MAP Reading and Writing Workshop notes + handout

MAP Columbia chapter, March 2019

1. Introductory comments

There are many ways to write well, and what we set out here is only one approach to writing well. We're going to focus, in particular, on one important facet of writing: *clarity*. Thinking of your writing in terms of clarity will help you deal with the kinds of assignments you'll tend to get in philosophy classes. And it will also perhaps help you in other forms of writing both outside philosophy and outside the academy. We can think of clarity in two ways:

1. Clarity of written expression—expressing your thoughts in a way that is easy and simple for the reader to understand.
2. "Getting clear about something"—figuring out what you should think about an idea or concept or phenomenon that matters to you.

Striving for clarity can be really helpful when doing philosophy. Writing clearly, in a way that is easy for your reader to follow, forces you to get clear with yourself about what you want to say. And it can be hard to know just exactly what it is you're trying to say in philosophy. You're often dealing with complex ideas, and while you have some sense of what points you want to make about them, you may not be fully sure about what you want to say. By striving to write clearly, you can not only produce a piece of writing that is easy for a reader to understand and so more persuasive; you can also get clear with yourself about what you're trying to get at. And those are two good goals to keep in mind: to make something that someone else could easily understand, and also something that reflects a solid sense on your part of what exactly you mean to be saying.

Clarity above all involves *simplicity*. Simplicity is different from *ease*: philosophical writing is about making complex ideas simple. But that is a very difficult thing to do, and one that takes time and practice. But it's also a really valuable skill!

So, the advice here is advice aimed at teaching you *one way* to think about your writing – this way is not the *only* way, nor is it necessarily the *best* way. But it is one valuable way.

2. The general structure of a piece of philosophical writing

Most of the writing you'll be doing in your philosophy classes will be *in response to a prompt*. What you are being asked to do in such pieces of writing is to respond appropriately to the prompt provided. Later, you may write papers that do not have a direct prompt. Even in those cases, it is useful to think: *what is the question or questions that I am answering in this essay?*

The prompt will usually take the form of a question or direction, or a set of questions or directions. So, in responding to that prompt, you just need to answer that question or questions, or follow those directions.

You might say there are two main parts to your paper. The first is your answer to the question or questions, which we can call your "claim" or your "thesis". The second is how you support that claim, which are the "arguments" you make in favor of your claim. A piece of philosophical writing therefore consists of your claim & an argument (or arguments) for your claim. An argument here can be thought of informally as a set of connected steps that provide support for your claim, ie that aim to convince the reader to accept your claim.

Some prompts will ask you to provide your own view, while some will ask you to explain another philosopher's view. In both cases the above structure still holds.

Here's a sample prompt and answer asking you for your own view:

Prompt: Can minds exist without bodies? Why or why not?

Claim + arguments: In this paper I claim that minds *can't* exist without bodies. I will provide two arguments for this claim. First, only bodies exist, so minds, if they exist, must be bodies. Second, even if minds are different from bodies, what minds do is to affect bodies. Hence, minds can't exist without bodies.

Here's a sample prompt and answer asking you to explain another philosopher's view:

Prompt: Does Anne Conway think minds can exist without bodies? Explain her view and evaluate one of her arguments for that view.

Claim + arguments: Anne Conway thinks that minds can exist without bodies, because minds and bodies are not two distinct kinds of thing. In this paper I will explain what this means for Conway and examine her argument that minds are purified bodies. I will argue that this argument is not successful, because it rests on a problematic premise about God's relation to nature.

(Note also that this second prompt still asks you for your own view, in the form of an evaluation of Conway's argument.)

3. **Introduction/body/conclusion: "Say what you're going to say, then say it, then say what you've said."**

A good piece of philosophical writing, in order to make its claim and argument clear, should have three parts: an introduction, body, and conclusion. The introduction "says what you're going to say"; the body "says it"; then your conclusion "says what you've said".

The introduction should contain **at least your claim** (in shorter pieces), and usually **your claim and a general outline of the key points of your arguments**. You can also include a lead-in that explains why the question arises, or why the problem is important. But don't feel like you *need to*: readers will be happy if your introduction just contains your claim + arguments.

