

# A Guide to Writing

by Michael Huemer

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This is not a comprehensive style guide; rather, it focuses on the most common problems I have found in student writing. Sections A and B give general tips on how to write a paper (esp. a philosophy paper). Sections C-F list common errors.

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## A. The Content of a Philosophy Paper

1. *Thesis*: A philosophy paper should have an easily identifiable *point*, something that you're asserting. It should *not* just (a) ramble on for a while without direction, (b) recount things that someone else said, or (c) ask a series of unanswered questions.
2. *Arguments*: It should present specific *reasons* for believing that thesis, not mere opinions. Ideally, a good argument should be:
  - a. *Non-trivial*: something that is not immediately obvious to most readers.
  - b. *Original*, not just a repetition of something you read or heard in class.
  - c. *Plausible*: the premises, for example, should be things that would initially seem true to most people.
  - d. *Non-question-begging (non-circular)*: the reasons given for your thesis should each be statements that are significantly different from the thesis itself, and that someone might accept before having made up their mind about your thesis.
3. *Objections*: Try to think of reasons someone might give for doubting your thesis, and indicate why those reasons are ultimately not persuasive.

## B. Clarity & Style

4. *Key Point*: **The purpose of (non-fiction) writing is to communicate.** It is not to make art or to impress the reader with your sophistication. Therefore . . .
5. *Be forthcoming*: State your thesis explicitly, right at the beginning. Here's a good opening sentence: "In this paper, I argue that incest is praiseworthy."<sup>41</sup> At the beginning of each *section* of the paper, state the conclusion of that section. At the beginning of each *paragraph* should be a sentence reflecting what that paragraph is about or what it asserts (also called a "topic sentence").
6. *Be organized*: A paper should usually be divided into sections (unless the paper is very short and simple)—much as this document is. Each section should have a name that clearly indicates what is in it. For example, you might have:

- 1: Common views of incest
- 2: Failed arguments for the common view
  - 2.1: The argument from birth defects
  - 2.2: The argument from emotional harm
- 3: The virtues of incest
- 4: Objections and replies

7. *Stick to the point*: Do not insert remarks that are not necessary to forwarding your central thesis.
8. *Be brief*: If you have an unusually long sentence, break it into shorter sentences. After writing a paper, go over it *line by line* looking for words, sentences, or paragraphs that could be deleted without weakening your point.
- Bad**: The question as to whether fish can experience pain is an important one. [13 words]
  - Ok**: Whether fish experience pain is important. [6 words]
  - Bad**: It has not often been the case that any mistake has been made. [13 words]
  - Ok**: Few mistakes were made. [4 words]<sup>(2)</sup>
9. *Be specific*: Do not use a vague word or phrase when a more specific one is available. The first sentence below is bad because “related” is one of the vaguest words there is; also, it doesn’t say what sort of obligations are being discussed.
- Bad**: Rights are related to obligations.
  - Bad**: Rights imply obligations.
  - Ok**: If someone has the right to do A, then others have the obligation not to stop him from doing A.
10. *Use plain language*: Do not use “sophisticated” or bombastic words in place of simpler, accurate words. Doing so makes your paper harder to read, and often makes you look stupid when you misuse the word.
- Bad**: I am disinclined to acquiesce to your request.
  - Ok**: No.
  - Bad**: I utilized a fork to ingest my comestibles.
  - Ok**: I used a fork to eat.
11. *Give examples*: When discussing an unfamiliar concept or claim, give examples that illustrate it. Give examples for every major thesis you defend or attack. For example, see the examples used in this document.

### C. Misused Words

12. *as such*: Do not use “as such” in place of “therefore.” (“As such” may be used only when the subject of the sentence following is the same as that of the sentence preceding.)
- Bad**: Clocks usually tell the time of day. As such, an appeal to a clock may be used to support a belief about the time of day.
  - Ok**: Clocks usually tell the time of day. Therefore, an appeal to a clock may be used to support a belief about the time of day.
  - Ok**: W is commander-in-chief of the armed forces. As such, he can order bombings of other countries. [The last sentence means: *As commander-in-chief*, he can order bombings, etc.]
13. *being that*: Never use this phrase.
- Bad**: Being that I just had a tofu sandwich, I am no longer hungry.
  - Ok**: Since I just had a tofu sandwich, I am no longer hungry.

