. Last but not least, proper references shield you from accusations of *plagiarism*, which is a violation of Northeastern University's [Academic Integrity Policy](http://www.northeastern.edu/osccr/academic-integrity-policy/).⁹ Providing adequate references to works sounds tedious, but it's an important skill to acquire and it will serve you well throughout your academic studies (and for many of you, in your career). So work on it!

If you have some difficulty footnoting, try and find the specific instructions for your word processing program. The format for footnotes I favor is *Chicago Manual*. Here is an online citation guide from the *Chicago Manual of Style*. It's very easy to follow as it contains examples of footnotes that cite various types of sources:

http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html

Other footnote styles such as APA are fine. What matters is that the format be consistent throughout your paper.

⁹ <http://www.northeastern.edu/osccr/academic-integrity-policy/>

- DON'T:



Digress

There should be nothing in your paper that does not contribute to the support of your thesis. Digressions that are irrelevant to the paper topic interrupt the flow of your argument and are distracting and confusing for your reader. When going through the first draft of your paper, ask yourself of every sentence: “Is this sentence necessary for my argument?”, and, if so, “Is this the best place in my paper for it, or would it be more effective elsewhere?”



Use dictionary definitions of key concepts

- Many terms used in philosophy, such as ‘authority’, have a precise, technical meaning. This means that they are not well captured by dictionary entries, which generally attempt to explain how a term is used in everyday English.
- Many philosophical concepts, such as ‘freedom’ or ‘autonomy’, are ambiguous: you should explain what you mean by them when using them.
- Dictionary definitions are not arguments. If, for instance, you are to reflect on the morality of same-sex marriage, you cannot accept the dictionary definition of marriage (viz., the union between a man and a woman) as an argument against same-sex marriage.



Over-quote

Try and use quotes sparingly (5 per page is too much, 2 per paper is not enough). Where possible, paraphrase instead: *i.e.* summarize the author’s claim in your own words, and reference the passage in a footnote. Paraphrases should not involve merely changing a few words, but should be sufficiently distinct from the original to demonstrate your understanding of the passage selected.

In general, you should quote eloquent or pithy phrases and paraphrase technical or purely informative ones. Let me illustrate with a few quotes from an article in which J. Savulescu, B. Foddy, and M. Clayton argue against the ban on athletic doping.¹⁰

- a. “The use of performance enhancing drugs in the modern Olympics is on record as early as the games of the third Olympiad, when Thomas Hicks won the marathon after receiving an injection of strychnine in the middle of the race.”

¹⁰ J. Savulescu, B. Foddy, and M. Clayton, “Why We Should Allow Performance Enhancing Drugs in Sport,” *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 38, 6 (2004): 666–670.

- b. “By allowing everyone to take performance enhancing drugs, we level the playing field. We remove the effects of genetic inequality. Far from being unfair, allowing performance enhancement promotes equality.”
- c. “There is one way to boost an athlete’s number of red blood cells that is completely undetectable: autologous blood doping. In this process, athletes remove some blood, and reinject it after their body has made new blood to replace it.”

Quotes a. and c. can easily be paraphrased. They shouldn’t be directly quoted in a paper insofar as they are informative but not quote-worthy. In contrast, quote b. offers a pithy and powerful formulation of the authors’ thesis.



Use rhetorical questions

A rhetorical question is a question whose answer is so obvious that it is not worth stating. Over the years, I have come to realize that you and I have different intuitions about what’s obvious and what’s not. So in the spirit of the SIM test, I urge you to always assume that the answer to your rhetorical question is *not* obvious to your reader and *is* worth stating. Asking questions is fine; but always answer them.



Write verbosely

There is a tendency, in some academic circles, to associate verbosity with depth of thinking. In 1995, Judith Butler won the first prize in the annual Bad Writing Contest sponsored by the *Journal Philosophy and Literature*, for the following sentence—a marvelous example of how *not* to write:

The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.

Martha Nussbaum offered a scathing critique of Butler’s style in *The New Republic*:
Now, Butler might have written: “Marxist accounts, focusing on capital as the central force structuring social relations, depicted the operations of that force as everywhere uniform. By contrast, Althusserian accounts, focusing on power, see the operations of that force as variegated and as shifting over time.” Instead, she prefers a verbosity that causes the reader to expend so much effort in deciphering her prose that little energy is left for assessing the truth of the claims.¹¹

¹¹ M. Nussbaum, “The Professor of Parody: The Hip Defeatism of Judith Butler,” *The New Republic* 22 (1999): 39-45.

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Much of the advice in my guide further draws on the following sources:

- Jim Pryor’s reading guidelines:
<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html>
- Peter Horban’s writing guidelines: <http://www.sfu.ca/~horban/writing1>

Students looking for more tips should consult these webpages.