

Term Paper Guidelines and Helpful Hints

Choose a guiding idea - a rough version of your claim. Don't get so committed up front that you feel stuck writing about something boring or obviously incorrect later.

Pick out the relevant readings. Figure out what we've read that is relevant to the topic you'll be writing on and familiarize yourself with what they say.

Research using reliable resources. It's best to use sources from major journals. Consult the databases in Philosophy by visiting <http://libraries.ucsd.edu>. The best databases are JSTOR and Philosopher's Index. You might also consult the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, and look in the bibliographies of entries for appropriate secondary source material. You may also want to search GoogleScholar, though results here are not always as reliable.

Read for relevance. Use highlights or pens, write in the margins, use sticky-notes, whatever technology will help you pull apart the structure of what you read.

Talk to people about your ideas. This includes classmates, other friends, TA, professor. Get advice. Bounce ideas off each other. Advice is different from plagiarism.

Analyze, don't summarize. Pick apart the argument and show how it works. Only talk about the part of the text that is relevant to your argument. Leave out useless details. Don't just repeat in shorter form what has already been said.

Be prepared to revise or change your claim. Stay flexible.

Every part of your paper should provide new reasons for accepting your claim. Make sure everything in your paper is clearly connected and makes your point.

Provide specific evidence. Don't speak only in vague generalities and abstractions, and don't just appeal to personal feelings or commitments. Provide facts that favor your view.

Be creative. Bring something new to the table: a new bit of evidence, a more subtle argument, a novel application of an argument, or a new position in the debate.

Write for an interested but relatively unfamiliar audience. Imagine trying to explain it to your peers who aren't in the course. Better yet, actually try explaining it to them.

Use correct grammar and formatting, and a clear style. Consult a standard handbook such as MLA for references and citations. Use a style manual like Strunk & White's. It may be useful to consult a basic handbook of argumentation, such as Weston's *Rulebook of Arguments*. Another useful resource is Jim Pryor's page on writing philosophy papers: <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

Cite every source that you quote directly, paraphrase, or rely on for your understanding of the material, including course textbooks. Use appropriate sources! Encyclopedias, Wikipedia, blogs, etc. are fine for giving you ideas for where to look for information, but usually don't provide sufficiently scholarly information to be used as a source. Again, look to a guidebook.

Write "Draft Zero." Get all of your thoughts on paper, all the rough notes, quotes, bits of analysis, etc. Arrange it so that it looks sort of like an argument. Print this out and read it over. Highlight your claim with one pen/highlighter. Highlight all of the most important bits of support in another color.

Write a shitty first draft. Start a fresh document, and commit to not copy-pasting anything except for quotations. Put your argument together. Get the whole thing down on paper before you worry about how each part of it works.

Revise, revise, revise. For each draft, print it out. Highlight (different colors) your main claim, major sub-claims, and key bits of evidence. Make sure that the non-highlighted parts of your paper all work to make clear the connections between the other bits. Read it over again to make sure it sounds good. Be merciless with a red pen: cross out useless words and sentences, rewrite awkward bits, add in missing pieces. Look over this draft with your classmates, TA, professor, friends, significant other, parents, or whoever can give you useful feedback.