14. *it's*: “It’s” means “it is,” not “belonging to it.”  
**Bad:** My car lost one of it’s wheels on the freeway.  
**Ok:** My car lost one of its wheels on the freeway.
15. *their/they’re/there*: The first means “belonging to them.” The second means “they are.” The third refers to a place.  
**Bad:** Their sure that there cat is still they’re.  
**Ok:** They’re sure that their cat is still there.
16. *reference*: “To reference” means “to cite a source.” It does not mean “to talk about.”  
**Bad:** He should make the argument for sense-data without referencing physical objects.  
**Ok:** He should make the argument for sense data without mentioning physical objects.  
**Ok:** He referenced his colleague’s work.
17. *such/as such*: Do not use “such” to mean “this” or “as such” to mean “in that way.”  
**Bad:** I believe the last step in the argument—that because *x* will most likely appear as such in the future means that *x* is as such—is a mistake.  
**Ok:** I believe the last step in the argument—that because *x* will most likely appear a certain way in the future, it is that way—is a mistake.
18. *phenomena* is the plural of *phenomenon*.  
**Ok:** We discovered an interesting phenomenon.  
**Ok:** We discovered many interesting phenomena.
19. *data* is the plural of *datum*.  
**Bad:** Russell thinks that when you look at a table, all you see is a sense data.  
**Ok:** Russell thinks that when you look at a table, all you see is a sense datum.  
**Ok:** Russell thinks that when you look at a table, sense data are all you see.
20. *reality*: Do not use “reality” to mean “appearance” or “belief.” Do not talk about whether reality is real or whether reality is true. “Reality” means everything that is real (everything that exists).  
**Bad:** Whose reality is true?  
**Ok:** Whose beliefs are true?  
**Bad:** There are many different realities.  
**Ok:** There are many different beliefs.
21. *true*: Do not use “true” to mean “believed.”  
**Bad:** To the medievals, it was true that the sun went around the earth. But to us, this is not true.  
**Ok:** The medievals believed that the sun went around the Earth, but we do not believe this.  
**Ok:** The medievals believed that the sun went around the Earth, but that is not true.
22. *infer, imply*: Do not use “infer” to mean “imply.” (To say or suggest something indirectly is to *imply* it.)  
**Bad:** Are you inferring that I had something to do with the assassination?  
**Ok:** Are you implying that I had something to do with the assassination?
23. *know*: Do not use “know” to mean “believe,” and especially do not use it to mean “falsely believe.”  
**Bad:** Back in the middle ages, everyone knew the sun went around the Earth.  
**Ok:** Back in the middle ages, everyone thought the sun went around the Earth.
24. *refute*: “To refute” means “to prove the falsity of.” It does not mean “to deny.”

**Bad:** Clinton refuted charges that he had sex with Monica.

**Ok:** Clinton denied that he had sex with Monica.

25. *based off/ based off of:* Do not use these phrases.

**Bad:** Hume's argument is based off of three premises.

**Ok:** Hume's conclusion is based on three premises.

26. *reliant on:* Never say this.

**Bad:** Determinism is reliant on two definitions.

**Ok:** There are two definitions of determinism.

**Bad:** The state of the world at any point in time is reliant on the second before.

**Ok:** The state of the world at any point in time depends on the state of the world the second before.

27. *argue:* "Argue" is normally followed by "that" or "for."

**Bad:** Dennett argues compatibilism.

**Bad:** To argue this, he uses an analogy of a chess-playing computer.

**Ok:** Dennett defends compatibilism.

**Ok:** Dennett argues that free will is compatible with determinism. To argue for this, he uses an analogy involving a chess-playing computer.

28. *begs the question:* "To beg the question" means "to give an argument in which one or more of the premises depend on the conclusion." It does not mean "to raise the question."

