

## Academic Writing Advice

with an eye towards ancient philosophy

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### General advice

First ask yourself: what are you writing? Are you getting your own thoughts clear on paper?

Or presenting ideas to others?

- I assume below that you are presenting your ideas to others. It can be valuable first to clarify your own thoughts on paper.

Next, who is your audience? What is the format?

- Is it a job talk, a talk to specialists, a paper for a generalist journal, a paper for a specialty journal, a commentary, a chapter in a dissertation/book, etc.? When writing for your dissertation advisor(s), there is typically an imagined audience of specialists.

In general, I assume here that you are writing thesis-driven prose.

- A thesis-driven paper is what you should give as a talk or writing sample.

The goal of thesis-driven prose, as a genre, is persuasion.

- How to persuade depends on your audience.
- In general, in ancient philosophy, the heart of persuasion is textual evidence.

Persuade people of something interesting and significant.

- It is more important to have an interesting thesis that you argue for well than to ultimately persuade people of your thesis.
- That said, in general the best papers—the most interesting and exciting papers—have an interesting thesis and argue for it in a convincing way.
- Typically you need to refine your thesis throughout the writing process. Often the key step in developing a paper is giving it the right scope, so that you are arguing for something interesting without needing to defend too many controversial claims. At its best, this process can help you tighten and clarify your central idea.
- This document does not offer advice on how to come up with an interesting thesis. That is highly dependent on the specific issues in the relevant sub-sub-discipline.
- Instead, I provide here an outline of what a finished paper in this genre should look like.

Only explain things as they are relevant.

- Do not provide generic “background information.” Explain it as needed.
- Do not tell people things that they likely already know.
- In general, do not make claims that are not needed to develop and establish your thesis. If you make such claims, be clear that your thesis does not depend on them.

Work relentlessly on being clear and precise.

- Philosophy is very hard to understand. Communicate as clearly as possible.
- Subtle distinctions are often crucial. Be careful in your word choice.

### The introduction

Motivate that there is some sort of problem and at least point towards your solution.

- Sometimes the problem is well known to your audience, and so does not require much motivation.

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- Other times, it is necessary to develop your problem because you are the first to develop it, it is not widely known, or it is important to clarify.
- The solution to your problem is your thesis. I suggest making the thesis explicit in the introduction, but some good papers simply point in the direction of the solution.

Provide a basic account of how you will establish your thesis.

- Do not simply give a laundry list of what you do at the end of the introduction. Make clear *why* your paper's sections and structure is a natural and appropriate.

Convince the reader that there is something original in your paper.

- Perhaps others have already argued for your thesis. In that case, there needs to be something original about how you argue for your thesis.
- Ideally, you convince the reader in the introduction that you are doing something new and interesting. At worst, indicate that you will do this in the paper.

Make clear, in the introduction, that you are an authority on the topic.

- At the same time, you do not want to bog down the paper with an exhaustive and exhausting literature review.
- Footnotes are often ideal for this.

First impressions are important, especially for papers.

- Your introduction should be very clear, careful, and tight.
- In general, people really like short introductions. It feels like you are focused and aren't wasting anyone's time.
- (Final impressions may be even more important for talks. Be careful what you say in your conclusion in a talk – it can end up dominating the discussion.)

### The body

This is where you convince your reader that you are right.

- It should be written in light of (1) the main obstacles to your position and (2) the strongest evidence for your position.

It is, to some degree, a sociological question what the obstacles are to convincing people.

- What questions, ideas, and concerns are your readers likely to have?
- What are the standard questions and concerns on your topic?
- Which parts of the secondary literature are you expected to address?
- Typically, what convinced you of your thesis is unlikely to be what will work for most people. There is no reason to reproduce what historically led to your discovery.

Put your strongest evidence as early as possible in the paper as possible.

- The sooner you can get the reader to think "oh, maybe the author is onto something," the better. I think of this as turning the reader to your side.
- The reader is unlikely to become convinced in the last few pages, by which point they probably have a settled view.

In general, ask yourself: Where are your readers now? Where do you want them to be? How do you get them there?

- Give your paper the structure needed to get them there.
- Think both about the logical structure of the ideas and what will be most persuasive.

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Do not over-sell or under-sell your arguments.

- If you say that something “shows” something, which it merely suggests it, readers will be unhappy. On the other hand, if you say that it provides support for your view, they very well may agree.
- At the same time, do not downplay the strength of your arguments.

Be clear as you go through your arguments *why* you are doing what you are doing.

- It is incredibly common for readers to get lost.
- It is not enough to signpost, i.e., to merely say what you are doing.
- You need to make the rational structure of the paper apparent to the reader.

### **The conclusion**

You can simply summarize your view and be done.

Sometimes it is appropriate to broaden out, or point towards avenues for future research, or to make connections that would be off topic in the body of the paper.

- But note, as mentioned above, that if you are giving a talk, what you say in the conclusion can become the focus of the discussion.

### **Final thoughts**

Getting feedback from people on your work will make it better.

- Find people you can exchange work with. Do not only think about what they object to, but also where they get confused or misunderstand you. Every misunderstanding points towards something you can try to clarify.
- Advice from people in your sub-field will be quite different from those outside it. Both types can be quite useful.
- The sort of advice found in this document is much more meaningful when given in response to specific things you have written.

If you think that a paper you have read is well or poorly written, think about why. This is a different way to learn from concrete writing.

### **Some books on writing you might find helpful**

*Style: Towards Clarity and Grace* by Joseph M. Williams

- My overall recommendation for academic writing. Bad title (not primarily about style), good book. (Williams ran the academic writing program at University of Chicago.)

*Thinking on Paper* by Howard and Barton

- Distinguishes sharply between the process of getting clear on your thoughts on paper and presenting those thoughts to others. Can be very useful, especially for those with writer’s block or having trouble communicating ideas to others.

*Clear and Simple as the Truth* by Thomas and Thomas

- Focuses on the idea that academic essay writing is a specific genre, developed at a certain time, guided by implicit expectations and ideas that are useful to understand.