

Some common mistakes in philosophy papers

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This is a work in progress. Comments and suggestions are welcome!

In the typical philosophy paper, your aim is to *convincingly*, *efficiently*, and *clearly* make a focused point that an intelligent but *uninformed* reader could understand. Below are some common mistakes students make that keep them from achieving that aim.

Logistical mistakes

Mistake: Not reading the prompt and doing what it asks for.

Why this is a mistake: Prompts are designed to fit with specific learning goals, and instructors often grade papers partly through comparison with one another. It's always worth double-checking that you're writing the paper your instructor wants!

Assumptions about your reader

Mistake: Assuming that, since your paper makes sense to you, it will make sense to your reader.

Why this is a mistake: Your reader isn't approaching your paper with your same background and way of thinking. So it's part of your job to spell things out in such a way that a patient, thoughtful reader can understand. This requires some *intellectual empathy*: imagining how your sentences will seem to someone who has been thinking about different things in different terms.

Mistake: Assuming background knowledge and memory on the reader's part.

Why this is a mistake: A good philosophy paper is one that any intelligent reader could understand, even if she did not have any background knowledge of philosophy, and even if she is forgetful or distracted while reading the paper.

Stylistic mistakes

Mistake: Writing more abstractly than you need to.

Example of this mistake:

"The conceptual space in which the objection is considered can shift the reasons for denying the acceptability of the dialectical context."

Why this is a mistake: Abstract language is typically harder to understand than concrete language, and much more open to misunderstandings. Your writing will be more efficient and (so) more convincing if it is simple.

Mistake: Writing long sentences.

Why this is a mistake: Longer sentences take more mental work to understand, and so reduce your reader's ability to understand (and so be convinced by) what you're saying.

Mistake: Using lots of semi-colons

Why this is a mistake: Semi-colons are somewhat difficult to use well. They're often used in ways that make a sentence longer than it needs to be (see previous mistake). It's safest to just avoid them.

Mistake: Using demonstratives and pronouns without clear antecedents for them.

Example of this mistake: “Kant claims that the space is merely a form of intuition and that transcendental realism is false. He assumes that it is self-evident.”

Why this is a mistake: The reader cannot easily figure out what “it” in the second sentence here refers back to. This can also occur with “this,” “that,” “the former,” “the latter,” and all pronouns. If it’s not clear from the written context what these would mean, then give the full noun instead.

Mistake: Not providing proper references for direct quotes.

Example of this mistake: “Kant states that ‘experience is nothing but a continual joining together (synthesis) of perceptions.’ By this, he means that...”

Why this is a mistake: Your reader should be able to easily verify that the author you are discussing did make the claims you ascribe to them, and to be able to check what context the quoted claim appears in. Also be sure to give more than just the page number. Without knowing what edition of a work you’re referring to, a page number is not very helpful.

Mistake: Not using a consistent, familiar reference style.

Examples of this mistake: “In her article, *Kant’s Idealism and the Secondary Quality Analogy*, Lucy Allais discusses the idealist view Kant defends in the ‘Critique of Pure Reason’ and the ‘*Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*.’”

Why this is a mistake: There’s no objective reason. But consistency and use of a familiar style makes things easier on the reader, leaving them more cognitive space to focus on what matters.

Mistake: Not including a space before parenthetical references.

Example of this mistake: “Kant says that our concept for substance is ‘wholly independent from experience’(Prolegomena 4:315).”

Why this is a mistake: Including a space is just a stylistic convention. So not including it is visually distracting for readers who are used to it.

Mistake: Not giving the full name of authors when you mention them.

Why this is a mistake: When you first mention some author in a paper, assume you are introducing them to the reader. Unless they are so famous that a reader could recognize them by their last name alone (e.g., Plato), give their first and last name. That will keep the reader from confusing them with someone else. After the first mention, though, just use the last name.

Small-scale content mistakes

Mistake: Using jargon without defining it.

Why this is a mistake: Undefined jargon makes it impossible for an intelligent but uninformed reader to fully understand what you are saying. Your reader has to guess what a term or phrase means.

Mistake: Citing dictionary definitions.

