Guidelines on Writing, Formatting, and Citation for Philosophy Students[1]

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1. Why Is It Worth Trying to Write Well?

The ability to write clearly, honestly, and insightfully is one of the most important tools of human thought. It is also a highly marketable ability. While some people have more innate talent for writing than others, writing is a skill that can be developed with study and—most important—practice. Writing well demands a combination of painstaking attention to detail with a willingness and ability to see the big picture. The notes here are hardly the whole story about how to write well, but if followed attentively they will give you a big "leg up" in learning how to excel at university writing assignments. Some of what I say here applies specifically to philosophy, but most of it can be applied to almost any kind of serious writing.

[1] Latest revision of this document: December 31, 2015.

2. What I Am Looking For in a Philosophy Paper

Here's what really matters to me when I mark your papers. My criteria are pretty similar to those of most other philosophy professors but possibly not all, so you should always ask your prof if you have any doubt what she or he wants.

1. Most important, I'm looking for an original and insightful vision of the problem area:
    a. However, originality comes not from trying to be original, but from honestly trying to *understand* the problem on your *own* terms.
    b. Be ready to question the conventional wisdom; it is often wrong.
    c. Be ready to question your own beliefs, no matter how comfortable you are with them.
    d. Take intellectual risks; don't fence-sit. A very well-written and properly researched paper that presents a clear and accurate account of two sides of a question but makes no attempt to decide between them or somehow go beyond the dichotomy would earn at best a low to mid-B from me.
    e. Don't take the easy way out of an intellectual problem.
    f. Listen for that "nibble." By this I mean that when you steep yourself in the literature surrounding a question, you may not immediately see what you have to add to the debate; however, a small voice will often start whispering in your head or something will slowly begin to seem obvious. Nurture these nascent insights by trying to put them into words, and they will often grow into the basis of a significant position of your own.
2. Presence of argument:

    a. Philosophy is not just expressing your heartfelt opinions about the meaning of life. You must back up your claims with evidence and logical argumentation, and you must be very clear about which propositions you are taking as assumptions and which you claim to be able to prove.

3. Intellectual honesty:
    a. Never try to kid your reader that you know something that you do not know; even more important, never try to kid yourself.
    b. Be prepared to face unwelcome conclusions if evidence and sound reasoning lead you to them.
    c. Don't pretend you have an answer to a difficult problem if you do not; some of the most enlightening philosophical writing ends in uncertainty.
4. Competent understanding of the relevant literature:
    a. This is not a sufficient condition for an excellent grade but it is absolutely necessary for any respectable grade at all.
    b. When you are explaining someone else's arguments, I look for that freshness and clarity of exposition that tells me that you have processed the argument through your own neurons.
5. A willingness to understand viewpoints with which you do not agree.
6. Clear, competent, grammatical writing.
7. Careful proofreading.
8. Professionalism in formatting and presentation.
9. Correct and complete citations.

I'll talk about some of these requirements in more detail below.

3. How to Format Term Papers

This document demonstrates, by example, what I consider to be minimal acceptable guidelines for formatting short writing assignments in philosophy courses. I've laid out this document itself in the needed format. Some of you may wish to add "bells and whistles" (such as more elaborate headers), but it is not necessary to do this. As a rule it is better in working documents such as term papers to confine your creativity to the content and keep your formatting as simple as possible.[2] (In the publishing world this is called "vanilla" formatting.) Other professors may have different requirements; always, if in doubt, ask.

Formatting and presentation will rarely be worth more than about 10% of your grade in my courses (unless your formatting is incredibly sloppy), because intellectual content and the quality of your writing are the main things I'm interested in. On the other hand, a very sloppily formatted paper tells me that you were not trying hard to do a good job or were not willing to pay attention to the details, and even if your content is brilliant it is bound to prejudice me a bit. (Perhaps unfairly, but handing in a sloppy paper is a bit like showing up for a job interview with your hair uncombed and your shirt hanging out; you might still be the best person for the job, but it doesn't help your chances!)

Here's a list of the main points:

1. Write in 12pt serif font, preferably Times New Roman. I know this font is boring, but it's easy to read, and it's probably the most widely used font in professional work. Avoid sans-serif fonts such as Helvetica, or "fancy" fonts, as much fun as they are.

