

Philosophy

What this handout is about

This handout discusses common types of philosophy assignments and strategies and resources that will help you write your philosophy papers.

What is philosophy, and why do we study it?

Philosophy is the practice of making and assessing arguments. An argument is a set of statements (called premises) that work together to support another statement (the conclusion).

Making and assessing arguments can help us get closer to understanding the truth. At the very least, the process helps make us aware of our reasons for believing what we believe, and it enables us to use reason when we discuss our beliefs with other people. Your philosophy teacher wants to help you learn to make strong arguments and to assess the arguments other people make.

Elements of philosophy papers

A philosophy paper may require several kinds of tasks, including:

- Argument reconstruction
- Objections and replies
- Application
- Original argument
- Thought experiments

Let's examine these elements one at a time.

Argument Reconstruction

To reconstruct an argument, you'll need to present it in a way that someone unfamiliar with the material will understand. Often, this requires you to say a lot more than the philosopher whose work you are writing about did!

There are two main ways to reconstruct an argument: in regular prose or as a formal series of numbered steps. Unless your professor or TA has told you otherwise, you should probably use regular prose. In either case, keep these points in mind:

- Keep your ideas separate from the author's. Your purpose is to make the author's argument clear, not to tell what you think of it.
- Be charitable. Give the best version of the argument you can, even if you don't agree with the conclusion.
- Define important terms.
- Organize your ideas so that the reader can proceed logically from premises to conclusion, step by step.
- Explain each premise.

Let's walk through an argument reconstruction. Here is a passage by 18th-century British philosopher David Hume:

Take any action allowed to be vicious: Willful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In whichever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact, but it is the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object. So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. (David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*).

Step 1: Reread the passage a few times, stopping to look up any unfamiliar words—"disapprobation," maybe. Be sure you understand the important terms, like "vicious." (By "vicious," Hume seems to mean "wicked, depraved, or immoral," which probably isn't the way you use the word in everyday speech.)

Step 2: Identify the conclusion. Sometimes your teacher will identify it for you, but even if she didn't, you can find it. (Caution: It won't always be the first or the last sentence in the passage; it may not even be explicitly stated.) In this case, Hume's conclusion is something like this: The viciousness of an action is a feeling of disapprobation in the person who considers it, not a property of the action itself.

Step 3: Identify the premises. Consider the conclusion and ask yourself what the author needs to do to prove it. Hume's conclusion here seems to have two parts:

- When we call an action vicious, we mean that our "nature" causes us to feel blame when we contemplate that action.
- There is nothing else that we could mean when we call an action "vicious."

Step 4: Identify the evidence. Hume considers an example, murder, and points out that when we consider why we say that murder is vicious, two things happen:

- We realize that when we contemplate murder, we feel "a sentiment of disapprobation" in ourselves.

- No matter how hard we look, we don't see any other "matter of fact" that could be called "vice"—all we see "in the object" (the murder) are "certain passions, motives, volitions, and thoughts."

Step 5: Identify unspoken assumptions. Hume assumes that murder is a representative case of "viciousness." He also assumes that if there were "viciousness" in the "object" (the murder), we would be able to "see" it—it isn't somehow hidden from us. Depending on how important you think these assumptions are, you may want to make them explicit in your reconstruction.

Step 6: Sketch out a formal reconstruction of the argument as a series of steps.

1. If we examine a vicious action like murder, we see passions, motives, volitions, and thoughts.
2. We don't see anything else.
3. So we don't see any property or "matter of fact" called "viciousness."
4. Assumption: What we don't see is not there.
5. When we examine our feelings about murder, we see a "sentiment of disapprobation."
6. Unstated premise: This feeling of disapprobation is the only thing all the acts we think are vicious have in common, and we feel it whenever we confront a vicious act—that is, all and only vicious acts produce the feeling of disapprobation.
7. Conclusion: So the viciousness of a bad action is a feeling of disapprobation in the person who considers it, not a factual property of the action itself.

