

## **Instructions for Writing Papers**

**Elliott Sober**

1. Your papers must be typed.
2. They must be double-spaced.
3. Leave ample margins for comments.
4. Please paginate.
5. Always save a copy of your paper in addition to the one you hand in.
6. Your papers must be grammatically sound
7. Papers should be proofread carefully.

### **Content**

8. Avoid personal attacks on the authors you are criticizing. Don't accuse them of being stupid or of having bad motives. Stick to criticizing what they say – the arguments they give.
9. Don't start your essay with a statement that says very little. Two examples: "Human beings through the ages have pondered the truth of miracles" and "philosophers down through the ages have had different opinions about the merits and demerits of Hume's essay on miracles." Your job in this essay is to state YOUR views and to defend them cogently. Get down to business, stating your thesis at the start of the essay.
10. If your essay is about someone's argument, state the argument by giving numbered premises and stating the argument's conclusion. The two main criticisms that can be made of an argument are (i) the premises are untrue; (ii) even if the premises were true, that wouldn't provide a good reason for believing the conclusion. After describing the author's argument, see if either or both of these criticisms apply. If you think the argument has one or both of these defects, you also should consider whether the argument can be repaired. Can a false premise easily be replaced by a true one? Can plausible additional premises be supplied so that the augmented set of premises provides a good reason for accepting the conclusion?

### **Grammar and Style**

10. Avoid jargon. If you are using technical terms, rigorously define them.
11. Whenever you use pronouns, be sure to clearly specify their referents. The default assumption is that a pronoun refers to the immediately preceding noun.
12. If a gerund (like "reading," "running," "arguing") starts a sentence, the word after the comma that ends the gerund phrase must name the object doing the action. For example, "Looking closer at Hume's essay, the philosophy turned out to be full of holes" is wrong (unless you mean that the philosophy was looking closer...). What would be grammatically correct is: "Looking closer at Hume's essay, I discovered that his philosophy is full of holes."
13. Be clear about whose voice you are writing in. Make sure that your point of view and that of the author you are writing about are clearly distinguished.
14. Do not use rhetorical questions. What's the point?

15. Use non-sexist language. Do not write as if all human beings were men; so, for instance, do not refer to “man” or “men” or “mankind” when referring to all human beings. Consider using “human beings” or “people.” Avoid the ugly “s/he” or “him/her”. One easy way to do this is to shift from singular to plural; for example, instead of saying “The empiricist thinks that experience is the only source of knowledge; he argues that ...,” say “empiricists think that experience is the only source of knowledge; they argue that...”
16. Don't conflate singular and plural pronouns (as in, “if one wants a good grade on an essay, they ought to abide by this instruction sheet”).
17. Create a new paragraph when introducing a new idea.
18. Keep paragraphs brief and to the point. No paragraph should take up a full page.
19. Most paragraphs should have a topic sentence that clearly introduces the content of the paragraph.
20. Use quotations sparingly; always cite page numbers when doing so. When you say that some person says thus-and-so in some essay that you are discussing, give a page reference.
21. Make sure your verbs go with the nouns to which they are attached. For example, it is people who make inferences, not theories. A theory can imply or entail or predict that the sun will rise tomorrow. But a theory can't infer that the sun will rise tomorrow. This is something that a theorist can do.
22. Make every word count. See if words (or sentences or paragraphs ...) can be cut without altering what you want to convey. Often intensifiers like “quite” and “very” actually weaken the force of a sentence. Don't say “Hume's argument is very/quite unclear.” Say “Hume's argument is unclear.”
23. In criticizing someone's thesis or argument, state your criticism in terms of what is wrong with that thesis or argument. Don't describe yourself. The fact that you found an argument hard to understand isn't a criticism of the argument you are discussing, but the claim that the argument was unclear, if true, would count as a criticism.

### **Some comments on terminology in philosophical essays**

24. If you say that “X is relative,” say what it is relative to. Since “relative to” is so often misused, it would be better to say that “X depends on Y,” thus forcing you to say what Y is.
25. Be careful how you use the terms “vague” and “ambiguous.” These have definite meanings. “Rich” and “bald” and “smart” are all vague terms, because each has an underlying quantity (number of dollars, hairs, intelligence) and it isn't clear where the cut-off is. How many hairs can a person have and still be bald? Notice that this fact about “rich” and the other terms mentioned doesn't mean that we should avoid using these terms. Don't say “vague” when you mean unclear. Likewise, to say that a term is ambiguous means that it has two or more meanings. The word “bank” is ambiguous – it can refer to a financial institution or to a river side. Don't say “ambiguous” when you mean unclear.
26. In general, dictionary definitions are not very useful in doing philosophy. When philosophers discuss what justice is, or what knowledge is, or what evidence is, these questions can't be resolved by opening a dictionary. Otherwise philosophical questions would be easy and philosophy would have been over as a

subject long ago.