Some Guidelines on Writing a Good Political Philosophy Paper
(Materials developed by Rob Reich and by Joshua Cohen)

Introduction

Many students believe that writing a paper in philosophy is unlike any other kind of writing. This is an exaggeration. Writing a good philosophy paper is very much like writing a good paper in history, economics, literature, or biology. A good paper requires a particularly careful use of language and a particularly close examination of ideas and arguments. Because a good paper is a good paper, the guidelines sketched here apply with equal force in other courses as well.

It's important, however, to stress just how central good writing is when doing philosophy. As a general matter, your writing is a good measure of your ability to communicate ideas. But in philosophy, the quality of your writing is not just a measure of your ability to *communicate*; it is also a measure of your ability to *think*. If you cannot express your thoughts in a clear, concise, and cohesive manner, then *your thoughts themselves* are not clear, concise, or cohesive. Philosophical writing exercises your thinking; learning to write better is inseparable from learning to think better. In philosophy, becoming a good writer is the same thing as become a good thinker.

Basic Requirements

A good philosophical essay possesses five "C's": Clarity, Conciseness, Cogency, Cohesiveness, and Creativity.

Clarity: A good paper makes clear how the writer uses different terms; it avoids confusing sentences or arguments; and it demonstrates an unambiguous position on the issue it address. The reader should not be puzzled as to where the writer stands.

Conciseness: A good paper makes its argument succinctly; each sentence contributes to the paper; it does not repeat itself.

Cogency: A good paper persuades or convinces the reader of the argument; it provides compelling reasons to adopt the writer's point of view.

Cohesiveness: A good paper is well-organized and hangs together as a whole; its paragraphs flow into each other; it contains an identifiable introduction and conclusion.

Creativity: A good paper shows evidence of creative thinking: identifies interesting questions or puzzles, provides rhetorical flourishes, delivers innovative examples. A creative paper helps the reader to see things in a new (and perhaps unexpected) light.

In addition, a good philosophical essay demonstrates both *comprehension* and *philosophical skills*.

Comprehension is what you get by reading and listening attentively. If you comprehend material, you are able to summarize and paraphrase ideas and other people's arguments with ease. You will also be able to distinguish the main points of an argument from the less important ones, and you will be able to apply general principles to specific cases.

Philosophical skills show your own thinking and deeper understanding of the material. They enable you not merely to describe but to evaluate other person's arguments and to apply a critical eye to your own. Some basic philosophical skills are:

1. Distinguishing a person's assumptions from his/her conclusions. Note that very often a person will not argue for, or even express, the premises of her/his argument. You will have to unearth them. Premises don't always come first, either. Often a writer will not state, "*A, therefore B,*" but "*B, because A.*"
2. Drawing out the logical consequences of a person's position.
3. Specifying exact definitions of debated terms or phrases.
4. Evaluating specific objections to a given theory. The objections do not have to be your own; the evaluation of the objection will be your own.

Practical Guidelines about Philosophical Argument

Generally speaking, what you do in a paper is defend a thesis. Here are some examples of philosophical theses:

- Mill's defense of liberty depends, contrary to what Mill says, on non-utilitarian ideas.
- There is a fundamental tension between predictive accuracy and fairness, explainability, and privacy that forces the coder to make difficult choices about how to weigh competing values.
- The FBI's decision to sue Apple to obtain access to an alleged terrorist's iPhone data was an unjust intrusion on the right to privacy that should be guaranteed to all people.