[2] I've cheated a bit by putting my section heads in bold face, but you don't have to do that.

2. Your paper must be double spaced—*not* single or 1.5. This is to allow room for commenting and editing. A single-spaced manuscript that was submitted for publication to most journals and book publishers would not even be read.[3]
3. Paragraphs should be indented, using the Tab key. Some people, like me, prefer to leave the first line of a document, and the first line of a section, without indentation, but this is a matter of preference.
4. Do not put extra blank lines or extra space between paragraphs.
5. It is absolutely essential that you number your pages; this is so they can be referred to in comments.
6. The document should be left-justified (also called ragged-right), *not* full-justified.
7. Long term papers require a separate cover sheet, but short assignments up to about 1500 words only need a title and your name and student number, centred, at the top of the first page. (You can also add information about the course, the instructor, and the assignment, if you wish, but it is not absolutely needed unless your prof asks for it.)
8. Please remember to put your *name* on your assignment. I need your whole name, not just "Joey."
9. Create a descriptive title; don't just call your paper "Assignment 2." Creating a title makes the paper more memorable and it also helps you, the author, to focus your thoughts as you work on the paper.

[3] Footnotes should be double-spaced, 12pt, as well, since they also have to be edited. Note that it is possible to change the default footnote text style in MS Word (either Mac or Windows version) so that it automatically formats all the footnotes in a document in 12pt Times New Roman with double spacing.

10. *Learn* how to set up in-line quotes, block quotes, footnotes, and end-notes—*do not just guess*. There are many places where this information is available. Below I describe the basic rules of quotation that I expect everyone in my courses to know.
11. For short papers, less than 2000 words or so, you do not have to create a table of contents such as I have for this document. For documents that are around 3000 to (say) 10,000 words these may be helpful if there are several sections but they are not absolutely necessary. For a thesis or other piece of writing over 10,000 words a table of contents is generally required.
12. This goes beyond formatting, but I again emphasize that you must proofread your work carefully, minutely, even obsessively, as it approaches the final draft. "There is no such thing as good writing, only good re-writing."[4]

4. Citation

Any citations you use must be complete and correct. The number of references you need will depend on the length and scope of your paper. But you absolutely must cite any of the following: direct quotes or close paraphrases of someone else's words; not-well-known or potentially questionable facts that you claim in support of your position; more generally, any fact, idea, or viewpoint that you honestly know you might not have thought of yourself if you had not seen it in someone else's work. Unless you are citing from a web source that does not have page numbers, *always* put the page numbers where your quote or information comes from. Incomplete or inaccurate citation can cost a lot more than 10%.

[4] I'm not sure who originally said this, but it probably goes back to the scribes of Hammurabi.

"Can I use *Wikipedia*?" I would be a pretty big hypocrite if I said you could not, since I often use *Wikipedia* myself. But be careful; it varies greatly in quality. I've found factual errors in a few *Wikipedia* articles myself. On the other hand, *Wikipedia* often provides extremely useful reviews of or introductions to a topic that would be almost impossible to track down anywhere else. Just do not take *Wikipedia* as an iron-clad authority**.** Most *Wikipedia* articles are festooned with useful sources, so often the best use of a *Wikipedia* article is as an entry point into the literature of a subject area.

You have to use web-based sources with discretion. Material out there on the Web can range from properly vetted writing of the highest professional quality to raving lunacy. One of the things I mark you on in your research papers is the good judgement you use in your choice of sources. I'm always glad to provide advice if you're not sure if a particular source (Web or print) should be trusted.

Which citation style should you use for philosophy or logic? Unlike some disciplines, there is not one citation style that is preferred throughout the field. This is complicated by the fact that virtually every publisher and journal has its own idiosyncratic in-house style that its authors must use. So unless your prof tells you precisely which style to use, pick a citation style that is widely used throughout the humanities and with which you are comfortable, and use it consistently and correctly.

