

THIRD EDITION

DOING PHILOSOPHY

A Guide
to the Writing of
Philosophy Papers



JOEL FEINBERG

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A GUIDE TO THE WRITING OF PHILOSOPHY PAPERS

Third Edition

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A GUIDE TO THE WRITING
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Preface

This booklet is intended to help college students who are enrolled in introductory courses in philosophy and are required to write at least one philosophical paper. A book of this kind, of course, could be used by *any* student in *any* philosophy course, beginning or advanced, or even by students who are not formal students of philosophy at all, but wish to “do philosophy” anyway. But the primary group it is designed to serve are beginning students in classes using my collection, *Reason and Responsibility*, twelfth edition, as a text. Wadsworth Publishing Company has made this guide available, free of charge, as a supplement to *Reason and Responsibility*.

I am grateful to Tammy Goldfeld and Peter Adams for suggesting that I write the booklet, and for giving me every support and encouragement. My research assistant, Linda Radzik, made numerous helpful suggestions and guarded me from tempting errors throughout. In these, as in other scholarly matters, her assistance has been invaluable.

Joel Feinberg
Tucson, Arizona

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Methods of Proceeding

INTRODUCTORY

Philosophical perplexity can assail anyone, from a six year old child who wonders how she can know that she is not really dreaming, to the victim of a painful disease who wonders how the evil in the world can be reconciled with the existence of an all-good, all-powerful deity, to the computer programmer who is tempted to the view that human beings are merely complex machines. In fact, it is difficult to conceive of any person of normal sensitivity who has not reflected on genuinely philosophical problems and grappled seriously with them. For help in that inevitable project students study philosophy. The ultimate aim of a philosophy course is not merely to help the student understand the writings of the great thinkers of the past. It is also to give opportunity to students to try their hand at those problems themselves. This process of using discussion and essay writing to dispel, as much as possible, perplexities about the human condition is often called "doing philosophy," in the odd phrase of philosophy professors. Given the difficulty of the intellectual problems, the only hope anyone has of doing philosophy well is to get practice at it.

That is why professors like to make writing assignments even to inexperienced beginning students of philosophy. The first results of such assignments, however, are likely to be disappointing to the student and teacher alike. If a student's only model of a philosopher is Plato, or Descartes, or Hume, scholars whose own views were the results of years of deep reflection, intense conversation with learned friends, and philosophical essay and letter writing, she is likely to be overwhelmed by the challenge. Still, if students are not encouraged to do philosophy themselves on the ground that they are too inexperienced to do it well, then paradoxically they will never become experienced enough to have a remote hope of doing it well. The situation invites comparison with children who are not allowed in the water until they know how to swim.

This little book then is meant to help the student in a beginning philosophy course whose text is *Reason and Responsibility*. We imagine that the student has just been assigned the task of writing a philosophical essay, say of three to five pages, or a term paper of as many as ten pages. This booklet provides not only hard and fast rules of good writing, but also informal tips and guides. The scope of our subject includes not only the writing of specifically philosophical essays, but also the production of good writing generally, whatever its subject.

A poorly written paper cannot be a good philosophical paper whatever its uniquely philosophical merits may be. So we shall try to help the student put into practice the principles of good writing, which of course must be included among the principles of good philosophical writing.

SELECTING A TOPIC

Choose a relatively narrow question for your essay to answer. Even if your instructor has made the assigned topic rather precise and narrow, it may be helpful to make it narrower still. There may be a controversial issue separating the philosophers who have disagreed in their answers to the assigned question, an issue that is presupposed by the assigned paper topic in the sense that *it* must be solved before the assigned problem can be solved. To say that one problem presupposes another in this sense, is to say that what its correct solution is depends on what the correct solution of the presupposed problem is. Then, having identified such a problem, you may have some light to cast on it, thereby taking an important step toward its solution.

If your instructor, however, has given you much greater discretion in the choice of a topic, then the best advice one can give you is to select the question that you are most interested in. That will be to arm yourself with the best kind of motivation for working out your own belief-dispositions, straightening out their hitherto unforeseen difficulties, making them more clear and more coherent with your other beliefs. This motivation will enable the study of philosophy to perform its own special services for you, to make your work meaningful, and even exciting. If you find another philosophical problem boring, then give it wide berth if you can. Perhaps further on in your studies you will discover a significance in what is now boring that will make it seem crucial and exciting.

