Some Basic Tips on Philosophical Writing
By Peter Nichols

1. **Have an argument.** The key to writing a good philosophical paper is to come up with an argument in favor of your thesis, and defend that argument against objections. Whatever your thesis statement, it should be more than a mere explanation of some philosopher’s view. When writing about a major philosopher, what you need to do is to come up with an *argument* about one or more of that philosopher’s central claims, and *defend* that argument. There are several forms such an argument can take, including (1) an *objection* to something the philosopher says, (2) a *resolution* to an apparent discrepancy or problem in the philosopher’s view, (3) a *defense* of the philosopher’s view against objections voiced by other commentators, and (4) an *interpretation* of a philosopher’s view, where that view is in need of clarification. Of course, other options are also available, but these are four common strategies. Typically, your argument should be the main item of focus in your paper. You will need to explain the philosopher’s view either before or in the course of your argument, but you generally want to include only as much explanation as is necessary to make your argument intelligible. (That is to say, you do not want your explanation of the philosopher’s view to dominate your paper.)

2. **Have a specific thesis.** One of the most common errors in undergraduate writing is that of beginning with too broad of a thesis. An appropriate thesis statement for a philosophy paper should be narrow, specific, and explicit. When you compose your thesis, state very clearly what your purpose is in the paper. What is your main argument, and how do you intend to advance it? (One helpful point to keep in mind is that in philosophical writing, it is okay to use “I” in formulating your thesis.) Here is an example of a solid philosophical thesis: “In the following essay I shall argue that Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean is too vague to be of practical guidance in ethical deliberation.” In addition, it is often helpful to follow the thesis up by giving a few sentences that explain how you will argue for your point. For example: “Specifically, I shall maintain that Aristotle does not define the mean precisely enough for non-virtuous people to be able to know whether or not they have achieved it.” The thesis statement does not necessarily have to always be the last sentence in the first paragraph.

3. **Have a focus.** Your entire paper should be relevant to your thesis statement. If you start talking about something that does not relate, or only relates peripherally, to your thesis statement, then you are probably getting off track. You should make the main point of each paragraph clear at the beginning of that paragraph, and it doesn’t hurt to recapitulate your main point again at the end of that paragraph (as long as it doesn’t sound redundant). It should always be clear to the reader why you are discussing whatever it is you are discussing, and how it is relevant to your central point(s). Just as the entire paper should center on your thesis statement, each individual paragraph should center on a point that is relevant toward the defense of your thesis.
4. **Be clear.** Good philosophy should be written clearly, literally, and concisely. All of your main points should be explicit, and they should all be stated up front. Sometimes English professors will tell you not to reveal too much in the first paragraph, and instead, to keep the reader involved by revealing main points gradually throughout the paper. **DO NOT DO THAT HERE.** In philosophical writing, your first paragraph or two should read like an abstract of your entire paper; you should state not only your thesis, but also your main supporting points up front. You can then approach the rest of your paper as an elaboration and analysis of the main points that you state up front. An additional strategy from English class of which you want to be careful is the use of metaphor and other literary flourishes. These have an essential place in poetry, literature and some other forms of writing, but in philosophy, they often obscure your main points, and thus should be used sparingly. Occasionally they are appropriate and even beneficial, but it takes a good eye to discern when they are called for and when they are inappropriate. Overall, in philosophy, you want your writing to be literal, explicit, and concise.

5. **Cite your sources.** Sources need to be cited. Period. If you are summarizing a philosopher, provide a citation. If you are quoting a philosopher, provide a citation. If you are explaining a major religious view, provide a citation. If you are using secondary sources, provide a citation. Remember to always provide a page number when citing quotations. If you have any other questions about how to cite appropriately, see the instructor, teaching assistant, or writing center.

6. **Observe the conventions of proper mechanics, composition, and style.** Mechanical errors can hopelessly muddle your paper, even if you have a strong argument. If you have problems with mechanics and style, see the teaching assistant or writing center. It might also help to pick up a copy of Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style.*