Step 7: Summarize the argument, explaining the premises and how they work together. Here's how such a prose reconstruction might go:

To understand what we mean when we call an action "vicious," by which he means "wrong," Hume examines the case of murder. He finds that whenever we consider a murder itself, all we see are the "passions, motives, volitions, and thoughts" of the people involved. For example, we might see that the murderer feels the passion of anger and is motivated by a desire to make his victim suffer, and that the victim feels the passion of fear and is thinking about how to escape. But no matter how hard we look, we don't see "viciousness" or wrongness—we see an action taking place, and people with motives and feelings are involved in that action, but none of these things seem to be what we mean by "viciousness" or wrongness. Hume next turns his inquiry inward, and considers what is happening inside a person who calls a murder "vicious." The person who thinks or says that murder is wrong always seems to be feeling a certain "sentiment of disapprobation." That is, the person disapproves of the action and blames the murderer. When we say "murder is wrong," we usually think that we are saying something about murder itself, that we are describing a property (wrongness) that the action of murder has. But Hume thinks what we are in fact describing is a feeling in us, not a property of murder—the "viciousness" of a vicious action is just an emotion in the person who is thinking about or observing that action, rather than a property of the action itself.

Objections and replies

Often, after you reconstruct an argument, you'll be asked to tell whether it is a good or a bad argument and whether you agree or disagree with it.

Thinking of objections and examining their consequences is a way that philosophers check to see if an argument is a good one. When you consider an objection, you test the argument to see if it can overcome the objection. To object to an argument, you must give reasons why it is flawed.

- The premises don't support the conclusion.
- One or more of the premises is false.
- The argument articulates a principle that makes sense in this case but would have undesirable consequences in other cases.
- The argument slides from one meaning of a term to another.
- The argument makes a comparison that doesn't really hold.

Here are some questions you can ask to make sure your objections are strong:

- Have I made clear what part of the argument I object to?
- Have I explained why I object to that part of the argument?
- Have I assessed the severity of my objection? (Do I simply point out where the philosopher needs to do more work, or is it something more devastating, something that the philosopher cannot answer?)
- Have I thought about and discussed how the philosopher might respond to my objection?
- Have I focused on the argument itself, rather than just talking about the general issues the conclusion raises?
- Have I discussed at least one objection thoroughly rather than many objections superficially?

Let's look at our example again. What objections might you make to Hume's argument about murder?

- You might object to premises 2 and 3, and argue that wrong actions do have a property that makes us call them wrong. For example, maybe we call actions wrong because of their motives—because the actions are motivated by cruelty, for example. So perhaps Hume is right that we don't see a property called "viciousness," but wrong that "viciousness" is thus only a feeling in us. Maybe the viciousness is one of the motives or passions.
- You might also object to premise 5, and say that we sometimes judge actions to be wrong even though we don't feel any "sentiment" of disapproval for them. For example, if vigilantes killed a serial murderer, we might say that what they did was wrong, even if we shared their anger at the murderer and were pleased that they had killed him.

Often you'll be asked to consider how a philosopher might reply to objections. After all, not every objection is a good objection; the author might be able to come up with a very convincing reply! Use what you know about the author's general position to construct a reply that is consistent with other things the author has said, as well as with the author's original argument.

So how might Hume, or someone defending Hume, reply to the objections above?

- To the first, Hume might reply that there is no one motive that all “vicious” actions have in common. Are all wrong actions motivated by cruelty? No—theft, for example, might be motivated by hunger. So the only thing all “vicious” actions have in common is that we disapprove of them.
- To the second, Hume might reply that when we call the actions of vigilantes wrong, even though we are pleased by them, we must still be feeling at least some disapproval.

Application

Sometimes you will be asked to summarize an author’s argument and apply that position to a new case. Considering how the author would think about a different case helps you understand the author’s reasoning and see how the argument is relevant. Imagine that your instructor has given you this prompt:

“Apply Hume’s views on the nature of vice to the following case: Mr. Smith has an advanced form of cancer. He asks Dr. Jones what she thinks his prognosis is. Dr. Jones is certain Mr. Smith will die within the month, but she tells him he may survive for a year or longer, that his cancer may not be fatal. Dr. Jones wants to give Mr. Smith hope and spare him the painful truth. How should we think about whether what Dr. Jones did is wrong?”

Consider what you know about Hume’s views. Hume has not given a list of actions that are right or wrong, nor has he said how we should judge whether an action is right or wrong. All he has told us is that if an action is wrong, the wrongness is a sentiment in the people considering the action rather than a property of the action itself. So Hume would probably say that what matters is how we feel about Dr. Jones’s action—do we feel disapproval? If we feel disapproval, then we are likely to call the action “wrong.”

This test case probably raises all kinds of questions for you about Hume’s views. You might be thinking, “Who cares whether we call the action wrong—I want to know whether it actually is wrong!” Or you might say to yourself, “Some people will feel disapproval of the doctor’s action, but others will approve, so how should we decide whether the action is wrong or not?” These are exactly the kinds of questions your instructor wants to get you thinking about.

