

The Basic Philosophy Paper: A Structural Guide¹

This is not a guide for your writing process. You should write in whatever way expressing and making sense of your ideas feels most natural and most productive to you. This is a guide for organizing your ideas, after you have captured some of them in fits and starts of prose, into a particular kind of final product: *the basic philosophy paper*.

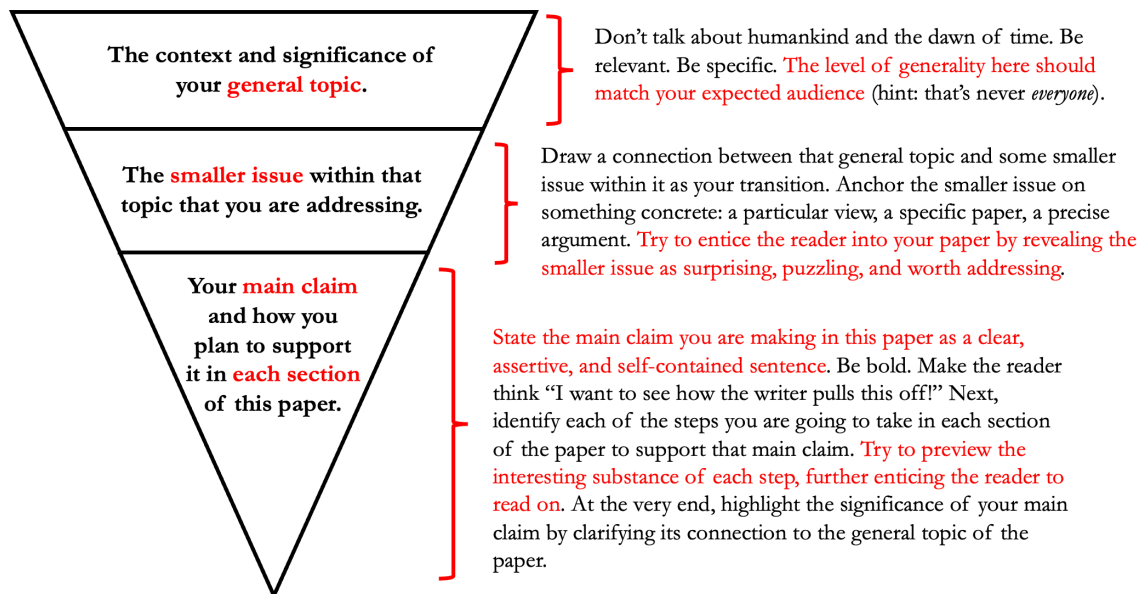
The basic philosophy paper reaches for a kind of functional ideal: clearly conveying an argument, its force, and its relation to some part of the philosophical literature. It is not, of course, the only kind of philosophical writing that is valuable, and it is probably not the kind of stuff you dream of reading. There is room and there is need for more ambitious and more creative writing in academic philosophy, and it's okay to pine and strive for that. Nonetheless, mastering the basic philosophy paper will help you advance professionally. It will increase your chances of doing well in graduate seminars, of getting your work accepted into conferences and journals, and of having some uptake in philosophical conversations you may wish to join. This guide was written with these kinds of pragmatic benefits in mind.

The qualifier “basic,” however, does not imply the qualifiers “simple” or “easy.” Putting together a basic philosophy paper can be hard. It takes time to get it right and it takes practice to make it natural. And while it can be beneficial to reach for this functional ideal – depending on your goals and context – it is important to remember that no paper is ever a perfect instance of it. So don't worry too much about your growing pains. Try to improve little by little. Be kind to yourself.

1. First Step: Introducing your Paper

The introduction is one of the most important parts of your paper. It is your chance to frame the conversation, to place the reader on a path you have carefully prepared for them. Professors, journal editors, referees, and committee members, are not reading your work for some aimless sense of wonder. Feeling lost on their way to your point is a deterrent for their interest and appreciation. It is good to show them the way.

There are three essential components to a basic introduction: a statement of the context and significance of your *general topic*, a statement of the *smaller issue* within the topic you are addressing, and a statement of both your *main claim* and of how you plan to support it *in each section* of the paper. The goal is to funnel the reader's prior interest in the general topic into a newfound interest in your paper.



The introduction should consist of at least 3 paragraphs – one for each component – and not of too many more. It is okay to spend a couple of paragraphs on one or more of these components, but brevity is a virtue.