**Bad:** Honderich said that "there is no experimental evidence in a standard sense that there are any [quantum events],"<sup>(3)</sup> which begs the question of what he thinks "experimental evidence in the standard sense" is.

**Ok:** Jon argued that we should believe the Bible because it is the word of God, and we know it is the word of God because the Bible says it is the word of God. This argument begs the question.

## D. Punctuation & Formatting

29. *General formatting:* Papers for classes should generally have:

All pages *numbered*

A staple in the corner

Double-spacing

1-inch margins

12 point font

30. *Indenting Quotations:* quotations of 3 or more lines should be indented, without quotation marks, and with a blank line before and after.

**Bad:** Robert Nozick writes:

"Taxation of earnings from labor is on a par with forced labor. Some persons find this claim obviously true: taking the earnings of  $n$  hours labor is like taking  $n$  hours from the person; it is like forcing the person to work  $n$  hours for another's purpose." (Nozick 1974, 169)

**Ok:** Robert Nozick writes:

Taxation of earnings from labor is on a par with forced labor. Some persons find this claim obviously true: taking the earnings of  $n$  hours labor is like taking  $n$  hours from the person; it is like forcing the person to work  $n$  hours for another's purpose.<sup>(4)</sup>

31. *Source citations:* Any time you say that someone held some view, cite the source, including the page number where they said that thing. Standard format for citations:

*Articles:* Author, “Article Title,” *Journal Title* volume # (year): pages of the article, page where they said the thing you’re discussing. Example (note punctuation):

Michael Huemer and Ben Kovitz, “Causation as Simultaneous and Continuous,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 53 (2003): 556-65, p. 564.

*Books:* Author, *Title of Book* (City of publication: publisher, year), page where they said the thing you’re discussing. Example:

Michael Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), pp. 110-11.

32. *Spacing:* Put spaces before opening parentheses, and after punctuation.

**Bad:** Nozick compares taxation to forced labor(p.169).

**Ok:** Nozick compares taxation to forced labor (p. 169).

33. *Punctuation & parentheses:* Punctuation goes outside parentheses if the parenthetical material is less than the complete sentence/ clause that the punctuation is for.

**Ok:** Hare’s definition is too narrow (it makes some physical facts “subjective”), while Adams’ is too broad (it makes everything “objective”).

**Ok:** In the weak sense, to undertake an obligation is, roughly, to *purport* to place oneself under an obligation. (The exact analysis is not important here.)

34. *Ellipses:* use spaces.

**Bad:** “The past consistency...calls for some explanation...”

**Ok:** “The past consistency . . . calls for some explanation. . . .”

35. *Dashes:* A dash (-- or —) is longer than a hyphen (-). Dashes do not come with spaces.

**Bad:** Our inalienable rights- to life, liberty, and handguns-are under attack by liberal sissies.

**Ok:** Our inalienable rights--to life, liberty, and handguns--are under attack by liberal sissies.

**Ok:** Our inalienable rights—to life, liberty, and handguns—are under attack by liberal sissies.

36. *Titles:* Use italics for book and journal titles; use quotes for article and short story titles.

**Ok:** Unger’s celebrated paper, “Why There Are No People,” first appeared in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, volume IV.

37. *Scare quotes:* Do not insert gratuitous quotation marks around perfectly normal words. (How would you like it if I told you that I “read” your “paper” over the week-end?)

**Bad:** Scientists use experiments to “prove” the “truth” of their theories.

**Ok:** Scientists use experiments to prove the truth of their theories.

**Ok:** Scientists use experiments to try to prove their theories.

## E. Grammar

38. *Modifiers placed at the beginning of a sentence* attach to the **subject** of the sentence. Ignoring this is the most common grammatical error by students, so read this carefully. The first example sentence below is bad because it means that John was carrying a mouse in his mouth (it also rudely calls John “it”). The second implies that it was the teacher who couldn’t master grammar. The third just doesn’t make sense.

