

# Paper Requirements

Scott Brown, Ph.D.

1. **Packaging.** I am looking almost entirely for my personal convenience in the way your paper is packaged. I will have a fairly large stack of these papers to grade, and I want them all to fit neatly into this stack, and I want them all to be individually easy to handle while I'm grading them. The best format I know of for this is for you to simply staple your paper diagonally in the top left-hand corner, no plastic covers, no fancy binding schemes, certainly not a row of staples, just one staple in the top left-hand corner. You may include a cover page if you like, or you may omit that. Put your name and the title of the paper on the topmost page, whatever it is, as that is the most convenient place for me to find it when recording the grades and returning the papers.

2. **Grammar and Punctuation.** A surprising number of students express dismay at the fact that good grammar and punctuation are expected in the papers, wishing to be graded only on "content." There is a serious fallacy involved in that expectation, which is the notion that there is any other content in the paper than that what it expresses. Your paper cannot say very much, if words are poorly jumbled together in ways that don't work as intelligible sentences. Moreover, if you want to write well, you'll need a better command of grammar and punctuation than just enough to write minimally correct sentences and to make pretty good, intuitive guesses about where to put the commas and periods. Writing philosophy requires expressing some fairly difficult, complex and subtle ideas. And, if do not employ sufficient syntactical resources to express yourself clearly and accurately, this will obviously diminish the potential content of your paper. If you don't write any interesting sentences, then it's unlikely that your paper will be interesting at any level. To the extent that it is practical, philosophy is almost entirely a literary discipline, one inseparable from its literate exercise. The reason you write papers in this class is not merely as a "test" of knowledge you've acquired from the readings and lectures, but as an exercise, as part of your instruction, as one of the most important parts. The presumed value of a college education is not merely that it somehow puts ideas into your head, which may be useful for daydreaming or for passive recognition on occasion, but that you become better able to read and write in various areas, that you can explain and question in more literate ways, with more refinement, with more practical skill at it. You might be surprised at what you have to say and how well you can say it, if you improve your literary syntax, your grammar and punctuation. The good use of grammar and punctuation are both very elementary and very advanced skills, and it may be that philosophy especially puts demands on those skills. But, your education won't be very practical, if you don't continue to refine these skills at every level of your academic progress.

3. **Title.** Put a title on it. It helps my focus when I'm reading it, and it helps you remember to have a focus when writing it.

4. **Development.** Now supposing that you can write good and interesting sentences, a paper is more than a mere sequence of sentences. Development is controlled for the most part by **paragraphing.** Ideas ought to be unfolded in manageable topics whose exposition is grouped into paragraphs, each itself adequately structured to express its topic, the sequence of which topical paragraphs is precisely the ordered development of the theme of your paper. If your weakness is in this area, syntactical excellence won't be enough to keep your paper from stalling, choking and running out of gas pretty quickly. You might experience it as a sort of "writer's block," in that while your mind may be near exploding with insights, you just aren't able to lay what you think out in your paper. There are plenty of good books on elementary rhetoric, which are largely taken up with the art of paragraphing, and you are encouraged to consult and study these. However, it is something you should never cease to learn. And primarily you can learn this by observing how the writers you read develop their paragraphs, as well as how they set them into sequences, as they all have to do it somehow. It is easy to ignore, as this is something that is *shown and not said* by the writer, and many

readers simply read one sentence after another, regarding paragraphing as merely a sort of irregular second pagination, merely something that happens after a certain stretch for reasons not essential to what is being said in the paragraphs. It is essential that you pay careful attention to paragraphing in your reading as well as your writing, as this is probably the main key to good prose literacy, and you learn the art of doing it primarily by paying attention to it in the writings of others. Without attention to paragraphing, you will probably try to write your paper by simply saying one thing after another in one long screed of statement after statement that eventually just runs out of things to say, where if you attend to the paragraphing, you'll discover that you can always find room to break parts of what you've got to say into manageable, topical paragraphs.

5. **Argument.** Your paper should observe good principles of argument. This is the theme of *logic*, always a special preoccupation of philosophers. But, if you haven't had any formal instruction in logic, this is not something about which you should feel intimidated. "Argument," in the sense used by philosophers, is simply the giving of reasons, and logic is merely the study of principles of argumentative reasoning. Although not all philosophers are logicians, it is probably fair to say that all philosophy is argumentative, to the extent that it always involves some statement of reasons for taking what it says to be true. And you should do that. For example, if you think one of the texts we've read expresses a false view, and you want to express another view, one that contradicts it, then one principle of good argument you should observe is to do justice to the position you are attacking. If you want to say, for example, that Socrates is wrong about something, then don't just ignore any arguments he has given, but respond to his arguments as well as what he concludes from the arguments. That is, it won't do to simply juxtapose an opposite opinion to something expressed in the texts. There ought to be *reasons* for preferring one view to another, and justice should be done to any position that is attacked (this latter being commonly known as the "principle of generosity," according to which you should make the best case for the position you're opposing in preparation for your opposition). But, I'm not especially interested in seeing you make your paper into an exercise in logic, and you need not "debate" the authors we're reading. If your paper has more of what might be called an "interpretive" emphasis, it will still be "argumentative," to the extent that you give reasons in the course of the paper for what you claim to be true, more broadly construed as "citing evidences." And this "citing" of evidences need not be in the form of referenced quotations, as you probably don't need to prove to me in a formal documentary fashion that the text says something you describe it as saying, if I can simply recognize that indeed it says that. In any case, good logic, good argument counts *for* your paper, and bad logic, bad argument counts *against*.