¹ This guide was written for my graduate students. Thanks to Steve Wykstra, Tim Perrine, and Josh DiPaolo for helpful suggestions.

Sample Intro: Oliveira and Perrine (2017). “Cornell Realism, Explanation, and Natural Properties,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 25(4): 1021-38.


Many of us desire a meta-ethical position that allows us to take ordinary ethical discourse seriously. It seems to those of us, that is, that much of what we say about right and wrong or good and bad, for example, is true. Even more, it seems to those of us that we typically know many of these truths. What many of us desire, in other words, is a meta-ethical position that sees our ordinary ethical discourse as tracking important features of an accessible reality, as opposed to seeing it as some kind of mistake, mystery, or fiction (however useful). As we will put it, this is a desire for conservatism about ethical discourse, or *ethical conservatism* for short.

Many of us, just as much, desire a meta-ethical position that respects the success of scientific inquiry. It seems to those of us, that is, that certain scientific explanations are the most impressive and secure examples of knowledge of the world around us, and that we are thereby required to conform our methods of inquiry and the ontological commitments of our theories to its methods and commitments. Put a bit differently, it seems that the correct scientific account of the world has a special kind of privilege: the methods it deploys, and the entities that it requires—which we will hereafter refer to as natural—are the ones that we have most reason to employ and believe exist. What those of us desire, then, is a meta-ethical position that does not commit us to non-scientific (non-natural) methods and entities. As we will put it, this is a desire for naturalism about ethical discourse, or *ethical naturalism* for short.


Ethical conservatism and ethical naturalism, however, seem in tension. We see this when we notice that ordinary ethical discourse seems on its grammatical surface no different than other familiar kinds of discourse about the world. Just as the claim ‘cars are heavy’ seems to predicate the property *heaviness* to the object-type *car*, the ethical claim ‘murder is wrong’ seems to predicate the property *wrongness* to the act-type *murder*. Since ethical conservatism is committed to much of such discourse being true, it seems it is thereby committed to the existence of some such property as *wrongness*. And since ethical conservatism is also committed to much of such discourse being an expression of bits of knowledge, it seems it is thereby committed to some sort of successful cognitive access to the property of *wrongness* as well. But *wrongness* seems non-natural: it does not seem to be the kind of entity that is required for scientific explanations, and scientific methods of inquiry seem incapable of producing knowledge about it.

We here focus on one attempt to dispel this apparent tension. According to the meta-ethical position sometimes referred to as Cornell Realism, ethical properties are natural properties on a par with the properties that we find current in the sciences (cf. Sturgeon 1985, Boyd 1988, and Brink 1989). If so, then the fact that ordinary moral discourse predicates *wrongness* is no more worrisome than the fact that scientific discourse predicates *positive charge*. Though this suggestion has been criticized in different ways, an important weakness has yet to be properly exposed. In short, our claim is that there are important differences between scientific and moral explanations, such that only the former have privileged ontological insight.


Here is how we proceed. In the first section, we discuss philosophical naturalism more broadly, and J. L. Mackie’s particularly influential articulation of the tension between ethical naturalism and ethical conservatism. What we will call *Mackie’s Challenge* is, roughly, the claim that this tension simply cannot be dispelled: if one desires to be an ethical naturalist, then one best be ready to place ethical conservatism to the side. In the second section, we explain how Cornell Realism attempts to dispel that tension by claiming that ethical properties are natural properties. In the third section, we offer an undermining argument: even granting them their central claims, Cornell Realists have not yet shown that ethical properties are natural. In the fourth section, we offer a rebutting argument: typical natural properties have certain features that ethical properties lack, giving us good prima facie reason for thinking that ethical properties are non-natural. We conclude that Cornell Realism falls short of dispelling the tension between ethical conservatism and ethical naturalism.



The context and significance of your general topic.



The smaller issue within that topic that you are addressing.