THE IRRELEVANCE OF MOST LIBRARY RESEARCH

Your college library may contain books and journal articles that could help you, but in your circumstances, that is not likely. Professional philosophers usually write for one another, not for the general public, and what they write for one another is often technical and obscure to the beginner. There are textbooks in the library too, of course, but if you are rushed, as college students usually are, you may find that your time is better spent rereading the assigned materials than by looking here and there in the library stacks for a book that will overcome your inertia and start the words flowing from your own

intellectual pump. In the end, the creative process is a simple transaction between you, the philosophical problem, and your blank paper or empty computer screen. There is no simple substitute for thinking hard, on your own. One thing is for sure: you cannot solve a philosophical problem by “looking up the answer in the library.” Even if there were a way of looking up an answer in another writer’s book, it would give you no practice at *doing* philosophy yourself, and developing your philosophical reasoning skills. If “research” is defined in terms of looking things up, then there is no such thing as “philosophical research.”

Your library also contains biographical information about some of the philosophers you have read, their marital and domestic situations, their political and religious affiliations, the place where they lived out their lives, and the years of their births and deaths. These historical facts can be interesting, and for some purposes even useful, but in almost every case they will be irrelevant to your task. If your aim is to do philosophy yourself, and to do it in this instance by criticizing another philosopher’s articles, then get on with it. Don’t delay the substantive part of your paper for digressive descriptions of historical facts that can have no relevance as reasons for or against the philosophical conclusions you are supposed to be criticizing.

There is another danger in padding up your paper with historical irrelevancies. You may not notice that you are treating the personal attributes of a philosopher as if they really were relevant as reasons for or against his views, as when we dismiss his views as mistaken because he is known to be a liberal or because he is known to be a conservative, or because he often is emotional, or even neurotic. It may be true that his circumstances give him some self-advancing reason for wanting some conclusion to be true, or that he has some shortcoming of intellect or character, but these are judgments about *him*, not about his arguments. His arguments for some philosophical conclusion might yet be valid and the conclusion itself true even though his motives are suspect and his character wicked. To infer that his position is mistaken because of some irrelevancy in his circumstances is to commit the informal fallacy called the *argumentum ad hominem* (Latin for “argument directed at the person”—see chapter 7). If certain facts about a philosopher will be irrelevant as grounds for accepting or rejecting his conclusions, you might as well not go to the library to look them up in the first place.

A philosophical essay, therefore, is not a so-called “research paper.” A chemist may go to the library to discover what other chemists have learned in their observations of some phenomenon, or she may seek to make similar observations, if possible, in her own laboratory. A historian may go to the library to examine historical documents or to learn what happened at a certain time and place. Anyone may go to the library to “look up” a certain book, or to find out what books the stacks contain on a certain subject—even on philosophy. All these uses of a library are called “research” purposes. They all call for patience, ingenuity, and scholarship. In general, research is the effort to

discover facts about nature or history, not to argue for the truth or falsity of philosophical positions. Philosophical truths are not “facts” to be discovered by investigation. Rather they are truths we acquire, at least in major part, by “thinking hard,” making distinctions, giving proofs, and so on. One does not go to the library to discover whether God exists, or what are the limits of human knowledge, or whether human beings have free will.

RESOLVING CONTROVERSIES

If you find after a period of intense but fruitless hard thinking that you can't find any critical arguments to employ in support of a position on the assigned topic, you may be well advised (if your instructor allows this strategy) to compare two philosophers who are in clear disagreement with one another. Then you can try to decide which philosopher has the more plausible position, and why. This is a psychological technique for knocking down barriers to the forming of your own views. You need not defend a position of your own on the problem that divides the two philosophers. Rather you can take a stand on the comparative persuasiveness of two opposed arguments, a more limited and precise question.

In *Reason and Responsibility* you will find opposed positions by different philosophers on virtually every philosophical problem discussed there. The editor's assumption is that presenting more views than one on each philosophical question covered in the book will make it somewhat easier for the students to come to terms with the problems themselves. Moreover, it is simple fairness to give every side an equal hearing, and to give the student “customer,” shopping for her own philosophy, a balanced inventory of beliefs from which to choose.

APPRECIATING PHILOSOPHERS OF AN EARLIER PERIOD

The problem of “picking sides” in controversies between other philosophers is further complicated by the fact that some of the opposed views expressed in *Reason and Responsibility* are those of different historical epochs. One might find a seventeenth century thinker, for example, disagreeing with a philosopher from ancient Greece. The twentieth century British philosopher Bertrand Russell warns students of the pitfalls of such a situation and gives them exactly the right advice in a passage which (unlike most passages) warrants quotation at length:

In studying a philosopher, the right attitude is neither reverence nor contempt but first a kind of hypothetical sympathy, until it is possible to

know what it feels like to believe in his theories, and only then a revival of the critical attitude which should resemble, as far as possible, the state of mind of a person abandoning opinions which he has hitherto held. Contempt interferes with the first part of this process, and reverence with the second. Two things are to be remembered: that a [person] whose opinions and theories are worth studying may be presumed to have had some intelligence, but that no [person] is likely to have arrived at a complete and final truth on any subject whatever. When an intelligent [person] expresses a view which seems to us obviously absurd, we should not attempt to prove that it is somehow true, but we should try to understand how it ever came to *seem* true. This exercise of historical and psychological imagination at once enlarges the scope of our thinking, and helps us to realize how foolish many of our own cherished prejudices will seem to an age which has a different temper of mind.¹

THE OUTLINE

There is no requirement that you make an outline when you are ready to begin writing. Many writers get along fine without ever making outlines. But for others, an outline helps them see the shape of the emerging forest when not blocked from view by individual trees. The outline should contain near its beginning a precise statement of the question you will attempt to answer. Following that, at some point there should appear a preliminary statement of what your answer to that question, also called your "thesis," will be. The rest of the outline should state the reasons supporting your thesis and perhaps, if room remains, your replies to criticisms that might be made by skeptical readers. There is no reason why the author should regard the outline at this point as somehow binding. The outline is no private promise made to oneself or to anyone else. In most cases some of its arguments will prove very difficult to state clearly. Others will turn out to be logically flawed, still others will require more length to develop than you have time to arrange. Quite apart from logical argument, parts of the emerging paper may be awkwardly written and highly inelegant. For that reason the obscure parts will have to be rewritten, and that too might lead to some deviation from a very *nonbinding* outline. You should feel free to revise you outline as you go along. In the end, it will be hard to say which came first, the paper or the outline, and in some cases the outline will be largely *ex post facto* ("after the fact"). That

¹Russell, Bertrand. *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1945), p. 39.

matters not a bit. The point of the outline is simply to help you keep your thoughts together, to remind you of your own strategy if it should fade from view.

The following sentences form a kind of outline of an outline, an informal self-directed battle plan.

- I. Opening paragraphs
 - A. The question this essay is designed to answer (or alternatively the problem it aims to solve)
 - B. The question is clarified (if necessary)
 - C. If it would be helpful, an explanation of why the question is important (or interesting or difficult)
- II. The writer's answer to the question (or alternatively, her thesis)
- III. Middle paragraphs (the bulk of the paper):
The writer's argument for the thesis. There is no one fixed pattern for arguments.
- IV. The argument may include, but it is not required to include, a restatement and if necessary a qualification, of the thesis. Also it could include, but need not, "a reply to the critics," that is a rejoinder to arguments against the writer's thesis that were actually made by some other or earlier philosopher, or which might be made by someone of skeptical disposition.
- V. Closing paragraph: A brief summary of this argument as presented in III A.

This abstract of an outline is only one among numerous formal structures that a given paper's outline might follow, depending of course on the content of the paper being outlined. Very likely, a student paper accurately condensed by the outline-abstract above would be too long, thus forcing the student-author to cut. In this case, the outline would enable the student-author to see at a glance what is most dispensable, and act accordingly. Also the outline might reveal to the author that she doesn't really trust or understand her own argument. That argument may no longer seem intuitively convincing when she is able to look closely at its bare bones, so improvements or corrections will have to be made. In that case the outline, which is always tentative, may reveal a connection between statements that will not hold them together in the way required by a cogent argument, and will show the various possibilities of change that would correct the situation. The outline serves as an uncluttered statement of the logical structure of the argument. One can use it as a work sheet, moving propositions around until they seem to form a coherent argument, and then reconstructing the full paragraphs in the paper itself so as to incorporate the changes first worked out on the work sheet (that is, on the tentative outline).

PREPARATION OF THE FINAL DRAFT

It is hard to know exactly what a complete “draft” is. If you use an outline to record your strategy and to decide upon deviations from it, and you constantly revise subsections and switch paragraphs about in order to find the most natural ordering of the points you are trying to make, you may well reach the end of your essay after many revisions in its major points. In the extreme case so many changes will have been made that you will want to rewrite the entire paper from beginning to end. That would be to write a new “draft.” Sometimes it will be necessary. More often it will not.

