How to Write A Paper for a Philosophy Course

Some resources:
My first piece of advice is to read some very useful guides to philosophical writing.

If you can read *only one* thing, read…
- Jim Pryor, "Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper" (takes under an hour to read) http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html

If you can read *another* thing, read…
- Jim Pryor, "Guidelines on Reading Philosophy" (under an hour) http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html

If you can read a *third* thing, read…
- A.P. Martinich, *Philosophical Writing: An Introduction*, **Ch. 3** (under an hour)

If you *want* to read still more, read…
- Lewis Vaughn, *Writing Philosophy: A Student's Guide to Writing Philosophy Essays* (takes an afternoon)

As you will see, much of my advice just repeats what you will read in these places.

Three mantras:
To my mind, when you boil down all of this advice, you get:
1. **There's no substitute for *repetition*.**
2. **Always ask: What *job* is this sentence doing *in the argument*?**
3. **Strive to be *clear* to your *reader*.**

Now, to flesh these slogans out…

There's no substitute for repetition:
Practice: Writing philosophy is like anything else that's worth doing: singing, dancing, playing a musical instrument, playing a sport, playing chess, performing magic tricks, speaking a foreign language, etc. *You get better only with practice*.

I can't serve a tennis ball. I can't play the violin. I can't speak Japanese. Maybe, in the future, I will be able to do these things. But first—this is so obvious it almost doesn't seem worth mentioning—I would have to practice *a lot*. No one thinks that I could do this trying it only a few times. I would have to try so many times that I lost count.

Practice involves starting by focusing on simpler things, often for which there is an explicit rule. As they get ingrained, you don't have to think about them any more, and you turn attention to more complicated things, often for which you just have a "sense" or a "feel."

Practice involves making mistakes. In fact, at the beginning, you don't even know what getting it right *is*. (It's not just that I can't serve a tennis ball. If you show me a bunch of different serves, I won't be able to tell you which one is better than the others.)

This can be frustrating! It can't be helped. You aim in the general vicinity, knowing you are going to miss the mark in lots of ways, you get feedback, and you try again. It is all part of the process, not something to be embarrassed or discouraged about.

Rewriting: *You can't write a good philosophy paper the first time.* You *never* will be able to do this. This isn't anything about *you*. *No one can do it*. *My* first drafts are Ds. Lara's first drafts are Ds. Wes's first drafts are Ds. They wouldn't make sense to anyone else. If I come back to a first draft after a month, it doesn't make sense even to *me*. Even if anyone could make sense of it, they would find lots of holes, unanswered questions, unasked questions, basic mistakes, flat contradictions, etc.

Drafts only become published books and papers by lots and lots of rewriting, often where pages and pages of material, which took weeks to write, just gets cut. Drafts only become A papers by lots and lots of rewriting too. *So start as soon as you can!*

Philosophy 100: This course is designed is to give you lots of repetitions. You write a short paper, you get feedback, you write another, and so on. Take this course as early as you can. Consider taking it even if you are one of the few people who could "place out" of it.

Re-reading: Jim Pryor has an excellent rule, to read a piece of philosophy at least three times:

- First time: Skim the article to find its conclusion and get a sense of its structure
- Second time: Go back and read the article carefully
- Third time: Evaluate the author's arguments

This isn't a baby rule: something that you are meant to outgrow. This is what I still have to do if I want to understand a piece of philosophy. There's no way I can understand it one time through.

Always ask: What job does this sentence do in the argument?

The key to philosophy is *understanding how arguments are structured*: seeing what job each sentence is doing in the argument.

Anything you read or write is a bunch of sentences organized in a certain kind of way.

- In a *story*, sentences are usually put in the order in which fictional events took place. Harry Potter finds out he's a witch. Then he goes to Hogwarts. Then he meets Ron and Hermione. Then…
- In a *recipe*, there's a list of ingredients, and then steps to take in the order that you need to take them in order to prepare the dish.
- In *philosophy*, the sentences are organized *as arguments*. These arguments consist in premises, which support a conclusion, and rules of inference that show how the premises support the conclusion. There's also lots of *other* stuff, but it's there to help the reader understand what the argument is and how it works.