**Bad:** Carrying a mouse in its mouth, John saw the cat enter the room.

**Bad:** While unable to master grammar, the English teacher had to explain the use of adverb phrases to me again.

**Bad:** By using this premise, it makes Hume's argument more plausible.

**Ok:** John saw the cat enter the room carrying a mouse in its mouth.

**Ok:** Since I could not master grammar, the English teacher had to explain the use of adverb phrases to me again.

**Ok:** By using this premise, Hume makes his argument more plausible.

39. *Parallelism:* Phrases or sentences that have similar functions (such as items in a list, or items joined by “either . . . or”) should have grammatically parallel forms. In the Ok examples below, I have added emphasis to the key words that are grammatically parallel. In the Bad examples, I have added emphasis to the relevant non-parallel words.

**Bad:** We *bad no* alcohol. We also *did not have* drugs.

**Ok:** We had neither *alcohol* nor *drugs*.

**Bad:** Guns are for family *protection, to hunt* dangerous or delicious animals, and *keep* the King of England out of your face.

**Ok:** Guns are for *protecting* your family, *hunting* dangerous or delicious animals, and *keeping* the King of England out of your face.

**Ok:** The purpose of guns is to *protect* your family, *hunt* dangerous or delicious animals, and *keep* the King of England out of your face.<sup>(6)</sup>

## F. Other Bad Writing

40. *Misquoting:* When taking a quotation, copy down exactly what appears in the text. Do not introduce grammatical, punctuation, or spelling errors of your own. If you omit something from the text, use ellipses (. . .). If you need to add something to the text, put it in square brackets, [like this]. For example, the following appears (exactly as written here) in a book by Russell:

His theoretical errors, however, would not have mattered so much but for the fact that, like Tertullian and Carlyle, his chief desire was to see his enemies punished, and he cared little what happened to his friends in the process.

I might quote this as follows:

**Ok:** Russell writes:

[Marx's] theoretical errors . . . would not have mattered so much but for the fact that . . . his chief desire was to see his enemies punished, and he cared little what happened to his friends in the process.<sup>(7)</sup>

I insert “Marx’s” in place of “His” so readers who can’t see the context know whom Russell was talking about. I use square brackets to indicate that this is my insertion/substitution. I use ellipses where I omitted unnecessary words. (Obviously, do not omit anything whose omission changes the meaning of the passage.)

41. *Negative phrasing:* It is not best to phrase things negatively. “Rarely” is better than “not often.” “Unnecessary” is better than “not necessary,” while “needless” is better than either.

**Bad:** It is not often necessary to use the expression “the case.”

**Ok:** The expression “the case” is rarely needed.

42. *Needless qualifiers:* These are phrases that, I think, unnecessarily weaken your statements. The following are often (but not always) needless qualifiers: “I think,” “I attempt,” “it seems,” “could be,” “if I am correct,” “my claim is,” “we are justified in concluding.” No one wants to read mealy-mouthed prose by an author who can’t make up his mind. (But this is not to encourage overstating your case.) If you’re wrong, then you’re wrong—no one is going to say, “Well, it’s all right that he was wrong because he put ‘we are justified in concluding’ before the false statement.”

Notice how the third example below is so enervated by needless qualifiers that it has almost no content and even ends up *denying* that the author's theory is true. It is also too wordy.

**Bad:** In this paper, I will attempt to defend moral realism.

**Ok:** In this paper, I defend moral realism.

**Bad:** My speculations on this score are at best the roughest approximations to the truth. Still, I try sketching a naturalistic picture of human normative life, and enough in it coheres and fits the phenomena to make me think the truth may lie somewhere in its vicinity.<sup>(8)</sup>

**Ok:** The naturalistic picture of normative life that I sketch is probably approximately correct.

**Bad:** My claim is that  $x$ . If I am right, then it follows that  $y$ .

**Ok:**  $x$ . Therefore,  $y$ .

43. *Redundancy:* Omit unnecessary or redundant words.

**Bad:** It could be said that it is a fact about the world that clocks usually tell the time of day.

**Ok:** Clocks usually tell the time of day.

**Bad:** Testimony is not sufficient enough to defeat a perceptual belief.

**Ok:** Testimony is not sufficient to defeat a perceptual belief.

**Bad:** It may be possible to rephrase this sentence more concisely. [This means, "It is possible that it is possible to rephrase this sentence more concisely."]

