



# Center for Writing and Speaking

**F NO. 5 IN THE CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING HANDOUT SERIES**

## Writing in Philosophy

*Philosophy papers can be daunting in terms of subject matter, approach, and style. Although there is no standard, sure-fire method for writing philosophy papers, here are some tips to keep in mind as you're tackling an assessment of a dialogue or treatise.*

**There are two basic strategies that apply when approaching any philosophy paper:**

- *Read:* One of the most important aspects of writing a philosophy paper is reading. Read the text multiple times and take notes while you read — note key points and things you don't understand.
- *Talk to your instructor:* Standards for philosophy papers vary, so your best bet is to make sure you understand what your instructor expects in an essay for that particular class and that particular assignment.

**Philosophy papers come in several formats. Here are the main types of papers you will write.**

*Summary.*

A summary is a restatement of a philosopher's ideas in your own words. This type of paper gives you the opportunity to prove that you have read and understood the material and as such it should only contain minimal quotes. The point is to prove that you have a solid grasp on the material, so aim to paraphrase!

*Evaluation.*

An evaluation is your chance to be a philosopher. It is your analysis of the philosopher's ideas and the expression of whether you agree or disagree with those ideas and why. Avoid explanations that merely summarize the text. You must develop an argument and defend it!

*Position Paper.*

Sometimes you will be asked to adopt a position and defend it from a philosophical or ethical standpoint. You are responsible for providing an argument that defends that position, regardless of whether or not you agree with it.

**Other general tips:**

- Philosophy papers differ from literature papers in that you are allowed to use the first person.
- Make sure your argument is clear. Think about what someone would say against your argument, and address those counterarguments in your essay. If you cannot defend your argument sufficiently, change it!
- Use examples to supplement your argument, not replace it. Beware of listing example after example after only a couple of sentences explaining your position.
- Define any key technical terms (for example, "justice" or "gender") as you use them in the particular paper.
- Organization is key. Try making an outline of your paper before you write so that you can better see the development of your argument.
- Be explicit. Assume nothing on the part of the reader. The reader should make no inferences; you should be going all that work in your paper.

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