

How to Write an Assignment and How to Read a Philosophy Text

By

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• About Essays and Term Papers

Handouts: No font/size, no restriction of any sort. It should normally be no longer than 4 pages. It should present in bullet points the main theses and arguments of the paper you are discussing. Possibly, conclude the handouts with one or two questions for discussion.

Essays: Times New Roman 12, spacing 1,5; standard Word page margins. Page count: 4-6 (excluding references).

Term paper: Times New Roman 12, spacing 1,5; standard Word page margins. Page count: 10-12 (BA-students), 15-16 (MA-students) (excluding references).

Academic writing: All written texts should have the following structure:

- **Introduction** (max. 1,5 pages): here you must state clearly: (a) what your goal is; and (b) provide some signposts about the next sections, e.g. “in §2 I will argue that...”; “in §3 I will provide an exposition of...” etc.
- **Sections:** marked with “§”, §1, §2, §3, etc. use as many sections as you need. In a term paper, the first section after the Introduction should contain a concise statement of the problem.
- **Conclusion** (max. 0,5 pages): briefly summarize your argument and the conclusion you draw from it.
- **Reference list:** Provide a list of all (and only) the works cited in the text (look at the reference list of any academic paper to have an idea of how to write a reference list; or simply ask the course instructor (i.e. me)).
- **Citation:** Always cite a source in the text when you are:
 - (a) simply reporting/using someone’s else ideas, unless this is very clear from the context;
 - (b) when you refer to significant passages or works to support your point.Citation can be *direct*: e.g. “As the Bard famously said: «All the world’s a stage, / and all the men and women merely players» (Shakespeare 2006, p. 227)”¹.
Or *indirect*: e.g. “As McDowell (1994, p. 22) says...” or “In his attack against sense-data, Austin (1962) argued that...”
- **Plagiarism:** Plagiarism’s a bad thing. Indeed, it is so bad, that it results in a direct fail of your exam. Be smart, do not plagiarize.

¹ Of course, Shakespeare did not write this in 2006. *As You Like It* was probably written at the end of 1598, first performed in early 1599, and first printed in the famous *First Folio* of 1623. When you cite a text, you should insert the year of the edition you have worked with. In this case, this is the Arden critical edition edited by Juliet Dusinberre. This is called the “Harvard” citation style.

- *Language*: All the texts and class discussion will be in English. In exceptional cases, if you have troubles writing your essay and term paper in English, you may write in German, but please, first inform the instructor (i.e. me) if you decide to do so.

● HOW TO READ PHILOSOPHY

Let's face it, philosophy is not easy. Reading a philosophy text sometimes we might feel lost. Here are some tips to deal successfully with the course material:

- *Be honest*. Gadamer said that we cannot get rid of all our biases — it is not even desirable to do so — so just be receptive to the text, be open to different opinions. This usually starts with an act of honesty with oneself: don't be overconfident about what you think you know, there are very few obvious things (if at all).
- *Underlie*. Read the text, underlie what you think is important, take a break, then re-read the text. Would you underlie the same lines or do you think you have missed something?
- *Time is key*. You cannot read the text in 10' and hope to fully understand it. Give yourself time.
- *Question*. When approaching a text, ask yourself 'What is the author's main point?' — look for passages/lines that reveal the author's intentions.
- *Arguments*. Philosophy is in the arguments. Always attentively scan the text for argumentative passages.
- *Divide et impera*. Sometimes arguments may be very complex, with main arguments and various subarguments and threads. The best way to go is to decompose the argument, untangling the different streams of thought.
- *Reconstruct*. You might try to reconstruct the core argument of the text by writing on a separate sheet only the core theses and their joints stated concisely (this is precisely what you should do in the handouts).
- *Play*. Ok, now that you have reconstructed the argument, you might still not understand some passages. Try just to imagine how the argument would look like without them. Does it still work? If so, congratulations! You've just spotted a weakness in the reading material! If it doesn't, ask yourself what is the argumentative role of this passage.
- *The silence of the premises*. A philosophy paper is made by what is written in it, plus what's *not* there. (Hemingway called this the 'iceberg theory' of writing). Sometimes the authors's premises or her assumptions may be problematic, or even not expressed, it's your task to unearth them.
- *Alternative*. Ok, sometimes an argument works perfectly well, yet you are incredulous about the conclusion. Or maybe the premises are wrong. Try to imagine alternative scenarios, how things could be.
- *Valid and Sound*. An argument may be valid, but is it also sound? 'Seth Brundle is a human', but 'If Seth Brundle is human, then he's a fly', therefore, 'Seth Brundle is a fly'. Ugh, unless we are in the world of Cronenberg's classic movie *The Fly* (1986), chances are that Seth cannot be a human *and* a fly. Ask yourself, are the propositions making up the valid argument also true?
- *The road to Larissa*. Another important aspect of philosophy writing and reading is not only whether the propositions we utter (or write/read) are true, but also whether they are justified, i.e. whether we have good reasons to support them and

use them as premises in our reasoning. (Sometimes it is ok to just accept something, after all, we must all start somewhere).

- *Understanding*. No, you will not understand everything. I'm sorry. You might read the text 50 times, and always learn something new, especially from the very best works. But I'll promise you, the more you read it, the better you'll understand it.
- *Come and ask*. Come to the class, ask questions: there is a 99,9% chance that you *haven't* understood the text if don't have any questions. Remember also, it's better to ask what you think is a "stupid" question rather than not voicing your doubts.
- *Game over, start again*. Sometimes you cannot ask questions because you have so many of them you don't even know where to start. I know how it feels. But this is so because you probably haven't read the text carefully enough. That's a game over, you ought to start again, this time, proceed more carefully.
- *Resist and bite*. If you think, upon a second and third reading you still don't understand enough, you can come to the class and ask the instructor (again, me), it's ok. Before resorting to this solution, you can try the 'resist and bite' strategy: don't try to understand everything, focus on the very essence of the text: 'What's the conclusion? How does the author get there?' Resist as long as you can!
- *Allies*. You can ask other students to discuss difficult passages or things you do not understand at all, that depends on your learning style.
- *Always look on the bright side*. Don't forget to focus also on the rewarding side: yes, there's a lot you won't understand, but there's also a lot you *will* understand if you work through.