6. **Drafts.** It will probably take more than one draft to write your paper. If you are not accustomed to writing more than one draft, then you might be stunned at how much better your paper gets with each new draft of it, until the paper handed in hardly resembles what you wrote as the first draft. Often, you may write a paper on a topic, and discover that you actually want to say more about a subordinate idea that develops in the course of your first draft, and then make that the central topic of the paper, entirely changing topics. This paper on the second topic is likely to turn out better, more fully developed, particularly more interesting. Paragraphs that it seemed you just haphazardly arrived at in the course of one draft may be tightened up, expanded, broken into several paragraphs dealing with topics that accidentally emerged in the course of writing the paper on the previous round. Don't confine yourself to just correcting obvious errors in a previous draft. It may take one writing just to discover all the things you want to talk about in your paper, as well as what themes don't seem to be going anywhere and probably ought to just be cut out of subsequent drafts. Writing a paper is largely a process of discovering your paper by successive approximations of what it would have been better to have written in previous drafts. If you try this, you'll discover that it shows in the final product in a way that is obvious to you as well as to whomever your readers are. When you really get it right, you may discover that you like reading your paper; in fact, your friends and associates might all discover that you like to do that too.

7. **Reading.** Topics can be drawn from any part of the reading. If you've read a lot, especially if you've read and re-read the texts, there is an implosive effect on your understanding. And that shows in your interpretations, even if you only write explicitly on a narrow selection. Just as there is usually a better than expected improvement gained from writing another draft of your paper, your understanding of the text on re-reading will improve more than you might expect. It is not simply that you can't remember it all on a first reading, but that many things are simply not evident at first, such as where earlier passages are leading, whether questions raised will be adequately answered, etc. If it seems daunting to have to re-read something that you have read once already, you might take courage in the fact that the text seems to get shorter and more manageable on re-reading, and your better understanding makes the re-reading actually more rewarding than was your first reading. Moreover, the confidence of having read well what you are talking about in your paper tends to show, for example, in well executed subtle distinctions that in reading your paper I will realize wouldn't have been readily evident on a first reading. I.e., I can usually tell from your paper how well you are reading.

8. **Style.** The paper should be typed in double space, but don't put an extra double-space between paragraphs. Use any normal font, 10 or 12 point. Proportional fonts are better, as they are easier to read. It is also easier to read a paper that has a ragged right margin (non-justified). Observe the rules for italicizing book titles, placing articles in quotation marks, etc. The information on how to do these latter sorts of things is contained in style manuals, such as those by Kate L. Turabian (based on the *The Chicago Manual of Style*) or the MLA manual; and you may use any style manual you like, as long as you're consistent within the paper. Start page numbering on Page 2, and write the page number in the top right-hand corner, as I find it easier to read there. You should begin the first page two inches down from the top edge of the paper, but otherwise you should have a one-inch margin on all four sides of the paper. Use footnotes, if you want, and don't if you don't; you may also place references in line (in parentheses). But, footnotes are defined by a place, not a function (say, "referencing"), and if you find it convenient to write something down there, then do it. I don't like end notes, and I can't see any good reason for them, since word processors now take care of the mechanics of placing notes, and they're obviously easier to find and read at the bottom of the referring page than at the end of the document. Please at least use your spelling checker, but also proof the paper for obvious errors, word-processor trash, half-written sentences, etc., also doing a final check of punctuation and grammar.

9. **Readability.** Make your paper easy to read! Use that rule as a criterion throughout for how finished things are, for how well sentences are worded and punctuated, how coherent your paragraphs are, whether they carry a point or just amble, how well things are punctuated. The best punctuation, used correctly, is always the one that makes the text most readable. Something interesting is always more readable, but say that interesting thing as clearly as possible, i.e., in a way that's most readable. The best test is always to read the paper you intend to hand in as though you were reading it out loud to someone. If your paper doesn't make any sense when read it like this, it can't possibly be accomplishing anything else; your paper can't possibly be better than just what it says and exactly the way it says it: That's about it!