When you are given a piece of philosophy to read, you are given a more or less ordered set of sentences. Think of it like a jigsaw puzzle that is only partly done. You understand what you are reading only when you can put all of the sentences in order—only when you can see how the jigsaw pieces fit together. In philosophy, "putting sentences in order" means "knowing what job each sentence is doing in the overall argument."

- Which sentence is the *conclusion*?
- Which sentences are the *premises*?
- How does the conclusion *follow from* the premises? (Or, how does the author *think* the conclusion follows from the premises?)
- There will usually be *arguments within arguments*: e.g., an argument for a premise in the overall argument.
- There will be *a ton* of stuff left over. What is it doing? Some possibilities:
    - An *intuitive case* to convince the reader to accept a premise.
    - A *definition* of a term.
    - An *example*, to help to explain how a definition or claim should be understood.
    - A *clarification* to avoid misunderstanding. Perhaps the claim that the author is making is easy to confuse with another claim. So the author pauses to point out the difference, so you won't get confused.
    - An explanation of the *importance* of the conclusion that the author is arguing for. This may be another mini-argument, for the conclusion that the author's main conclusion is important.

You can do this at two levels of depth:

1. First, make *marginal notes*: Circle sentences (or groups of sentences) as you read, and write in the margin what they are doing.

2. Second, write out a *reconstructed outline*: State in the most concise and organized way what the main points are and how they are related.
    - Don't stick to the author's *order* (whether point A comes before point B)...
    - Don't stick to the author's *proportions* (the amount of space that the author spent making making point A as compared with the amount of space that the author spent making point B)…

… unless you have tried and have concluded that there's no way to improve on the author's order and proportions. This is very rare, but it sometimes happens.

Here's an example, with room for marginal notes on the right and for a reconstructed outline at the bottom:

"On Denoting"
By Bertrand Russell

By a 'denoting phrase' I mean a phrase such as any one of the following: a man, some man, any man, every man, all men, the present King of England, the present King of France, the center of mass of the solar system at the first instant of the twentieth century, the revolution of the earth round the sun, the revolution of the sun round the earth. Thus a phrase is denoting solely in virtue of its *form*. We may distinguish three cases: (1) A phrase may be denoting, and yet not denote anything; e.g., 'the present King of France'. (2) A phrase may denote one definite object; e.g., 'the present King of England' denotes a certain man. (3) A phrase may

denote ambiguously; e.g. ‘a man’ denotes not many men, but an ambiguous man. The interpretation of such phrases is a matter of considerably difficulty; indeed, it is very hard to frame any theory not susceptible of formal refutation. All the difficulties with which I am acquainted are met, so far as I can discover, by the theory which I am about to explain.

The subject of denoting is of very great importance, not only in logic and mathematics, but also in the theory of knowledge. For example, we know that the center of mass of the solar system at a definite instant is some definite point, and we can affirm a number of propositions about it; but we have no immediate *acquaintance* with this point, which is only known to us by description. The distinction between *acquaintance* and *knowledge about* is the distinction between the things we have presentations of, and the things we only reach by means of denoting phrases. It often happens that we know that a certain phrase denotes unambiguously, although we have no acquaintance with what it denotes; this occurs in the above case of the center of mass. In perception we have acquaintance with objects of perception, and in thought we have acquaintance with objects of a more abstract logical character; but we do not necessarily have acquaintance with the objects denoted by phrases composed of words with whose meanings we are acquainted. To take a very important instance: there seems no reason to believe that we are ever acquainted with other people's minds, seeing that these are not directly perceived; hence what we know about them is obtained through denoting. All thinking has to start from acquaintance; but it succeeds in thinking *about* many things with which we have no acquaintance.

The course of my argument will be as follows. I shall begin by stating the theory I intend to advocate; I shall then discuss the theories of Frege and Meinong, showing why neither of them satisfies me; then I shall give the grounds in favor of my theory; and finally I shall briefly indicate the philosophical consequences of my theory.