Why this is a mistake: Dictionaries aim to record common understandings of the meanings of words. Since these understandings are common knowledge, you don’t need to provide a citation in support of them. If you need to disambiguate *among* common understandings, just say what you mean (a dictionary doesn’t support one disambiguation over another).

In addition, some philosophical terms (pieces of jargon) are used in ways that don’t line up with most dictionary definitions. If a term isn’t common knowledge, and so does need defining, use the philosophical text you’re discussing to provide its definition.

Mistake: Using jargon, acronyms, and abbreviations (even defined ones) when they are not needed.

Why this is a mistake: Jargon makes a paper harder for an intelligent but uninformed reader to understand what you are saying. Even if you provide definitions, your reader has to keep track of what the jargon, acronyms, and abbreviates mean.

Mistake: Adding formalism (symbols, mathematics, etc.) when it's not needed.

Why this is a mistake: In rare cases, formalism is needed to make a point clearly, and some topics in philosophy are about formal issues. But most of the time, formalism just makes the paper harder to read (see previous mistake).

Mistake: Giving more definitions and background than is needed.

Why this is a mistake: You want to make your core point as efficiently as possible. Adding more definitions and background takes up some of your reader's attention, and so leaves less mental space for your point to sink in. So you have to make a judgment call about which words really need definitions, and which ones don't (most don't).

Mistake: Not distinguishing *uses* of a word from *mentions* of it.

Example of this mistake: "The term metaphysics refers to the study of ultimate reality."

Why this is a mistake: When you're talking about (*mentioning*) a word, such as "metaphysics," that word should be in quotation marks. When you're *using* the word to talk about something in the usual way, you don't need quotation marks.

Mistake: Using rhetorical questions.

Example of this mistake: "Does Kant really think that everyone will agree with him that space is infinite?"

Why this is a mistake: A rhetorical question doesn't give reasons for accepting or rejecting some claim, but merely indicates that it should be accepted or rejected. Philosophical writing is about giving reasons. In addition, any rhetorical question can be rewritten as a direct statement. Doing so almost always makes it easier for the reader to follow. Finally, many rhetorical questions have the effect of alienating those who disagree with the implication (think about how you'd feel if you read "Is anyone really stupid enough to spend their time reading about common mistakes in philosophy papers?"), and so make it harder to convince those readers.

Larger-scale content mistakes

Mistake: Not included something the paper prompt asked for.

Example of this mistake: Leaving out a 'reply to the author' section when the prompt asked for one.

Why this is a mistake: One of the things a course grade reflects (which future employers care about) is whether someone can accomplish a task the way it is described.

Mistake: Discussing the *author* or the author's *presentation* of her view, instead of the view itself.

Example of this mistake:

"Conway begins her second chapter with a summary..."

"Kant seems to be biased in favor of..."

Why this is a mistake: Philosophy is primarily interested in figuring out whether we should accept or reject certain *views*. Most of the time, when we want to decide whether a view is right, it's just not relevant who the person is who proposed the view, or how they chose to present it. (There are exceptions to this, such as when a person's identity or position gives them special justification for making some claim.)

Mistake: Trying to include multiple objections or arguments.

Why this is a mistake: For most philosophy writing, it takes an entire paper to make *one* point or argument well. You might have a number of good points in mind, but if you try to include more than one, chances are that you won't be able to make any of them persuasively. Aim to make *one* point decisively, in a way that anticipates (and deals with) likely ways your reader might misunderstand you.

Mistake: Using hand-wave-y, grandiose claims, especially at the beginning of the paper.

Example of this mistake: "For millennia, philosophers have tried to discover the nature of consciousness."

Why this is a mistake: These sorts of claims don't help you make your argument, and are typically either highly ambiguous or false.

Mistake: Not giving an *independent reason* for why you reject the conclusion.

Example of this mistake: "I believe that Strawson's claim that we lack free will is incorrect, since my choices are free. As an example, I freely chose to come to class today. Since I made this free choice, I have free will."

Why this is a mistake: To convince someone of a claim, it's rarely enough to just state the claim. You want to give reasons in favor of the claim that could draw your reader in. Those reasons should be distinct from the claim itself, not just another formulation of the claim.

