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
  - 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)