The **body** of your paper should set out your arguments. Some people find it helpful to think of each paragraph as setting out one step in your argument. But sometimes you might break up one point into two paragraphs, or reiterate a point in a second paragraph. Ideally, the reader should be able to piece together your argument just from reading the first one or two sentences of each paragraph. (You can think of them as "introductions" to the paragraph.) "Transition sentences", which are sentences that connect one paragraph to the next, can be useful in introducing the point of the paragraph and situating it in your larger argument.

The **conclusion** summarises what you've done in the paper. In longer papers, you may use the conclusion to set out some things you've left undone, or things you will want to explore later. But your conclusion should not contain *any surprises*: the main thing you want to say should be stated from the outset.

The relative length of these parts of your paper will differ according to the length of the paper. The following are just *rough guides* to how a paper might be structured, given that people often ask this. But there are no hard and fast rules here! Over time you will learn to "feel" your way through the structure of a paper. For a 4 page paper, for example, you might have the following structure (see eg Examples 1 and 2 below on page 6):

Introduction (1/2 page)
- Your claim + brief outline of the structure of your arguments

Body (~3 pages)
- Argument 1
- Argument 2
- Objection to your view
- Response to objection

Conclusion (paragraph to 1/2 page)
- What you've shown in your paper (restatement of your claim)

For a 1 page paper, you might want to structure it like this (eg **Example 3** below):

Introduction (1 or 2 sentences)
- Your claim (eg "I think that X. Here are two reasons that support my claim.")

Body (most of the page)
- Argument ("First, … Second, …")

Conclusion (1 sentence)
- Restatement of your claim: "Therefore, X."

(Note: these are *general* tips for how to structure your paper. If your professor gives you specific advice, then you should follow that advice. You should always feel able to ask your professor or TA for further specific guidance!)

4. <u>General writing tips</u>

In philosophy, using "I" (the "first-person") is completely normal. This is because it is a very useful way for making clear which claims you – the writer – are making, as opposed to claims of other people that you are making use of in your paper. So don't be afraid to use "I"! However, it's important to remember that you are making a claim and putting forward an argument in favor of it, not exploring your own subjective feelings or sense of what sounds right. So when using 'I' you want to only be talking about your own claims and reasons for holding them, and not ever about what happens to feel right to you. It's important to use "I" and to avoid the **passive voice** ("It is argued that X"). With the passive voice, the reader doesn't know **who** is arguing for X. But there's a clear difference between "I argue that X" and "Descartes argues that X".

Writing takes time! You will find that your thoughts become clearer if you start thinking about your paper at least **a week in advance**. You can try to write up an outline of your paper first in the first couple of days, and then writing your paper in a new document alongside your outline.

Always take the time to **look over your paper** before handing it in. You'd be surprised how many grammatical errors you find (have a look at the examples below!). Alternatively, get a friend to look it over. It's also great to read the paper out loud – that way you find errors you might otherwise have missed.

Be modest about your claim. Don't attempt to claim anything beyond what you can provide an argument for. For example, if you argue that there's a flaw in someone else's view, don't claim that you have "refuted" the view, or even that the view is "wrong". Maybe there are better arguments for the view that you haven't considered, or maybe there are counter-arguments to your objection.

Consider and respond to objections to your claim. Objections are useful for at least three reasons. First, they force you to refine your claim and to think about it from other perspectives. Second, they show the reader that you are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of your position. Third, you can use objections **to further your claim**: "Against my claim, it could be argued that X. But X is wrong because of Y. This reveals something important about my claim insofar as Z."

Don't try to do too much. It can be tempting to want to make very grand claims in philosophy, but it is always better to make a really strong case for a smaller claim than to make a weak case for a big one. So try to set up a manageable task for yourself. Try to make claims modest enough that you really are able to defend them.

For those of you for whom **English is a second language**: don't stress too much. Philosophy has many technical terms that most native English speakers will not know. Like everyone else, keep everything simple. You don't need to try to use lots of different words. Stick to the ones whose meaning you know. The same goes for native English speakers.

Remember: you can always ask your TAs, your professors, or us at MAP for help!