Mistake: Sliding between talk of representations and of objects

Example of this mistake: "We make choices because we have an idea of our free will."

Why this is a mistake: Normally, we don't think it's our *idea* of free will that explains why we make choices, but free will itself. Don't talk of ideas, beliefs, opinions unless that's really your topic.

Commonly misused words and phrases

Here are some words that I often see misused in student papers (though some of these uses would be fine in other contexts). It's best to just avoid them unless you're sure you really need them:

- "logic"/"logical"/"illogical": These terms have a specific, technical use in philosophy, concerning inferential relations. Do not use them to mean "good"/ "bad" or "reasonable"/ "unreasonable."
- "valid"/ "invalid": These terms also have a specific technical use in philosophy. "Valid" is used to describe arguments or inferences where, *if* the premises were true, the conclusion would have to be true (so an argument can be valid even when its premises are false). Arguments or inferences without that property are invalid. Do not use these words to mean "good"/ "bad" or "reasonable"/ "unreasonable." And do not talk about individual claims being valid or invalid – only arguments have those properties.
- "sound" / "unsound": These terms also have a specific technical use in philosophy. "Sound" is used to describe arguments or inferences that are valid (in the above sense) and have true premises. Arguments or inferences without that property are unsound. Do not use these words to mean "good"/ "bad" or "reasonable"/ "unreasonable." And do not talk about individual claims being sound or unsound – only arguments have those properties.
- "true argument": Philosophers never say that an *argument* or *inference* is true. Arguments and inferences can be valid and sound (see above), but only claims, statements, and propositions can be true. Same goes for "false."

- “argument”: This is a very useful word in philosophy. But it should be used only for *combinations* of claims where some claims (premises) support another claim or claims (conclusions). Do not use “argument” to refer to a single claim by itself.
- “infers”: This word is fine if it’s talking about something a *person* does. For example: “From the fact that he thinks, Descartes infers that he exists.” But students sometimes use it to mean “implies,” as in: “The fact that Descartes thinks infers that he exists.” Don’t use it in this second way. For philosophers, implication is a logical relation that holds between facts or propositions. Inferring is an action a thinker performs.
- “defends that”: Philosophers love the word “that,” since it makes it clear what the claim is that’s being discussed. But, grammatically-speaking, not all verbs work with “that” clauses. “argue that” and “object that” are fine, but “defends that” does not (“defends the view that” is better).
- “rational”: Rationality is a fascinating and difficult philosophical topic. When you say something is rational, you are bringing that topic into your discussion. Unless you’re actually writing about rationality, it’s better to leave this word out.
- “essential”/“essentially”: Essences are a fascinating and difficult philosophical topic in metaphysics (some philosophers deny essences exist). When you mention essentiality, you are bringing that topic into your discussion. Unless you’re actually writing about this metaphysical issue, it’s better to leave this word out.
- “obviously”: Very little is obvious in philosophy. Moreover, stating that a claim is obvious does not give your reader any reason to accept it. Never assume that the views you are arguing against are stupid.
- “proves”/ “refutes” / “demonstrates”: In philosophy, these terms indicate certain *success*. If you have proven something, you have shown that it is true with 100% certainty, and if you have refuted something, you have shown it is false with 100% certainty. That kind of success happens in philosophy, but it’s rare enough that most professional philosophers avoid claiming to have proven or refuted anything unless they’re working within a formal system like modal logic.
- “subjective” / “objective”: These terms are used in a wide number of ways in philosophy (there are books and articles about their different meanings!). In fact, they have so many meanings that you shouldn’t use them without explaining what you mean by them. Better to just leave them out unless the topic really calls for them.
- “highlight”: Students sometimes use this word to mean “claim” or “state.” What it means, though, is to draw attention to something that we’re already aware of.
- “begs the question”: In philosophy, this term has a specific technical meaning. It describes the mistake of using a premise in one’s argument when that premise could only be justifiably accepted if one already were justified in accepting the conclusion of the argument (a form of circular reasoning). In non-academic English, however, this phrase is instead often used to mean “raises a question.” To avoid confusion, avoid the phrase altogether unless you really need the philosophical sense.