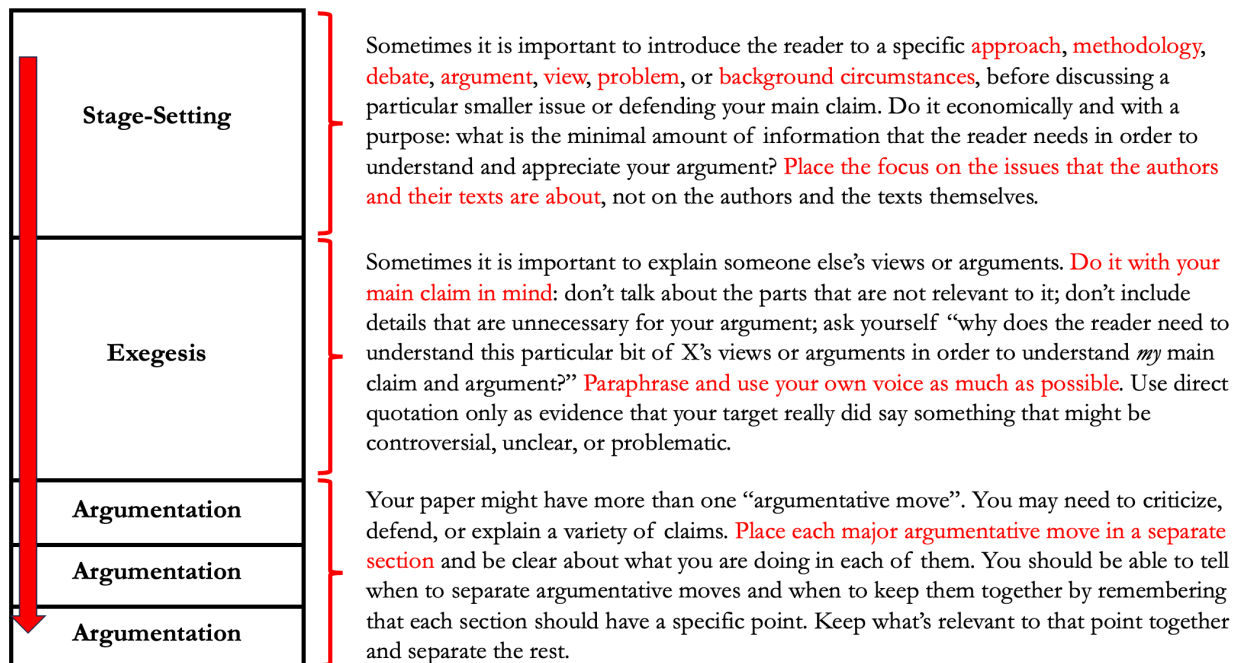
Your main claim and how you plan to support it in each section of this paper.

2. The Second Step: Structuring your Paper

Try your best to emotionally distance yourself from the structure of what you have produced in the free writing stage – the meandering path of insight and inspiration you have taken to your destination. A basic philosophy paper calls for *the beeline* instead: it includes only the bits of your writing that take the reader most directly to your point. A basic philosophy paper is *an argument* for your main claim. Only what is relevant to that argument should be included.

Each section of your paper should be a relevant step in your overall argument. This means two things. First, that each section should have a *specific point*, a point that you should be able to state clearly at the outset. Second, that the points you make in each section, and state clearly to the reader, should fit together to constitute some kind of *support for your main claim*. The reader should be able to list the specific point of each section and be able to see that, if they are all true, there really is some reason to believe your main claim.

A basic philosophy paper should have at least two of the following three kinds of elementary sections: *stage-setting*, *exegesis*, and *argumentation*. As you look over the flood of words you have produced in your free writing stage, it is important to identify where the various parts fit into the final structure of your paper, besides recognizing whether they fit at all.



A basic philosophy paper does not need to have more than one stage-setting and/or exegesis section. One of those, or one of each, is often fine. However, you should resist having more than one stage-setting section and/or more than one exegesis section. Two of either, or two of both, is likely too much. Try to compress. The longer it takes for the reader to reach your argumentation sections (the sections where you offer something new to the conversation), the higher the "upfront costs" for the reader. Don't make those costs too high.

Of course, there are different ways to combine and order the sections in your paper. And great papers typically have argumentation weaved into their stage-setting and exegesis as well – they deliver goods at every turn. But this guide is keeping things basic. Organizing your paper in more elementary ways will do wonders for your budding efforts towards being understood – both by others and by yourself.

Note: This is as good a place as any to paraphrase the last rule in George Orwell's writing guide "[Politics and the English Language](#)": ignore or modify any advice in this guide before letting it lead you into doing something absurd.