Many citation styles (such as APA, PSA, and one version of the Chicago style) use a "name-and-date" format, so that (for instance) Kitto's *The Greeks* would be cited as Kitto (1957). Your professor may want you to use a name-and-date style, which is commonly used in many social sciences and some science subjects. Name and date styles are especially appropriate when you are writing a research paper that cites recent work in first publication. They are less

sensible in writing where you could be citing reprinted or translated historical works, such as in a history of philosophy course. Aristotle (2005) just looks silly, in my humble opinion.

There are styles that allow you to avoid such barbarisms. My favourite citation style is the Modern Languages Association (MLA) style, because it is especially flexible, efficient, and easy to use for the author and the reader; however, it is, unfortunately, not used very much in professional philosophy. The authoritative text on the MLA style is *The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*; see www.mlahandbook.org/. The Purdue University Online Writing Lab (OWL) has a very handy guide to MLA at https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/.

Another good citation style to use for philosophy papers (especially those drawing on historical material) is the bibliography form of the tried-and-true Chicago Manual of Style (CMS). Complete details on the Chicago Style are available in the massive *Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th Edition, University of Chicago Press, 2010. But you don't need the whole book: most of what you need to know about citations and notes can be found here: Chicago Style Quick Guide (http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html). Many American publishers require the Chicago Style, or something close to it.

The venerable Turabian system[5] is similar to CMS and is also widely used, but in my opinion it is not as easy to use as the CMS bibliography style because it requires you to put full bibliographical details in each note. The CMS style allows you to use shortened "keyword" citations in your notes, similar to those used in the MLA style.

[5] Turabian, *Manual*.

Vaughn and McIntosh's *Writing Philosophy* has a very clear and concise introduction to the CMS, MLA, and APA styles, as well as much helpful advice on many aspects of philosophical writing from elementary grammar to the basics of style and argumentation.

There are now a number of bibliography management software packages. Using one of these requires that you climb a not-too-steep learning curve, but they offer certain efficiencies that could make your writing life much easier. For instance, EndNote has a "cite as you write" function, which allows you to insert a citation where you need it and automatically formats the corresponding bibliography line at the same time. Staff and students at the University of Lethbridge have free access to EndNote, which is well on its way to becoming an industry standard. You might also want to try Zotero: https://www.zotero.org/ or Mendeley: https://www.mendeley.com/ .

Students often ask how to cite sources from a Custom Course Reader. These should be treated as citations from an edited collection, using the methods outlined in the manual for whichever style you are using, and with whoever compiled the collection (usually the course instructor) as editor. So do not cite the *course instructor* who compiled the Reader as the *author* of a piece in the Reader, unless he or she actually is the author.

Up-to-date style guides (such as the ones I've cited here) will contain detailed instructions about how to cite Web sources.

A word to the wise: when making rough research notes, be very careful to indicate *to yourself* whenever you are quoting someone else, so that you do not forget that it was someone else's material if you come to use it in your term paper. You do not want to be accused of plagiarism just because you forgot that something you jotted down or cut and pasted three weeks

ago was actually taken from an article or book by someone else. I was once plagiarized by an eminent journalist who forgot this simple rule.

5. The Basics of Quotation

Short quotations, less than about 150 words, should be done inline surrounded by double quotes, as follows: "Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country." A quote within a quote is set off with single quotes: "As John F. Kennedy once said, 'Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country.' "

You may notice that works published in Great Britain have the reverse convention: outer quote marks are single, and inner are double. Stick to the North American usage in your papers, unless you are quoting from a British source. As a general rule, do not rewrite quotations from other authors to conform to the stylistic usages you prefer; quotes are quotes.

Sometimes authors use "scare quotes," to indicate an ironic or questionable usage of a term. For example, many people think they just "know" that global warming is a hoax. (In fact, they don't know that at all, in any meaningful sense of the word "know.") Scare quotes are a useful tool in a writer's kit, but do not overuse them. If you use a lot of scare quotes it usually means that you are being too lazy to try to define your terms carefully.

Longer quotations should be put in block form, like this:

> The first and the greatest of European poets surely deserves a chapter to himself, both for his own sake—for in Homer we can see all the qualities which characterize Greek art—and because of the influence which his poems had on many generations of Greeks.[6]

[6] Kitto, *The Greeks*, 44.