5. Words of Wisdom on Writing from Faculty

#1 – "When writing a paper, ask yourself 'what is the strongest objection someone may raise against my argument?' Try to formulate this objection as well as you can. And then ask yourself 'what is my reply?'"

#2 – "(a) It's important to be modest about what you've accomplished in a paper. If all you've done is presented an objection to an argument, don't pretend you've "disproven" or "refuted" the conclusion of the argument. (Even if you have shown that the argument is flawed, there still might be better arguments for its conclusion.) I think students sometimes try to impress us by making it seem that they've done something big. It's impressive for you to do something small, carefully and honestly.

(b) Come up with your own examples as much as you can when explaining concepts or key terms. They make your paper clearer and more fun.

(c) A common mistake is that students use too many quotes. Try to write your papers using absolutely no quotes if you can."

#3 – [On writing:] Always try to rephrase key claims or concepts in your own words. Ask yourself: what does that mean?

[On common mistakes:] The illusion of understanding. (The prior bit of advice affords a test of sorts for this.)

[On the benefits of philosophy:] Developing facility with complicated reasoning, which can be used in a wide variety of contexts."

[The following is a handout that we often give to students who attend the workshops. We work through it in the workshop after running through in a discussion format the above material.]

Examples of undergraduate writing

Here are some examples of introductions to essays from introductory classes. What do they do well? Where could they be improved? (Hint: there's *always* room for improvement!)

Explain the Evil Demon Argument. Explain what you think is the best or most interesting objection to the argument. Explain what you think is the best way for the skeptic to respond to your objection.

How do you know that you are currently reading this essay? Perhaps an evil demon is simply tricking you into thinking that you're reading this essay, and, really, the essay doesn't exist at all but is rather a cleverly-crafted trick. In the *Meditations*, René Descartes introduces the Evil Demon argument . This argument strongly calls into question everything we think we know to be true. In this essay, I will first explain the Evil Demon Argument. Next, I will raise an objection regarding the argument's use of the term "know" and argue that one does not need absolute epistemic certainty to reach the conventional standard of knowledge. Finally, I will discuss how the skeptic may respond to this objection by stating that the conventional standard of knowledge is faulty, and we do need absolute epistemic certainty to have knowledge.

What do you think is the question(s) this essay set out to answer? Can you reconstruct it/them from this introduction?

Immanuel Kant proposed two formulations of categorical imperative, the Universal Formula and the Humanity Formula:

Universal Formula: "Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law."
Humanity Formula: "Act so that you use humanity, as much in your own person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as end and never merely as means."

He believed that if an act is in accordance with one of these formulas, it would be deemed morally permissible. Kant has stated these two formulations are equivalent, so if an act is shown to be permissible by the first formula, it should in theory be permissible by the second formula. I will explore whether this claim is true. First I will introduce a specific Surprise Birthday Party Case and then argue that it fails the Universal Formula and yet passes the Humanity Formula, thereby showing that, given my analysis, these two formulations are not, in fact, equivalent.

What about this one?

In Question Two, Article Three of his *Summa Theologiae*, Saint Thomas Aquinas adduces five distinct cosmological proofs in demonstration of the existence of God. His fifth "way", known as the Teleological Argument, considers the order and consistency evident in the natural world as indicative of intelligent design, and thus of God qua divine planner. In this paper, I investigate the structure and validity of Aquinas' argumentation by reconstructing it in accordance with reasonable interpretation, as well as examining a possible objection on the grounds of theodicy.

Some Advice on Reading Philosophy

Reading strategies depend strongly on one's *goals*. For example, reading to identify and assess an argument is different from reading to get the gist of what is being said; reading for aesthetic appreciation is different from reading to see how some view is historically continuous with another view; etc. Nonetheless, for our purposes, the following steps will generally be part of an effective reading strategy:

1) **Warm-up.** Choose the right time, place, and attitude that will allow you to devote substantial concentration to the text. Prime your memory by considering some questions of the following sorts:
    a. Why did the instructor assign this reading? To what topic, unit, subheading, or theme does this reading correspond? What are the fundamental questions or concepts to be addressed in this reading? Consider reviewing review the syllabus, your notes from class, or essay prompts.
    b. What presuppositions, if any, do you have about the questions or concepts to be addressed in the text? What prior experience, if any, do you have with those questions or concepts? This experience may or may not be an academic one.