Sample Outlines: Two Types of Basic Philosophy Papers

These two sample outlines are not intended as *constraining* you. They are not intended as rules for how your papers *must* be structured, but rather as helpful illustrations of how your papers *could* be structured instead. Both outlines can and should be modified, in any of a variety of ways, if and when your paper's central argument calls for a more complex structure. That said, keep in mind that there's no shame in keeping things simple, and no value in artificial complexity either.

<u>The “Reply” Paper</u>	<u>The “Problem-Solving” Paper</u>
<p>1. Introduction</p> <p>2. Exegesis</p> <p>(Where you reveal that some author relies explicitly or implicitly on the truth of P. This may require clarification, disambiguation, etc.)</p> <p>3. Stage-Setting (Optional)</p> <p>(Where you introduce and explain an approach, methodology, debate, argument, view, problem, or background circumstances.)</p> <p>4. Argumentation</p> <p>(Where you argue against P or argue against that author's reliance on P – building on the material from the previous section, if included.)</p> <p>5. Conclusion</p>	<p>1. Introduction</p> <p>2. Stage-Setting</p> <p>(Where you introduce and/or explain problem X: for an argument, for a view, for an approach, etc.)</p> <p>3. Argumentation (Optional)</p> <p>(Where you argue against other attempts to solve problem X. This may require efficient, direct-to-the-point exegesis of your targets.)</p> <p>4. Argumentation</p> <p>(Where you argue for your own solution to problem X – building on the material from the previous section, if included.)</p> <p>5. Conclusion</p>

Conveying what you have found and learned from some parts of the relevant philosophical literature plays an important role in a basic philosophy paper. One of the central differences between an “interesting idea” and a “philosophy paper” is that the latter is clearly tethered to an ongoing philosophical conversation: it organizes some contributions to that conversation in informative ways, it positions itself in relation to the achievements and failures it finds in them, and so on. At the very least, a basic philosophy paper makes some effort towards that kind of tethering by *showing its awareness* of other contributions to the conversation it hopes to join. Sections 2 and 3, in the outlines above, provide you with an opportunity to reach for these goals.

It is unlikely, however, that the author you are targeting is explicitly saying something that is obviously false, or that the problem you are targeting has an obvious solution everyone else has missed. When you have that kind of initial reaction, you are likely missing something yourself: maybe the author is not quite saying what you think they are; maybe your solution does not quite do what you think it does; maybe the broader issue, in either case, is more complex than you think it is. A basic philosophy paper goes deeper than merely reporting initial reactions. Think of your initial reaction as an *alarm* indicating that something in the vicinity smells fishy. Part of your job during the free writing stage is to *investigate* the matter by (a) trying to state the relevant claims as clearly and precisely as you can, (b) trying to reveal hidden assumptions or hidden connections or hidden tensions, and (c) trying to understand and learn from what other people have said about all these things. A basic philosophy paper emerges from this investigative practice.

Philpapers.org is an excellent resource for identifying relevant work. Use it.

Structuring your paper well increases the accessibility of your ideas. That is the final goal. But a clear structure also makes it harder to present unsubstantial work as substantial. This can be daunting, of course, since it can reveal that much that you have produced in your free-writing stage amounts to very little. Don't despair. Use this to your advantage. Trying to organize your writing into the structure of a basic philosophy paper – either in the ways I have suggested or in other similar ways – reveals exactly where your argument needs more work. Focus on that.

3. The Third Step: Structuring your Sections

The internal structure of each section should mirror the overall structure of your paper. Your paper has a main claim, and each section makes a specific point towards supporting that claim, in some sensible order. Similarly, your section has a specific point, and each paragraph should play a clear role in establishing it, in some sensible order. A basic philosophy paper has no fluff. Every paragraph earns its keep.

This is perhaps the hardest bit to master. The key is to remember that your section is trying to establish a *specific point*. Think of that as your target and think of each paragraph as a step towards that target. With the specific point of the section in mind, then, start by numbering each of the paragraphs in that section and by trying to identify and state *their* point as well. Once you see clearly what point each paragraph is making (or *should* be making), edit, reorganize, and even re-write each paragraph so that it better makes that point. If you can't quite tell what point a paragraph is making, or how its point fits somewhere on the guided walk towards the specific point of the section, cut it out.