The point of the paper is to explain your thesis and offer reasons in support of it. Keep in mind that writing papers is not a game. The aim is to learn something about what you think, whether you can support your ideas with evidence and argument, and whether you should change your mind. What you think is *important*, and writing philosophy papers is an especially good way to become clear and self-critical in your thinking. Although philosophy papers require careful, abstract, critical *reasoning*, they also have a very *personal* side. You are expressing what you believe, and trying to defend it. When you do that, you expose your ideas to criticism. And when you expose your ideas to criticism, it can feel like you are exposing yourself to criticism. The only way to learn from writing a paper is to accept that vulnerability, be as clear as you can about what you think, and make the best case for your views. You can try to protect your ideas, thus yourself, by surrounding them with a blur of words. That defeats the purpose. Writing a paper—with this blend of abstract reasoning and personal conviction—is best approached in a social way, as if you were in a dialogue with another person. You should write with a particular reader in mind: perhaps a friend, or a student in another class who wonders what you are working on. Write the paper as if you were directing your argument to this imagined reader: a real person, who you imagine to be reading your paper. Your imagined reader cannot read your mind. You need to tell him or her what you are aiming to show in the paper, consider where he or she will need some more explanation, ask yourself where your reader might have some doubts about what you are saying, and try to answer those doubts. A paper presents an argument for a thesis, not a sequence of inertly juxtaposed observations. Writing it in imagined dialogue with a reader is a way to achieve that essential purpose.

Conceiving your paper as a dialogue has two very important consequences. First, you are not writing a story, not making a commentary, not providing a mere exposition, and not writing a book or article review. There should be no big climax for the reader of your paper; it should be clear where you are going,

where you came from, and what the route is you're taking. Don't surprise the reader at the end of the paper with your conclusion. Second, you are not writing a polemic, or one-sided argument such as you might find in the editorial section of the newspaper. **Philosophy demands that you consider the strongest possible objections to your argument, to show argument and counter argument.** It is entirely appropriate to make an argument in one paragraph and then begin the next paragraph with "However, it might be objected that..." or "Of course, other people believe that..."

Practical Suggestions in Writing

1. **State the main thesis** of your paper at (or near) the beginning, preferably in the opening paragraph. It is not bad to say something like: "I will argue that ...." If you do not have a thesis, a way to complete that sentence, then get one. Often, you will end up refining and revising your main thesis in the course of writing the paper, as you understand better what you are able to defend. Typically, the last thing you work on in a philosophy paper is a careful revision of the introduction; you will have learned in the process of writing what it is you think about the topic at hand, and now you can state your thesis with greater precision in the introduction.

2. **Take the views you are discussing seriously**. The philosophers and other authors you are reading are not fools, and you will not learn anything from reading and writing about their views if you assume that they are. If you find yourself attributing foolish views to them, assume you have misinterpreted. (Perhaps you have not. But treat "misinterpretation" as the default setting.)

One strategy for taking a view seriously is to start by making your doubts, criticisms, and points of agreement explicit, rather than simply liking or not liking what you have read. Suppose, for example, you have some doubts about what you have read in John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. Try first to get clear about the criticisms: what exactly concerns you? Do you object to the conclusions, or to the way(s) he defends them? Then try to "argue against yourself": ask yourself how Mill would respond to your criticism. This means that you will need to get "inside" his view, develop a sense of its internal integrity, and see if you are able to understand how someone (who may have strange ideas, but is neither moron nor sociopath) might have come to hold the views in question. Bear in mind that the readings in your course are the product of sustained reflection, over a long period. The authors often distributed drafts of their manuscripts to other people who disagreed with them, and then tried to incorporate responses to objections. Their views may not be right, or fully coherent, or nice. But you can safely assume that they have greater depth and coherence than first reading might suggest.

3. **Focus.** Your papers should critically assess some important aspect of one of the philosophical views you have been discussing. The main thesis of your paper will say what that aspect is. But before getting to the critical assessment, you will need to describe the position you are assessing. Keep your description focused, and guide your presentation by the particular problems that animate your paper. For example, Hobbes tells us that in a state of nature, with no political authority, we would all be at war with one another. If you are examining this argument, you will need to explain why he thinks we need an authority to keep us from fighting each other. You should *not* also discuss his views on monarchy. Confine yourself to the aspects of Hobbes's view that are of immediate relevance. Anything else will be a distraction.

4. **Avoid sweeping generalities**. Steer clear of such large gestures as: "Rawls's theory of justice is the most important recent contribution to the perennial human search for the ideal society," or "Since Plato, philosophers have sought out the meaning of justice," or "For millennia, human beings have searched for truth." (What about: "Man is born free, but is everywhere in chains." If you are Jean-Jacques Rousseau, you are allowed to violate these guidelines.) Such sweeping remarks add nothing of substance to your paper; by distracting from your point, they subtract substance. Moreover, they suggest that you are unsure what to say and are looking to fill space. So just get right to the point.

