

Advice on Writing

Most have been taught to write papers by high school English teachers. This is fine to some extent, yet *there are THREE ways you need to move beyond high school writing.*

FIRST, high school English teachers overemphasize the so-called RULES of composition, i.e., rules about how to *structure* your paper. Focusing on compositional RULES in high school teaches people how to write well-organized, coherent papers. This is certainly a good thing. But there are significant disadvantages if you continue to focus just on the compositional RULES in your writing beyond high school.

For one, what high school English teachers call RULES are really rules of thumb: They say what is *often* good for composition, but not what is *always* good for it. Sometimes your paper can be greatly improved by violating certain rules on certain occasions. What should primarily guide your compositional choices is not the RULES *per se*, but the rhetorical advantages and disadvantages of those choices in the context of your paper.

More importantly, the emphasis on RULES creates the impression that a good paper is primarily a matter of *compositional structure* and *rhetoric*. This is ridiculous. Although composition and rhetoric are important, they are clearly secondary to the **CONTENT** of your paper!!! In philosophy, a good paper depends essentially on how powerful the arguments are. Accordingly, the primary concern should be *what you're arguing and how you're arguing it*... rather than whether your paper conforms to various structural constraints. Besides, if you're more focused on content, as opposed to fretting over split-infinitives and the rest, you'll have much more fun. I guarantee.

Your paper should of course be coherent, the arguments clear, and it should always be apparent where you're heading in your discussion. But certain RULES which are strictly enforced in high school can be somewhat relaxed. In particular:

- You can use the first-person pronoun 'I', as long as you don't come off as an egomaniac. The second-person pronoun is also ok in moderation; however, second-person can sound too informal if used frequently.
- You shouldn't feel obligated to use a different word each time you express the same idea. For example, there is no need to revise "If infanticide is morally wrong, then abortion is also morally wrong" to: "If infanticide is morally wrong, then abortion is disgusting." Just because the former employs the term 'morally wrong' twice doesn't make it a bad sentence. In fact, often it is *counterproductive* to switch terms in referring to the same thing. First of all, if you do switch, it is no longer clear you *are* referring to the same thing. Some expressions that look synonymous end up not being so (e.g., some things are disgusting without being morally wrong, such as a compost heap). Secondly, you may have spent much of the paper explaining what you meant by "morally wrong;" so you've rendered useless all that work if you start using different terms in its place.
- You don't always need a standard introductory paragraph; sometimes, they look superfluous. "Since the dawn of man, philosophers have pondered blah, blah, blah..." Instead, just jump right into the issue. (It may feel strange not to "set

- things up” a bit, but trust me, an academic audience won’t miss it.) Also in some cases, there’s no need to summarize your whole paper at the beginning. “In this paper, I will do X, then I will do Y, and finally I will do Z...” However, an initial summary can be a good idea, e.g., if the paper is lengthy or has a more complex structure.
- It is not always best to put your thesis statement in the first paragraph. Sometimes a thesis statement is easily misconstrued or seems obviously false, outside the context of your arguments. To be sure, you should start by defining *the issue* which you’ll be making a thesis statement *about*. You might also give *some* indication of what your view is. But many times, it’s good to state your conclusions at the *end* of an argument rather than right up front.

Remember, *what you say* is much more important than the rhetorical devices you use to say it. Despite what you may have been led to believe, good writing is more thinking than writing. (You may quote me on that!) This brings me to the next two points...

SECOND, high school often does not clearly distinguish book reports from true *academic research*. (Sometimes, these are not really distinguished from *creative* writing either, which is something else altogether!) Academic research is not concerned just to recap what someone else said. Instead, the aim is to give a NEW perspective on an issue, YOUR OWN perspective. After all, what’s the point if you don’t say something new???

This means writing will demand some thought and ingenuity on your part. You’ll need to look at a problem, and *think through the issues yourself*. Correlatively, the paper will largely feature *your own thought process*, rather than someone else’s.

True, your paper might start by recapping a debate—so there may be a bit of “book reporting.” But this is just to provide the background to your arguments. So even there, the overall aim concerns *your* thoughts and *your* arguments. *It’s all about you!*

Students are often baffled about how to fill up pages with their own thinking. If that sounds like you, make sure you are presenting your own ideas *as carefully and in as much detail as you would present the ideas of others*. (Sometimes folks are very detailed about other people’s thoughts, but extremely brief and sketchy about their own.) If you are absolutely vigilant in being clear, I’m certain you will fill up many more pages.

But the main reason why students struggle to fill pages concerns something deeper. This is important enough that I’m going to devote a separate section to it...

THIRD, in high school, the standards on argumentation are **exceedingly low**. Often, high school teachers are happy as long as you say *something* to “back up” your opinion. That is so, even if your argument is completely unconvincing.

But in college and beyond, the goal is to argue for a view **as convincingly as humanly possible!!!** It isn't enough just to back up what you say. Really, we all are interested in which opinions have THE *BEST* REASONS behind them, not just any ol' reasons.

Effective argumentation sometimes takes quite a bit of effort, but don't be discouraged. In making your arguments, a good strategy is to pretend you're arguing with someone intelligent who disagrees with you, yet is open to changing her mind. Try to argue in a way that makes it the *most likely* that she will change her mind.

This requires responding to OBJECTIONS to what you say: While you're writing, try to imagine how someone intelligent might poke a hole in your thinking. Then, after pointing out the hole, try to fill it in. The result is a more watertight case. And if you pursue objections-and-replies *in earnest*, this also fills pages much more quickly.

ADDENDA

Addendum 1. In philosophy, it is important that you present your thinking *as clearly as possible*. This means being clear on four levels:

1. The word level (favor clear, familiar words, and clearly define unfamiliar words)
2. The sentence level (it should be clear what each sentence is saying),
3. The paragraph level (it should be clear how the various sentences in a paragraph are working together, and what the point of the paragraph is),
4. The paper as a whole (it should be clear how the paragraphs work together to create a coherent line of reasoning, and what the main point of the paper is).

I know a lot of philosophers seem unclear in their writing, but that shouldn't give you license to be unclear! Although clear writing is neither necessary nor sufficient for a good philosophy paper, it certainly helps a lot.

Here is a useful guideline: Write the paper in the style of a professional encyclopedia article. Typically, such articles are very clear to the lay person, very pithy, yet manage to explain things in a fair amount of detail. *Every bit of the article maximizes efficiency*; there are no unnecessary tangents, nor any overly complex wording.

Addendum no. 2. Every semester, some of the better students do worse on the papers than more mediocre students. How does this happen? Good students, I think, are more inclined to be *creative* in their philosophical thinking. Often in high school, creative thinking is encouraged without restraint. But it seems to me that creativity is worthless if it results only in creatively generating rubbish. In philosophy, what's most important is that your statements are *compelling* rather than highly creative. Of course, an argument that is both compelling *and* highly original is best. But generally speaking, your primary concern should be to represent philosophical issues accurately, and to reason well about those issues. Creativity, although generally desirable, is subsidiary to these goals.