HUNTER COLLEGE WRITING CENTER

WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Writing about Philosophy

A philosophy paper is an opportunity to engage in a dialogue on the grand questions of life: our morality, our understanding of human existence, our decisive actions in the world, and our ceaseless striving to imagine and create ideas out of the raw materials of the everyday. Subjects such as love, friendship, war, language, government, art, and education have been the platforms for some of the many philosophical discussions, all of which involve arguments, ideas, and problems, from ancient times to the here and now.

It is a worthy effort to struggle with a philosophical concern as you may learn and also communicate to others why the issue is important, why thinkers have found it difficult, and what the relative values are of the various perspectives on the subject. In seeking to reach and present an understanding of a particular philosopher or a particular issue, a philosophy paper may call for analysis of a classic text, the historic study of the origins or influences of a philosopher's ideas, the detailed analysis of an argument, the comparison of two or more philosophers on a particular issue, or the comprehensive study of an important philosophical idea.

Defining Philosophical Terms

Many terms, theories, and ideas in philosophy are complex and discipline specific, which means that you, as the writer, have a responsibility to provide clear and accurate explanations when you use them. Certainly readers who are unfamiliar with this type of language will be left confused if you do not take this responsibility seriously, but you cannot take for granted that *any* reader will comprehend what you mean when you refer vaguely to a philosopher's idea or include philosophical terms without providing a clear context for them. Terms and related theories may mean different things to different people, and thus they must be explained in the context of your paper.

Therefore, it will be necessary to define key terms, but in so doing it is best to avoid typing in a dictionary definition since in many cases these terms derive their meaning from the specific context of your paper and your discipline. The more strategic method of defining terms is to make the clarification of them an integral part of your discussion, so that the act of defining actually becomes a part of your essay's development. For example, if you are critically engaging with a philosopher's idea, and there is a term being used to express a key component of his or her argument, you can, for one example, illuminate the meaning (in the following case, the word is "draining") in such a way:

> In this passage, Neil Postman relies on the term "draining" to signify the wasting away of society's religious and cultural symbols.

The following handout is a guideline. Always check with your instructor on the requirements of all assignments.

For information and online access to Writing Center handouts on Writing a Research Paper, Writing a Summary, Developing a Thesis Statement, or Documentation Styles, simply click on any of these headings or go to the Writing Center Handouts section of the Hunter Reading Writing Center website at http://rwc.hunter.cuny.edu. Of course, you are always welcome to visit the Writing Center at Thomas Hunter 416, to pick up handouts and to meet with a tutor.

The Thesis Statement

Most academic essays seek to persuade readers to understand a specific issue in a specific way—the writer's way. The writer's thesis statement offers this substantial assertion, usually in one to two sentences in the introduction or sometimes in the second paragraph, thereby providing an essay with its focus (see the Writing Center handout on Developing a Thesis Statement).

In writing about philosophy, you might want to offer a well thought-out central idea rather than an overtly argumentative thesis statement. For example, if you have decided to write about Aristotle's discussion of knowledge about the soul, your main concern might be to state what the philosopher explains and describes as the major problem in this discussion. Thus, your main idea would not be as argumentative as, let's say, taking a position on capital punishment. In the case of such overtly controversial topics, your thesis statement will arouse a strong reaction, the kind that evokes an agreement or disagreement in your reader, and your main concern would be to persuade the reader to agree with your position.

The difference between a central idea and a thesis statement is in their degree of contention. In the Aristotle paper, your idea could certainly be debatable, but disagreement would mainly arise if you do not adequately explain and illustrate your idea through thoughtful criticism, analysis, research, and description, for example, and not necessarily because of the idea itself.

The Problem

Often in writing about Philosophy, you will be addressing a problem in regard to a philosophical theory. In the study of Plato, for example, the variety of problems is great. Beyond the big issues of the overall interpretation of a dialogue or of the Platonic corpus, scholars discuss all of the following and more: the meaning of a word, clause, or sentence; the analysis or assessment of an argument; the overall cogency of a theory; the meaning of a mythical or historical allusion; the function of a character, place, or time; and the meaning and functions of the myths and tales Socrates so often tells. These are considered to be "objective" problems, recognized collectively by the scholarly community. However a philosophical idea, passage, term, or argument that presents a difficulty specifically for you (perhaps you find it ambiguous) would be categorized as "subjective," and it might be a good place for you to begin your research.