**Ok:** It is possible to rephrase this sentence more concisely.

**Ok:** This sentence can be phrased more concisely.

44. *Passive voice:* This should usually be avoided.

**Bad:** That people exist has been denied by Peter Unger.

**Ok:** Peter Unger has denied that people exist.

45. *Repetition:* Don't repeat yourself. Do not say the same thing over and over again. Additional sentences should add something that was not stated earlier.

46. *Undermining your credibility:* Although I'm not claiming that you should listen to me, here are some things that make readers wonder why they're wasting their time reading your paper:

a. *Admitting that you don't know what you're talking about,* as in "This is just my opinion," or "The conclusions defended in this paper may well be mistaken." If you have nothing definite to say about a topic then *don't write about it*. Choose a different topic.

**Bad:** I believe we have free will, but I don't really know anything about it.

[Then why would I care what you think?]

**Bad:** I am not claiming that my argument establishes the reality of free will.

[Then why did you make me waste my time reading it?]

b. *Assertions about things you are ignorant of.* When you discuss things you are ignorant of, more knowledgeable readers are apt to find your remarks ignorant, whereupon they will mistrust the rest of what you have to say. For instance, if you have not read any of the literature on free will, you should avoid comments about what most philosophers think about free will, and indeed should probably avoid saying anything at all about free will. If you have to say something about it, go to the library (or the internet) and at least read an encyclopedia article about it.

c. *Overstated claims.* While avoiding problem (a), do not go to the opposite extreme of making overstated claims that are not justified by your arguments.

**Bad:** Obviously, I have conclusively refuted direct realism.

[The unlikelihood of your having done this undermines your credibility.]

**Ok:** I have given grounds for preferring representationalism over direct realism.

d. *Overly polemical or emotional style.* This undermines your credibility by raising doubts in the reader's mind about your ability to give objective reports or assessments. Also, readers who are initially skeptical of your position will just be pushed farther away.

**Bad:** Such generalizing nonsense needs to be put in its place.<sup>(9)</sup>

**Ok:** This objection is fallacious.

## G. Recommended Reading

47. *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White (New York: Penguin, 2005).  
A classic little book of advice on composition, commonly used in college writing courses.
48. Jakob Nielsen, “[Writing for the Web](http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/)” (web page), <<http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/>>. Accessed December 24, 2005.  
A brilliant guide for web authors. Much of it applies just as well to print writing.
49. *Chicago Manual of Style*, 15<sup>th</sup> ed. (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2003).  
The best-known authority on matters of style, including punctuation, grammar, formatting of books, and so on.
50. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., by Joseph Gibaldi (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2003).  
Another well-known style manual. Cheaper than Chicago, but less comprehensive.
51. Paul Briens, “[Common Errors in English](http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/errors.html)” (web page), <<http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/errors.html>>. Accessed December 24, 2005.  
Long list of word usage errors. Also discusses some non-errors (such as splitting infinitives and ending sentences with prepositions).

## Notes

1. This example is jocular; I am not advising you to write a paper on this.
2. From *The Elements of Style*, p. 67.
3. See “Determinism as True, Both Compatibilism and Incompatibilism as False, and the Real Problem,” pp. 461-76 in *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, ed. Robert Kane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 463—which makes a fair bid to be the worst academic paper ever written on free will.
4. *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 169. [Note: In this footnote, I do not need to name the author I’m quoting, because the text already indicated that it was Robert Nozick.]
5. Source: *Chicago Manual of Style*, 14<sup>th</sup> ed. (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 14.17.
6. Paraphrase of Krusty in *The Simpsons*, “The Cartridge Family.”
7. *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961), p. 479.
8. This is a quotation from Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. viii.
9. This example is from “Four Legs Good, Six Legs Bad: An Entomological Error?” by James Patrick Holding <<http://www.tektonics.org/af/buglegs.html>>. Accessed December 29, 2005.