

# HOW TO WRITE A PHILOSOPHICAL PAPER: KEY IDEAS TO HELP YOU

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- I. **Goal:** The point of writing a first person, analytical research paper whereby you cogently (1) summarize the philosophical problem you plan to tackle, offer a competent and challenging response to the problem, anticipate potential objections, and give counter-replies.
  
- II. **Start Early:** Put your thoughts on paper long before you expect to turn in the assignment. Have a conversation about the components of your topic with someone in class after you write your thoughts down. Look at your topic every few days and see if what you wrote down convinces you that your argument/position is worthwhile, pertinent, and possesses explanatory power.
  - A. Repeatedly ask yourself if your paper is logical, existential relevant, and offers explanatory power.
  - B. Each paragraph should be a unit of thought that advances or clarifies your argument.
  - C. Write clearly. Remove unnecessary words.
  - D. Stay on target! Do not follow “rabbit trails.”
  - E. 3-7 sentences per paragraph; no more than 14 lines down (rule of thumb).
  
- III. **Outline:** Start with an outline of the paper following the format below. Even a rough map of where you are going is better than none at all.

## **Example:**

- I. **Introduction:** 5-7 sentences. Be sure to state your topic with specificity...be exact, clear, and methodical.
  - A. What is your thesis topic/problem?
  - B. What will be your conclusion?
  - C. How will you proceed to meet your goal?
  
- II. **Body Paragraphs:**
  - A. Argument
  - B. Defense of argument
  - C. Illustration of argument
  - D. Implications/consequences of your position.

D. What are potential objections?

E. Respond to potential objections with counter-replies.

**III. Conclusion** (restatement of introduction). 5-7 sentences.

**IV. Bibliography** (proper citation of bibliography).

- A. Divide your paper up according to with section headings.
- B. Introductory paragraph: Do not write an introductory paragraph until your paper is in its final form.
- C. Write first person voice for your paper: Example: “I define the knowability of God as...”
- D. **CAUTION:** When you use first person voice in your paper, be extra careful that you do not lapse into an informal, chatty style. Rather, simply give the facts and at all times avoid unnecessary words, useless conversational fillers, etc.

This is inappropriate:

*I was talking to my pastor on the phone the other day, and between us we came up with a great definition of the knowability of God. You are going to be absolutely convinced by my argument in this paper. I just thank God for what you are going to read and hope that you will be blessed by it. It blessed my pastor's wife, my beautiful spouse, and I hope it will be a blessing to you. However, I must say that I haven't written a paper in a long time, so I did the best I could, given the time I had.*

This is acceptable:

*This paper offers a biblical, coherent argument for the reliability of Scripture. I will begin by defining inerrancy. I will then prove that the Bible is without error based upon both external and internal claims of Scripture. I will then refute major arguments made against the inerrancy of Scripture. Lastly, I will offer practical suggestions on how to live in view of the Bible's factual inerrancy.*

**When writing a paper simply give the facts...nothing less, nothing more. I just want the facts. Be sure to write your facts down in complete sentences. Be exact in your wording.**

- E. **Avoid Ad hominem arguments:** These are arguments that attack the person rather than the substance of his or her views. Insulting comments of any kind directed at the author of a different worldview is to be avoided at all costs. Example, “He must be an idiot to believe in errancy.”
- F. **Give Proper Spelling, Punctuation, & Grammar:** Poor spelling and grammar will detract from the authority of your paper. It often helps to read your paper aloud to arrive at smooth sentence structure. Have a friend look at the paper for errors. You will not be graded on the mechanics of your writing, but if there are

significant errors, I may ask that you rewrite your paper with corrections.

- G. **Names:** The first time you mention an author, use her or his full name. All subsequent times use name only.
- H. **Rhetorical Questions:** It is sometimes tempting to move a paper along by asking rhetorical questions. For example, “What is a biblical worldview? Is it even possible to formulate a biblical worldview?” The concern we have is that you may end up asking questions but not answer them.
- I. **Avoid Contractions:** For example, “I sure *ain’t* going to believe that God is not knowable. In fact, I *shouldn’t* believe it. It *isn’t* what *I’ve* been taught.”
- J. **Avoid Humor:** Your topic is concerned with only the facts and how you will justify or substantiate those facts. Humor will not help you.
- K. **Regarding Quoted Material:** Never offer a quotation without telling us how you interpret a passage of the Bible or another book and why you included it. If you use a Bible passage for substantiation, don’t cite the whole passage. Rather, simply give the reference: Example: Philippians 2:5-8. If you use a Bible passage within a quotation, you may abbreviate the book (Phil. 2:5-8).
- L. **Be Original:** When we ask you to formulate a topic, it will not do to merely repeat what some other theologian, Bible scholar, or some other authority says. Rather, give your argument and prove it! Citing sources should only be secondary even though they are important to your paper.
- M. **Avoid unreliable sources on internet.**
- N. **Last Paragraph:** Avoid writing a lengthy summary paragraph at the end of your paper. Avoid statements like, “The ideas in this paper may be right, but who knows?” or “I’ve tried my best but I don’t know how to write well.”
- O. **Format for Papers recommended:**
  - 1. *Double Space (no double space between paragraphs)*
  - 2. *Proper cover sheet*
  - 3. *12 size font (new times or Romans only)*
  - 4. *One inch margins on all four sides*
  - 5. *Black and white print only (including charts)*
  - 6. *page numbers top right side*
  - 7. *Footnotes preferred but MLA style okay*
  - 8. *No spiral binding or folder; simply a staple*
  - 9. *.5 tabs*
  - 10. *Bibliography necessary.*

## **KEY REMINDERS:**

1. Just give your argument and support your argument.
2. Remove all unnecessary words that do not support your argument.
3. In your introduction define your topic, explain your objective/purpose/goal, and how you will proceed to meet that objective/purpose/goal.
4. Do not appeal to experience; do not preach; do not give a commentary; do not give testimonies; do not make it conversational.
5. Proofread, proofread, and proofread for proper grammar and spelling.
6. Does your paper flow logically? Do your points substantiate your argument?
7. Have you considered substantive alternative arguments or positions?
8. Have you cited substantive bibliographical sources?
9. Only give biblical references (e.g., John 3:16) unless you are going to explain or exegete a specific passage or portion of Scripture. In other words, do not fill your paper up with Scripture quotations; just give the reference unless you need to exegete the passage.
10. Does your conclusion a restatement of your introduction indicating how you accomplished your goal.
11. Does your paper contain any character attacks? If so, remove them.
12. Have you thought about your paper critically, cogently, meditatively, and reflectively?
13. Have you made sure that you listed all the sources you consulted in your bibliography?
14. Did you follow MLA or Chicago Manual Style format correctly?
15. Is there any case that can be made against you that you committed plagiarism?