2) **Skim the text.** Try to identify the author's main conclusion by focusing on the opening and closing paragraphs. Try to restate the main conclusion in your own words so that you comprehend (to some extent) what the author is after. Try to get a sense of the structure of the text by keeping an eye out for the following transitional devices:
    a. therefore, it follows that, as a result, consequently, given this argument
    b. likewise, similarly, on the one hand, however, otherwise, in spite of, instead, but
    c. for example, for instance, in other words, that is, to illustrate, suppose, imagine
    d. first, lastly, moreover, furthermore, next, previously

3) **Carefully reread.** Now read the text more slowly. Try to figure out how the various pieces of the text fit together. Identify the author's main arguments, the reasons offered in support of her conclusion, and where these reasons are put forward. Take special note of the following: key concepts, definitions, or distinctions the author introduces; unargued assumptions; statements that appear puzzling. Write notes as you do all of this, either on the text itself, on paper, or your laptop: draw diagrams, use different colored pens and/or fonts, note questions and criticisms as they occur to you.

4) **Evaluate.** Take time to reflect on the text by asking yourself the following questions:
    a. Which, if any, of the author's claims do you find puzzling? Why are those claims puzzling? Is the statement simply vague or ambiguous? If so, what makes it vague or ambiguous? Or is the statement in apparent conflict with one of your beliefs? If so, which of your beliefs? Either way, can you provide some other interpretation, explanation, or background to make the statement more intelligible or plausible, and so less puzzling?
    b. Does the conclusion follow from the premises? Are any of the premises in the argument open counterexamples? If so, which ones, and what are those counterexamples? Do the premises or conclusion have any implications that I find false, bizarre or otherwise unacceptable?
    c. Whether you find yourself in agreement or disagreement with the author, imagine yourself having a conversation with someone of the opposite opinion. What might that conversation look like?

For the purpose of *reading to identify and assess the author's argument*, the following steps will be helpful (from Professor Moody-Adams):

1) Read closely to identify the main claims of the text.
2) What is the author's context? When was the author writing? With whom, or with what traditions of thought, might the author be engaged in conversation or debate?
3) Try to identify the intended audience for the work as a whole. What shared assumptions might the author and the intended audience have? Why might the author want to make the main claims of the text?
4) Try to articulate the arguments meant to support the main claims. Do they establish what the author seems to have intended?
5) What are the premises of the argument? Are they clear? Are they plausible? Or are they ambiguous or confusing?
6) Try to identify any unstated assumptions needed to make the argument plausible. Are those assumptions compelling?

Sample text from Aquinas' *Treatise on Human Nature*:

> Although we attribute the action of a part to the whole – e.g., the eye's action to the person – nevertheless we never attribute that action to a different part (unless perhaps *per accidens*). For we do not say that the hand sees as a result of the eye's seeing. Therefore if from intellect and Socrates one thing comes about in the proposed way, then the intellect's action cannot be attributed to Socrates. If, on the other hand, Socrates is the whole composed of intellect's union with the rest of Socrates, and nevertheless the intellect is united to the other parts of Socrates only as a mover, then it follows that Socrates is not unconditionally one thing, and consequently that he is not unconditionally a being. For something is a being in just the way that it is one.
>
> The only way that is left, then, is the way that Aristotle proposes: that this particular human being thinks because the intellective principle is his form. In this way, then, from the intellect's very operation, it is evident that the intellective principle is united to the body as its form. (Question 76, Art. 1)

Sample text from Rae Langton's "Feminism in epistemology: Exclusion and objectification".

Knowledge and how women might be left out

> A first way in which women might be left out is that women might *fail to be known*. Women might get left out, as objects of knowledge, in its various institutionalized branches. Women's lives may be rendered invisible by particular bodies of knowledge, such as history, economics, medicine and philosophy itself. When historians chronicle only kings and dates and battles, women are left out. When economists analyse the relations between capital and labour, ignoring unpaid labour in the home, women are left out. When scientists study heart disease using male-only samples, women are left out. When philosophers define human beings as rational animals, assuming all the while that women are not rational, women are left out.