Question: "Fine, but how do I get practice in this? After all: There's no substitute for repetition!"

Answer: You can practice *every time you are assigned reading for lecture*. When you do the reading, make marginal notes or, even better, write a reconstructive outline. In lecture and section, you can check your work. Does your understanding of the argument match the professor's, or the other students'? If not, why not? (If you still don't understand why not, then *ask*. Maybe your professor missed something!)

Question: "Great, but so far this is all about *reading what other people* have written. What does this have to do with *writing something myself*?"

Answer: Everything. Or rather three things in particular…

First: Just like the texts that you *read* were jumbles of sentences that *you* had to put in order, the paper that you are *writing* will be a jumble of sentences that *your reader* will have to put in order. You need to make this as easy for your reader as possible. (*Strive to be clear to your reader!*) Just as you asked in your reading, "What job is this sentence doing in the overall argument?" you should ask about your own writing, "What job is this sentence doing in the overall argument?" So, by practicing putting *others'* sentences in order, you are learning how to put *your own* sentences in order.

Second: A large part of any paper for a philosophy course is spent showing the reader that you understand readings for the course. This is just fleshing out a reconstructive outline.

Finally: You may ask: "But wait, I'm not *only* being asked to paraphrase the author, I am *also* being asked to say something creative, original, insightful. That's what gets the A. Where on earth is this supposed to come from?"

I don't know where creativity in music, or dance, or art, or poetry comes from. That's a total mystery to me. But I do know where creativity in philosophy comes from. *It comes from trying to understand the structure of other philosophers' arguments.*

It's paradoxical. Creativity, originality, fresh insight, etc. in philosophy come from trying to reconstruct as faithfully and exactly as you can what *someone else has already* said. As you do this, you may discover that the argument *doesn't* follow from the premises. You may discover that the author *failed* to make a crucial distinction. You may discover that the author *could have* asked a different question. And so on.

In other words, almost every new philosophical idea starts *from noticing some mistake, oversight, etc. in some earlier philosophical argument*. Think of Socrates' method. He asks a simple, almost childlike question, gets an answer, and then puzzles over how that answer doesn't make sense to him. Even though he isn't working from prior texts, he's still doing the same thing: coming up with *new* arguments by seeing how the *existing* arguments go wrong. In order to do that, you first need to clarify *how the existing arguments work*.

Strive to be *clear* to your *reader*:
There is no such thing as good writing, period. What counts as good writing depends on what *kind* of writing it is. Here, we're concerned with writing *a paper for a philosophy course*. For *that*, good writing is writing that is *as clear to the reader as possible*.

Write a draft, put it down, and come back to it later:
Just because it is clear *to you* doesn't mean that it is clear *to your reader*. One of the hardest things about writing is taking an external perspective: reading your writing with the eyes of someone who doesn't already know what you are trying to say.

The problem is that you are the *worst possible judge of this*, because you *already know* what you are trying to say. (Well, sort of; if you're like me, you don't fully know what you are trying to say until you say it.) So what do you do?

It helps tremendously to write something, put it down, and come back to it a day or two later. That gives you a little distance. Of course, to be able to do this, you have to get started early and be willing to rewrite. (Yet another reason why *there's no substitute for repetition.*)

Communicate to your reader what job each sentence is doing in the argument:
Recall the work that you had to do putting the puzzle pieces in order when you were the reader. How can you make this process as easy for *your* reader as possible? How can you make clear what job each sentence is doing in the overall argument?