When you go back to read and discuss Hume, you will begin to see how he might answer such questions, and you will have a deeper understanding of his position. In your paper, though, you should probably focus on one or two main points and reserve the rest of your speculation for your conclusion.

Original argument/taking a position

Sometimes an assignment will ask you to stake out a position (i.e., to take sides in a philosophical debate) or to make an original argument. These assignments are basically persuasive essays, a kind of writing you are probably familiar with. If you need help, see our handouts on argument and thesis statements, among others.

Remember: Think about your audience, and use arguments that are likely to convince people who aren't like you. For example, you might think the death penalty is wrong because your parents taught you so. But other people have no special reason to care what your parents think. Try to give reasons that will be interesting and compelling to most people.

Thought experiments

If scientists want to test a theory or principle, they design an experiment.

In philosophy, we often test our ideas by conducting thought experiments. We construct imaginary cases that allow us to focus on the issue or principle we are most interested in. Often the cases aren't especially realistic, just as the conditions in a scientific laboratory are different from those in the outside world.

When you are asked to write about a thought experiment, don't worry about whether it is something that is ever likely to happen; instead, focus on the principle being tested. Suppose that your bioethics teacher has given you this thought experiment to consider:

An elderly, unconscious patient needs a heart transplant. It is very unlikely that a donor heart will become available before the patient dies. The doctor's other option is to try a new and risky procedure that involves transplanting the heart of a genetically engineered chimpanzee into the patient. This will require killing the chimp. What should the doctor recommend?

This scenario may be unrealistic, but your instructor has created it to get you to think about what considerations matter morally (not just medically) when making a life-or-death decision. Who should make such decisions—doctors, families, or patients? Is it acceptable to kill another intelligent primate in order to provide a heart for a human? Does it matter that the patient is elderly? Unconscious? So instead of focusing on whether or not the scenario is likely to happen, you should make an argument about these issues. Again, see our handouts on argument and thesis statements for help in crafting your position.

Other things to keep in mind

Be consistent. For example, if I begin my paper by arguing that Marquis is right about abortion, I shouldn't say later that Thomson's argument (which contradicts Marquis's) is also correct.

Avoid overstatement. Watch out for words like "all," "every," "always," "no," "none," and "never"; supporting a claim that uses these words could be difficult. For example, it would be much harder to prove that lying is always wrong than to prove that lying is usually or sometimes wrong.

Avoid the pitfalls of "seeing both sides." Suppose you think Kant's argument is pretty strong, but you still disagree with his conclusion. You might be tempted to say "Kant's argument is a good one. I disagree with it." This appears contradictory. If an argument really is good and you can't find any weaknesses in it, it seems rational to think that you should agree

with the argument. If you disagree with it, there must be something wrong with it, and your job is to figure out what that is and point it out.

Avoid personal attacks and excessive praise. Neither “Mill was obviously a bad person who didn’t care about morality at all” nor “Kant is the greatest philosopher of all time” adds to our understanding of Mill’s or Kant’s arguments.

Avoid grandiose introductions and conclusions. Your instructor is not likely to appreciate introductions that start with sentences like “Since the dawn of time, human beings have wondered about morality.” Your introduction can place your issue in context, explain why it’s philosophically important, and perhaps preview the structure of your paper or argument. Ask your instructor for further guidance about introductions and conclusions.

Stay focused. You may be asked to concentrate closely on a small piece of text or a very particular question; if so, stick to it, rather than writing a general report on a “topic.”

Be careful about appealing to faith, authority, or tradition. While you may believe something because it is a part of your religion, because someone you trust told you about it, or because it is the way things have always been done, be careful about basing your arguments or objections on these sorts of foundations. Remember that your reader may not share your assumptions and beliefs, and try to construct your argument so that it will be persuasive even to someone who is quite different from you.

Be careful about definitions. Rather than breaking out Webster’s Dictionary, concentrate on the definitions the philosophers you are reading have carefully constructed for the terms they are using. Defining terms is an important part of all philosophical work, and part of your job in writing a philosophy paper will often be thinking about how different people have defined a term.

Consider reading the Writing Center’s handout on fallacies. Fallacies are common errors in arguments; knowing about them may help you critique philosophers’ arguments and make stronger arguments yourself.

Works consulted

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout’s topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the UNC Libraries citation tutorial.

Feinberg, Joel. *Doing Philosophy : A Guide to the Writing of Philosophy Papers*. 3rd ed. Belmont, Calif.: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2005.

Holowchak, Mark. *Critical Reasoning & Philosophy : A Concise Guide to Reading, Evaluating, and Writing Philosophical Works*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004.



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