The Research Paper

One of the reasons for reading as widely as possible in the scholarly literature is to discover what problems are currently being debated in the literature. Ideally, this will enable you to find an intersection between your own interests and the scholarly debates. A research paper can make a contribution to the debate by confirming or refuting a previously proposed solution or by offering a more adequate alternative solution. Another way to make a contribution is to show that something not currently being discussed actually is a problem and then to offer a solution to that. In any event, it is crucial both to your research and to writing the paper to be clear about the problem(s).

It is also important to be aware of the relations of different problems to each other in the study of a given philosophical text. For example, the meaning of a sentence may be problematic; solving the problem of that sentence may contribute to solving the problem of analyzing an argument; and analyzing the argument might help solve the problem of the overall meaning of the text. This suggests why and how topics of research papers change and how to "narrow the topic." Usually, a general problem depends on the solution to a more specific problem. Remember, it is better to delve deep into a few issues rather than address many issues superficially.

Three suggestions for formulating a research problem:

- First, state simply, clearly, and concisely what the problem is (i.e., the meaning of this or that sentence, the function of this or that reference or allusion, the analysis or assessment of this argument or that theory);

- Next, state clearly and concisely why it is a problem (i.e., there are reasons to think it means different things);

- Then, state clearly and concisely the consequences of the problem in relation to the overall meaning or coherence of the dialogue.

Using Sources in your Writing

If you are asked to

- *write* a research paper—which means you will be expected to work with scholarly articles, books, interviews, films, music, case studies, etc.;
- *refer* to periodicals or essays that have been given to you in class;
- *analyze* the philosophical texts themselves—for example, Fredrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*;

you are using sources. In the examples above, both primary and secondary sources have been named.

Primary sources

refer to the original materials (not what another author says about them), so for a philosophy essay, for example, you could be asked to interpret the philosopher's text itself without referring to another philosopher's ideas of it. Interpreting a primary source

on your own can be challenging. Try to make time to begin the writing process with a topic-oriented freewriting exercise (sit down and allow yourself to react to ideas and subject matter with the freedom to write down anything that comes to mind) and brainstorming session (see the Writing Center handout on Invention Techniques). Then you can judge your ideas and choose the best, most relevant ones to develop.

Secondary sources

refer to texts, used in your research, which provide information, ideas, opinions, and advanced knowledge about your subject. A philosopher's text itself is usually more powerful than what someone else says about the text (a secondary source); however, secondary sources are important in that they demonstrate your ability to use and incorporate the thoughts of others in your own writing. (In most cases, use of both primary and secondary sources is preferred in support of the points you are making.) In many cases, you will be using books, periodicals, etc., that offer you, as the writer, the opportunity to explore your subject and learn more about it, and then offer that understanding to an audience. Secondary sources are also used to support, confirm, or challenge your own ideas. The use of secondary sources demonstrates your ability to interpret and incorporate the knowledge and opinions of others into your own writing.

Suggestion about using primary and secondary sources

Whether you are using primary or secondary sources, remember to explain and analyze the passages that you have chosen from texts, and what those passages mean in relation to your argument. You must also prepare your reader before using the words of an author (directly taken or paraphrased) by providing at least a brief background of the topic.

Documentation Style

All of your sources, including borrowed ideas, paraphrases and quotations, must be documented in your paper. In writing about philosophy, you may be able to use the documentation style of the *MLA (Modern Language Association) Handbook* or *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Since each discipline has its own style preference, always check with your instructor on which of these formats is acceptable. (For additional information, see the Writing Center handouts on MLA Documentation Styles and Quotation, Paraphrase, and Plagiarism.)

For research information about philosophy, you can check these online sources:
-The American Philosophical Association online at http://www.udel.edu/apa
-Guide to Philosophy on the Internet at http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/philinks.htm

Some information for this handout was adapted from handouts by Prof. Gerald Press.