- Write an *outline* to clarify *for yourself* what the structure of your argument is.
- *Signpost*: *Explicitly* tell your reader what you are arguing for, what step you are now making in that argument, what job it is doing in the argument, etc.
    - "I will argue that…"
    - "Next, I will consider some objections…"
    - "The following examples will help to explain the distinction…"
- Use what Pryor calls "*connective words*": These *implicitly* tell your reader what you are doing:
    - because, since = "Hey, reader, here are some premises in support of a conclusion…"
    - thus, therefore, hence, it follows that, consequently = "Hey, reader, conclusion coming next…"
    - nevertheless, however, but—"Hey, reader, this is going to be an objection to what I just said…"
    - on the one hand, on the other hand—"Hey, reader, I'm making a distinction…"
    - firstly, secondly—"Hey, reader, here is a list of sentences that are doing the same thing, e.g., objections, premises, etc."
    - suppose, for instance, consider a case where—"Hey, reader, this is an example or counterexample…"

Note: Not every paper for a philosophy course will *itself* be an argument (contrary to what Pryor says). Sometimes you will be asked simply to *explain some other philosopher's argument*. Even so, your task is very similar. You still need to make clear what job the various sentences (in this case, the other philosopher's, not yours) are doing in the argument.

Define technical or ambiguous terms:
When do terms need to be defined? Some rules of thumb to start out with:

- Would you not have understood the term, *as it is being used*, *before* taking *this* philosophy class (or a class in the *same area*, e.g., philosophy of mind)? If yes, then define.
    - Of course, you might have understood the term, *used in some other way*, before taking the course. For example, "free" used in a metaphysics course vs. "free" used to mean "you don't have to pay for it."
- Is it the name of a *philosophical position* or for someone who holds a philosophical position? Does the term end in *"-ism," "-ist" "-ian"*? For example, "externalist," "functionalist," "relativist," "utilitarian." If yes, then define.

Give examples:
Consider:

> The Doctrine of Double Effect says that it can be permissible to cause a lesser evil in bringing about a greater good if one only foresees that the lesser evil will occur, but does not intend the lesser evil as a means to the greater good.

As far as one-sentence descriptions of the Doctrine of Double Effect go, this is pretty good. But it's still far from complete. The writer still needs to explain:

- What's a "lesser evil," a "greater good"?
- What's the difference between "foreseeing" and "intending"?

I don't think you can explain these things without giving examples. Here's how the explanation with examples might go:

> Suppose that we can save five people from death, but with the result that a sixth person dies. The fact that the five people survive would be the "greater good" in this case, while the fact that the sixth person dies would be the "lesser evil."
>
> Consider a case in which, as we know, our only choice is to give life-saving medicine either to only five people, or to only a sixth person. If we give it to five people, then we foresee that the sixth will die, from lack of medicine. But we do not intend this lesser evil as a means to this greater good. The death of the sixth person is not like a tool or ingredient or a step in the recipe that we are using to cause the survival of the five.
>
> Now contrast this with a case in which, as we know, our only choice is to let five people die from organ failure, or to kill a sixth, healthy person and transplant his organs to save the five. If we kill the sixth person, then we do intend this lesser evil as a means to the greater good. Here, the death of the sixth person is a like a tool or ingredient or step in the recipe that we are using the cause the survival of the five.

Keep your language simple and direct:

- Use as few words as you need in your sentence to make your point (and be understood).
- Use as few sentences as you need to make your point (and be understood).
- Don't vary the words you use to mean the same thing. This surprises a lot of people! In other kinds of writing, you're *supposed* to use different words: "nation, homeland, patrimony," instead of "country, country, country." Otherwise, you seem robotic and

bore your reader. Philosophy is just different. In philosophy, you want to keep your language constant. If you mean the same thing, use the same word.

- Don't use a fancy, poetic, flowery word when an ordinary one will do. No one gets a higher grade on a philosophy paper, in my experience, from doing this. It doesn't help, and it can hurt.

Compare:

A.
"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

"Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

"But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate, we can not consecrate, we can not hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

B.
"Our nation was set up as a democracy. Now, we're fighting a war to show that democracies like ours won't always fall apart. Today, we're making a memorial to those killed here in a recent battle. However, the most important thing to do is to win the war."

The style of B is *awful as a speech.* But the style of B is a *much better for a philosophy paper*. It's clear, direct, and doesn't waste words. It leaves lots of room for further points. (Like: What's the definition of "democracy"? *Why* will losing the war show that democracies can't last? And why is it so *important* to show that democracies can last?)