Your motive for typing up a final draft may be more formal than substantive. You may simply want the essay that emerges from your word processor or printer to be neat and tidy, free of messy marks, uneven margins, punctuation and spelling mistakes and “typos,” that is errors resulting from inadvertence, typing accidents, slippings of the fingers, and the like. One graduate student, though a good typist generally, had a propensity to type a “t” when he meant to type a “w.” He opened a chapter of his Ph.D. thesis by typing “not” instead of his intended “now.” The sentence as it appeared on paper then read: “We are not [instead of ‘we are now’] ready to consider the next problem.” His supervisor then wrote in the margin: “Yes, that is true, but must you be so candid about it?” In a sense, the word “now” which the student meant to type was not misspelled. That is how one spells “not”—*n o t*, if one means *not*. A spell-check on your computer will not catch the mistake because it has no way of knowing what you meant—whether you meant *now* or *not*. The best way to prevent mistakes of this sometimes damaging kind is to look at each word and each letter, one at a time, page after page. That tedious but essential task is similar to what authors must do when they check for errors (primarily printer’s errors) in the page or galley proofs that come to them from the type-setter. In the publishing world that work, reserved for the author, is called proof-reading. It is done most efficiently when the labor is shared by two persons, one of whom (usually the author) reads aloud from her original typescript, while her assistant looks at the printed page proofs while listening to the author’s voice and spots mistakes when there are discrepancies between what he sees and what he hears. He then uses a conventional set of symbols to point out the mistakes to the printer in a marginal comment.

Students, of course, do not submit their original essays to typesetters. Still, students are as prone as other people to commit so-called “typographical errors,” and very often the errors are best caught and corrected by a team of two persons. One partner reads aloud from one copy produced by a computer *cum* desk printer, while the author, following an identical copy, and listening for incoherences, is ready to pounce on a typographical error when it turns up. This kind of “proof-reading” then results in the final revisions, before the paper is handed in.

WRITING BLOCKS

Typically, the very first thing to be done in the preparation of a philosophy essay is to write a first draft of an outline, knowing full well, that what you are doing at that stage is a kind of preliminary toying with the problem, first setting it up in one way, then in another, always feeling free to knock it all over and start again. Or one can experiment similarly with the various *theses* that might be the best answers to an interesting question. At a certain point an apparent insight comes, and in great excitement you type or write it down, determined not to lose it while it is still fresh in your mind. Very often that is how the words begin to come and what is called a “writer’s block” begins to erode.

Often, however, the erosion is not produced that easily. The problem in many such cases is not a result of confusion over logic or a lack of strategies for argument and proof. The problem lies elsewhere: *in finding the right words*. Even after a preliminary outline has been completed and a central argument sketched, there are times when the words still will not come. This happens on occasion even to the most talented and experienced writers. The experience can produce frustration and despair, and these emotional states can themselves strengthen the writer’s block, making the problem even worse. What then is to be done?

My best advice is simply to start writing anyway. Even if you know that you are not finding the elusive “right words,” use some other words, and if your sentences at first don’t express your real intended meanings, come back to them later and try new ones. Most importantly, keep reminding yourself that you are not instantly and permanently committed to these particular words. You can always change them or delete them later. Acknowledge to yourself now that you are holding yourself only to very low personal standards, but remain determined to substitute your usual high standards at some point after the block has collapsed. As you start writing with greater speed and words come in a quicker flow, you will gain more confidence and that too will contribute to the recovery of your usual prowess. Soon you will be thinking about things philosophical, and not simply about finding words. Then after you have completed the “final draft” of the paper, as your last chore connected with the project, rewrite the foolish “temporary draft” of the first few paragraphs, just as you promised yourself earlier.

Rules of the Game

PLAGIARISM AS A LEGAL WRONG (VIOLATION OF ANOTHER PERSON'S PROPERTY RIGHT)

Laws protecting authors and artists from the unauthorized publication of their works are called copyright laws. These laws give authors the “exclusive right to publish their works or to determine who may so publish.”¹ When a publisher or editor wishes to reprint the published work of an author he must first have the permission of the copyright holder, for which he may be charged a permission fee. Some works are said by the courts to be the property of no one owner, but rather belong to the general public. These works include court decisions, which are said to be in “the public domain,” and older works whose copyright has expired. Copyright infringement, as such, is not a crime. Rather it is the occasion for a civil suit brought by the copyright holder against the infringing party for compensatory damages, or a suit seeking an injunction that will require that the infringements cease.

In the law, then, plagiarism is a violation of a property right. At best its harm consists simply of a deprivation of the exclusive control an owner normally exercises over her property. At worst it can prevent an owner from realizing a profit that is rightly hers. In other instances it can mislead the public about the true authorship of a work, and affect the reputations of innocent parties in ways they do not deserve, for example getting credit for a good work they did not create, or blame for a poor work they did not create. Some of these harms affect private interests primarily; some affect the public interest too, especially the interest in avoiding deception about matters of fact. On the whole there is some analogy between plagiarism and theft. There is also some analogy between plagiarism and ways of violating property rights other than by simply stealing the property from its owner, for example trespassing, and other instances of violating an owner's exclusive control, by forgery of the owner's permission, false pretenses, and so on.

¹Gifis, Steven H. *Law Dictionary* (Woodbury, New York: Barrons' Educational Series, Inc., 1975), p. 46.