Paragraph Organization: Oliveira and Perrine (2017)

1. Stage-Setting: Wide Naturalism and Mackie's Challenge

- ¶1 Identifying Wide Naturalism
- ¶2 Clarifying Wide Naturalism
- ¶3 From Wide Naturalism to ontological commitments
- ¶4 From Wide Naturalism to Mackie's Challenge
- ¶5 The Cornell Realist Reply to Mackie's Challenge
- ¶6 Explaining the structure of our paper in light of that reply

2. Exegesis: Cornell Realism

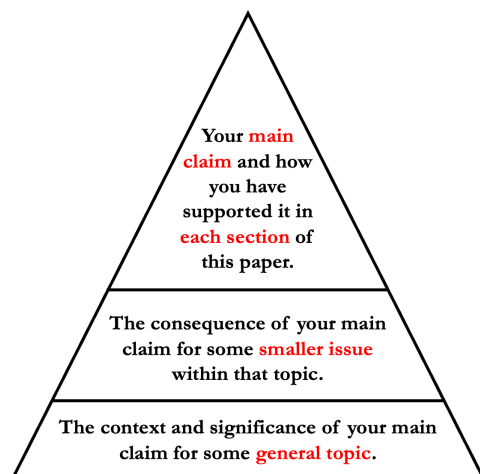
- ¶1 Defining Cornell Realism
- ¶2 Explaining non-reductive supervenience
- ¶3 Legitimate and valuable explanations as a guide to naturalness
- ¶4 The counterfactual test for legitimacy: an example from Sturgeon
- ¶5 Generalizing to ethical discourse in general
- ¶6 The inductive test for value: examples from Boyd and Brink
- ¶7 Putting it all together: From Wide Naturalism to Cornell Realism

Obsessing about these kinds of detail can feel unpleasant, uninspired, and unbecoming. Maybe it is unfashionable in some circles these days. Nonetheless, for the pragmatic purposes of a basic philosophical paper, it encourages the kind of intellectual and discursive discipline that can greatly elevate the floor of your paper.

The *principles of composition* in Strunk and White's writing guide [*The Elements of Style*](#) (1959) are particularly useful for paragraph-level editorial work. (Their grammatical advice is outdated.)

4. The Fourth Step: Structuring your Conclusion

If you have followed the advice above, concluding your paper will be easy. It is simply a matter of restating your main claim, reviewing the overall argument for your main claim, and returning the reader, now enriched by the details of your discussion, back to the vantage point of the introduction.



The goal here is to reverse the introductory maneuver and to shepherd the reader out of the funneled path you put them through.

And that's it.

Again, there is much more to philosophical writing than a basic philosophy paper. There is also much more to a basic philosophy paper than the slim structure I have mentioned in this guide. This is absolutely an instance of the old advice: "learn to walk before you run." Just don't look down on walking. It can do us all some good.

Please feel free to reach out if you have any questions or concerns.

The Basic Philosophy Paper Checklist

The basic philosophy paper reaches for a kind of functional ideal: clearly conveying an argument, its force, and its relation to some part of the philosophical literature. The qualifier “basic,” however, does not imply the qualifiers “simple” or “easy.” Putting together a basic philosophy paper can be hard. It takes time to get it right and it takes practice to make it natural. And while it can be beneficial to reach for this functional ideal – depending on your goals and context – it is important to remember that no paper is ever a perfect instance of it. So don’t worry too much about your growing pains. Try to improve little by little. Be kind to yourself.

- I have formulated my main claim as a clear, assertive, and self-contained sentence.
- My introduction tries to funnel the reader’s prior interest in some general topic, through the identification of a smaller issue within that topic, into a newfound interest in my main claim.
- My introduction tells the reader how I plan to support my main claim in each section of the paper.
- I have tried to entice the reader by revealing the smaller issue as surprising, puzzling, and worth addressing, by being bold in my statement of my main claim, and by previewing some of the substance of what I have to say in each step.
- Each section in my paper has a specific point, a point that I state clearly at the outset of the section.
- The points I make in each section, and state clearly to the reader, fit together to constitute some kind of support for my main claim.
- I have tried to tether my paper to an ongoing philosophical conversation (by citing and engaging with a representative portion of the relevant literature) in some structurally organized way (e.g., with an “exegesis” section, or a “stage-setting” section, etc.).
- I have identified the point that each paragraph is trying to make and have spent some time doing paragraph-level editorial work with that point in mind.
- Each paragraph plays a clear role in establishing the specific point of each section, in some sensible order.
- My conclusion restates my main claim, reviews the overall argument for my main claim, and returns the reader to the vantage point of the introduction by reconnecting it to the smaller issue and general topic I began with.