Notice carefully that there are no quotation marks on block quotes. They should be double-spaced, and indented by a tab stop past the paragraph indent line. It is not necessary to right-indent the block quote. Note the use of the footnote, which is done following the Chicago notes-and-bibliography style. Note also the use of punctuation dashes. You should not use hyphens for punctuation dashes, but rather the en-dash or em-dash; if you can't find these on your word processor, use a double hyphen -- like this -- for punctuation dashes. Do not use a single hyphen as a punctuation dash; hyphens belong in hyphenated words, such as "multi-use." The en-dash is used for number ranges, such as a person's lifespan ("Albert Einstein: 1879–1955") or a page range ("This week's reading is on pp. 36–55").[7]

Here's another small detail that you should get right: titles of books, journals, plays, and movies are *italicized*, while titles of articles, stories, chapters in books, and poems (unless book-length) are set in Roman with quotation marks.

6. Practical Survival Tips for Student Writers (and Professionals, Too)

1. Do not leave it to the last minute!
    a. Many people are shocked to learn that philosophy requires thought and thought requires time. If you have (say) five hours to invest in a particular writing assignment, you will do a far better job if you spend three hours of really hard work on it as soon as you get the assignment, and then two hours the day before it is due, rather than spending five miserable hours on it the night before it is due. Not only is it less stressful to do it the way I recommend, but it gives your brain a

[7] If you're using Word on a Windows computer with a number pad, you can easily get the en-dash by going Ctrl+(minus key), and you can get the em-dash by going Ctrl+Alt+(minus key).

chance to do that all-important subconscious processing that can make the difference between a mediocre piece of hackwork and an insightful essay that has a chance of getting a really good grade.

b. You can do a lot of your thinking on the computer screen; for most writers (especially beginners) it is a mistake to put off writing until you have it all thought out. Many students find writing to be intimidating because they are convinced that they have to be perfect on the first draft. No one is. Just get something down and keep going back to it, adding, polishing, perfecting, checking your facts and reasoning.

c. There are a few exceptionally talented and experienced authors who can write publishable copy on the first draft, but most of us have to start with rough notes or outlines and grow them into a complete manuscript. It is very easy to do this with today's computer-based word processing programs. I often write new material in point form, going as quickly as I can and jumping past parts I don't yet know how to do; then I go back, rethink, fill in the gaps, move material around, check facts and details, and smooth out rough sentences.

d. Your first drafts can be very rough, but your final drafts should be very polished. Sweat the details, without losing sight of the big picture.

e. Many professional writers set themselves a daily quota, typically between 500 and 2000 words (though some can do more). Making your quota every day, rain or shine, is a *hard* thing to do, in the face of the endless distractions of daily life and normal human indolence. But stick to a doable quota religiously and you will have written a book in three months.

f. Be prepared to write several drafts; again, "there is no such thing as good writing, only good rewriting."

2. Read what you have written!
3. Proofread it carefully!
4. Get a good dictionary, such as *Webster's Collegiate*, and use it without embarrassment. There are lots of good on-line dictionaries these days. Check a dictionary if you have the *slightest* doubt about the correct spelling, meaning, or usage of a word or phrase.
    a. Students often generate hilarious malapropisms. E.g. (from a paper I received): "Skepticism, as with all things, should be practiced in modernization." Another student wrote of people suffering from "scrutinizing headaches." Make me laugh with you, not at you.[8]
5. Get Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*; memorize Chapter 1.
6. Avoid meaningless padding such as "For thousands of years, people have debated the problem of free will…"[9] or "People have been having children for many generations."[10] Get to the point, and don't try to sound impressive or academic. For example, a good way

[8] The very best malapropism I ever got showed some genuine philosophical sophistication: "Perhaps," a student opined, "evil is the privatization of good."

[9] I recently got a paper that began, "For thousands of years people have debated the validity of Aquinas's arguments for the existence of God." The student had missed the part of the lecture where I said that St. Thomas lived about 800 years ago (1225–1274, to be precise).

[10] This was the first sentence of a paper on reproductive ethics that a colleague of mine once received from a student.

to start a paper would be simply to say, "In this paper I will discuss the ancient problem of [your topic]…" and then just launch into your discussion.