5. **Write clearly**. Philosophical ideas are often abstract and subtle, which makes it is easy to get lost. So it is especially important to write clearly and simply: in short sentences, avoiding very long paragraphs, and signaling transitions. If a sentence occupies more than (say) 4 lines, find a way to divide it up; if a paragraph goes on for more than 20 lines, make it two paragraphs; if your paper falls into sections, make sure to include a sentence or two of connective tissue between the sections. Moreover, put things as simply as you can. Writing philosophy papers does not require words that are esoteric, long, or newly invented. The rules for poetry and fiction are different. But philosophy is neither poetry nor fiction, and your papers need to focus readers' attention on the ideas you wish to express, not on the words you have chosen to express those ideas. As George Orwell (author of *1984*) wrote, "good prose is like a windowpane." Bad writing smudges the window.

6. **Do not make the writing boring and clumsy**. Clear and simple prose does not have to be boring. Introduce some stylistic variety. For example, do not start every sentence with the subject. Moreover, stay away from passive constructions. ("I wrote these guidelines," rather than "These guidelines were written by me.") Do not have too many sentences that begin "It is..." or "There are...." Though such constructions are sometimes appropriate, overusing them slows things down. Avoid long strings of prepositional clauses (why not say "the man's picture" instead of "the picture of the man").

7. **Support assertions**. When you attribute a position to someone whose work you are discussing, provide some evidence for the attribution by noting relevant passages. You need not include quotations. As a general rule, you should only quote a passage if the passage plays an important role in the paper (say, it is a passage that you will want to be able to refer back to at various points in the argument), or if you think that there is some controversy about whether the philosopher held the view you are attributing to him or her. Do not submit a paper that strings together lots of quotations.

8. **Philosophy is not high school debate**. Writing good philosophy is not like winning a competitive debate. You can beat the competition by mustering a large number of arguments, and keeping your opponent off-balance. In philosophy papers, the point is not to win a competition, but to convince yourself and a skeptical reader that what you are saying is reasonable, perhaps correct. One good argument, explored in depth, beats three or four quick and dirty ones. The best philosophy papers identify objections to the author's thesis and state those objections in the strongest way possible. Try to do this. Why? Because your aim is to isolate the truth of the matter and not to win an argument. So state (and give arguments for) some objections to your position and then answer those objections as best you can. In philosophy, as in life, it is a virtue to admit the weaknesses of your argument, rather than pretending that your position faces no difficulties.

9. When you finish writing, **read your paper out loud** to yourself or a friend. If it does not sound right, it will not read right. (And rewrite to correct the deficiencies.) Ask your friend to offer a summary of your main argument. If your friend's summary is not what you had in your head, perhaps your paper is not clear.

10. You may once have been told not to use the **first person singular**. Forget that bad advice. ("In this paper, I will argue that...." is fine.) Papers are personal, and using "I" makes good sense.

11. **Avoid using words like "truly" or "really" or "surely" in your writing.** They are typically very difficult to use well in a philosophy paper, as in "What Bentham really means here is that..." or "But the true form of utilitarianism is..." or "Surely any thinking person acknowledges the importance of human rights..." "Truly" and "really" and "surely" are usually thin shields to cover your inability or unwillingness to argue for your position.
Finally, a passage from Bertrand Russell that might help you think about your task in writing a good philosophy paper:

"As usual in philosophy, the first difficulty is to see that the problem is difficult. If you say to a person untrained in philosophy, 'How do you know I have two eyes?' he or she will reply, 'What a silly question! I can see you have.' It is not to be supposed that, when our inquiry is finished, we shall have arrived at anything radically different from this unphilosophical position. What will have happened will be that we shall have come to see a complicated structure where we thought everything was simple, that we shall have become aware of the penumbra of uncertainty surrounding the situations which inspire no doubt, that we shall find doubt more frequently justified than we supposed, and that even the most plausible premises will have shown themselves capable of yielding implausible conclusions. The net result is to substitute articulate hesitation for inarticulate certainty."

Bertrand Russell
An Inquiry Into Truth and Meaning