

# Five Virtues of Good Philosophical Writing

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## The Virtues

CLARITY | STRUCTURE | JUSTIFICATION | EXAMPLES | MODESTY

### How To Write Virtuously

#### 1. Writing Clearly

**Keep reminding yourself:** The point of a philosophical essay is *not* to summarize (as in a book report), *nor* to persuade (as in a speech), *nor* to present results (as in research) – what you are being asked to do is to *explain things clearly*

#### 2. Writing with Structure

**Keep asking yourself:** What is the point of this [section / paragraph / sentence / clause]? How does it relate to the [sections / paragraphs / sentences / clauses] before and after it?

Furthermore, make these relations clear to your reader through the use of **signposting** and **transitional phrases**. For example, to establish...

**sequence:** to begin; first; next; following this; as we saw above

**consequence:** therefore; thus; in this way; consequently; for this reason

**clarification:** that is; in other words; namely; in short; to put it otherwise

**emphasis:** in particular; specifically; especially

**contrast:** however; nonetheless; on the one hand ... on the other hand; yet; despite this; on the contrary; otherwise; conversely; rather

**a new point:** in addition; furthermore; moreover; additionally; also

**analogy:** similarly; likewise; analogously

**examples:** for example; for instance; to illustrate this point

Use these as much as possible! If this is your first time writing a philosophy essay, **force yourself to use a transitional phrase in every sentence**

#### 3. Writing with Justification

**Keeping asking yourself,** for every claim / assertion / statement you make: Have I also explained *why* this is the case?

Don't just say: "Socrates claims that mustard is not an essential ingredient of any good sandwich." Also explain *why* Socrates claims this: "This is because, as he points out, there are good sandwiches which do not include mustard."

#### 4. *Writing with Examples*

Want to be sure a claim you're making is sufficiently clear? **Give an example!**

Don't just say: "In fact, some sandwiches are made *worse* by the addition of mustard." Also give a specific example of what you are claiming: "For example, putting mustard on an egg salad sandwich would be gross."

#### 5. *Writing Modestly*

Don't overstate your conclusion. It is highly unlikely that you have demonstrated the unquestionable failure of *any* argument in your essay. **Keep your conclusion modest, honest, and representative of what you've said.**

#### **Other Resources**

- Jim Pryor, "Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper"
  - <http://goo.gl/e6tyz>
- Harvard College, "A Brief Guide to Writing the Philosophy Paper"
  - <http://goo.gl/PolpAE>
- Angela Mendelovici, "A Sample Philosophy Paper" (Prezi presentation)
  - <http://goo.gl/yX7tRo>
- James Lenman, "How To Write a Crap Philosophy Essay"
  - <http://goo.gl/ze3gf8>
  - (for advice on what *not* to do in your essays)