7. Here are a few common bits of verbal carelessness that tend to affect the profs and TAs who grade your papers like squeaking fingernails on a blackboard:
    a. Do not confuse "then" and "than".
    b. Do not confuse "effect" and "affect".
    c. Do not use the phrase "relates to".
    d. Avoid the phrase "in terms of".
    e. It is "cut and dried," not "cut and try".
    f. It is "for all intents and purposes," not "for all intensive purposes".
    g. A theory is based *on* evidence, not "off of" evidence.
    h. Please do not spell the word "argument" like "arguement," "argement," "arugument," "agrument," or any of its other amusing variants.
8. You *can* say "I" in philosophy papers, unless your prof specifically tells you not to. If first person was okay for Descartes, it is okay for students in Phil 1000 at the University of Lethbridge.
9. Writing is a skill that is developed by long practice. Don't despair; keep plugging away at it.
10. If you really want to be a good writer, turn off the TV and do lots of reading.
    a. Part of the reason that many intelligent people cannot write competently these days is because they are no longer taught enough about grammar and composition in high school. But more important, we do not do enough reading these days. *Read*.

b. Pay close attention to what good writing *sounds* like in your head, and it will become more and more obvious to you how to differentiate good usage from bad.

11. Become computer-competent. In particular, *back up your work*!
    a. "My dog ate the disk" is not an acceptable excuse for a late paper.
    b. It might be worth the trouble it takes to learn how to touch-type. I suffered through a six-week typing class in high school and it is now one of the most useful skills I have.
    c. As a writer who went as far as his Master's degree on a manual typewriter, I can testify that it is wonderful to be able to use today's computers, with their ability easily to cut and paste, reformat, store rough material, etc. We never have to re-type anything these days (unless we are so foolish as to have not backed up our work before the hard drive crashed). The most commonly used word processors these days are MS Word and Open Office. The latter has less functionality than MS Word but has the great advantage of being free.
    d. However (!), you must invest some time and effort *learning* how to use your word processor. I have had students tell me that they don't put page numbers in their documents because they can't figure out how to do it. Trust me, it is not difficult to insert page numbers in a Word document. Invest the small amount of time it takes to learn how to insert page numbers, format paragraphs, set up headers and footers, etc.
12. Please do not be embarrassed or shy in the slightest degree if you feel that you have to seek advice. An important part of what I get paid for is to be available to my students if they need help with general advice about writing, reading, or doing philosophy, specific

advice about your works in progress, or any other matters that pertain to succeeding in philosophy. Don't forget also about the University of Lethbridge Writing Services; while they are not necessarily expert in philosophy and logic they can help you greatly with techniques of writing and research. If you need help with computer tasks such as how to use a word processor, backing up your work, uploading documents, etc., see the friendly people at the Help Desks. If you have a question, don't suffer in silence.

7. Guide to Marking Comments

Here are definitions of the cryptic notations that you may see on your marked papers:

T	Typo
Sp	spelling mistake
P	punctuation error
Gr	grammatical error(s)
RO	run-on sentence
CS	comma splice
INC	incomplete sentence or sentence fragment
Ag	Agreement error (in number or gender)
DM	dangling modifier
??	unclear
????	very unclear; I haven't a clue what you're talking about
WW	wrong word or phrase, or incorrect usage of a word or phrase
WW?	I *think* this is a wrong word, but I can't tell what you were trying to say
Cit	error in citation

Awk Awkward diction (but not necessarily ungrammatical)

Rep Repetition; you've repeated a word or phrase

Red Redundant; cut

Del delete

Pr Ambiguous pronoun usage

Consult any good handbook of basic grammar if you need to review the meaning of run-on sentences, comma splices, and so forth. Any person of normal intelligence can teach himself or herself to use the basic rules of English grammar and punctuation, no matter how inadequately he or she was taught in high school.

If you see a lot of WWs on your papers, that means that you need to do more reading and it means that you need to use your dictionary religiously. Again, check your dictionary if you have the *slightest* doubt about the meaning, spelling, or proper usage of a word.

The Purdue OWL has excellent sections on Grammar, Punctuation, and the Mechanics of Writing; see https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/.

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[11] In a term or research paper this can also be called "References," "Sources," or "Works Cited."