

## Term Paper Guidelines and Helpful Hints

*Choose a guiding idea.* Start with a rough version of what you'll argue for that is a real issue worth exploring and focused enough to fit the length requirements. Don't commit yourself so much up front that you feel stuck later, though your final paper will need to have a clear thesis/claim.

*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 and appropriate resources.* It's best to use sources from an academic press. Consult the databases in philosophy and related areas at the library or on library webpage (the librarians are friendly and willing to help). Required & recommended class texts often include helpful sources in their bibliography. An encyclopedia is fine for giving you ideas for where to look for sources, but it usually isn't to be used as a primary source itself.

*Read for relevance.* Use highlighters or pens, write in the margins, use sticky-notes, whatever technology will help you pull apart the structure of what you read. You will need to explain and analyze the ideas *and* the reasons the authors give for accepting those ideas (i.e., the argument).

*Talk to people about your ideas.* This includes classmates, other friends, professor. Get advice. Bounce ideas off each other. Advice is not plagiarism, but do the research and writing yourself.

*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. Your reader should learn something new about your sources.

*Be prepared to revise or change your claim.* Stay flexible. Your research may prove you wrong.

*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. Focus it. **Avoid rhetorical questions!**

*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 *actually* 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 while you write.

*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. Again, look to a guidebook like MLA. **Don't plagiarize!**

*Make sure you understand what that means.*

The following advice is inspired by Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird* (NY: Pantheon, 1994).

*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 over it. Highlight your claim with one color. Highlight all of the most important items of support in another color.

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

*Revise, revise, revise.* For each draft, print it out (preferably on recycled paper!). Highlight (different colors) your (a) main claim, (b) major sub-claims, and (c) key bits of evidence. Make sure that the non-highlighted parts of your paper all work to make clear the connections between the highlighted parts *or remove them*. Read it again to make sure it sounds good. **Show no mercy** with your red pen: cross out useless words and sentences, rewrite awkward bits, add in missing pieces. Look over this draft with your classmates, professor, writing center tutors, friends, pets, roommates, significant other(s), parents, coworkers, or whoever can give you useful feedback.