

15 of the Most Common Mistakes in Philosophy Term Papers (And How to Avoid Them)

Ben Gibran

www.biggerliving.com

1. Just answering the question

The one thing you should never do in a philosophy paper is 'just answer the question'. At the very least, you'll need to explain how you understand the question: what the 'background' to it is, what the key terms mean, and the significance of the question in relation to its background.

Take the question 'Discuss the Russell-Strawson debate on definite descriptions'. Your introduction should explain what the 'Russell-Strawson debate' is (the background), define 'definite description' (and other key terms), and show how the question relates to problems addressed by Russell and Strawson. You would be expected to discuss the secondary literature and situate your answer within the larger debate, both in your introduction (in outline) and throughout your paper (in more detail). To avoid wasting time in blind alleys, it's highly recommended to plan your paper beforehand.

In some cases, you may need to question the question: interrogate its underlying assumptions and discuss any internal contradictions, modifying your answer accordingly (while remaining relevant to the question). For instance, the question 'does ethics owe more to nature than to nurture?' implies that biological and social categories are mutually exclusive. You may wish to question this assumption, perhaps mentioning that aspects of 'nature' (such as the environment, and differences between the sexes) have been shaped by social evolution over millenia (then explain how this will affect your answer).

A caveat: it is never a good idea to question the question simply to avoid answering the question! After you've done all the above, that's pretty much your introduction. It starts off as an outline, sufficient to guide you in

writing the paper. The complete introduction (and conclusion) will usually have to wait till your main arguments are done.

2. Not qualifying your arguments

Many philosophy papers suffer from being over-extended, making too many sweeping generalizations, and vague or ambiguous assertions. You don't have to be absolutely definite about everything, provided you qualify your arguments by pointing out limitations, boundaries, assumptions and exceptions (while avoiding 'death by a thousand qualifications!'). As you write, ask yourself how someone might misunderstand, misconstrue, misapply or otherwise 'twist' your arguments and conclusions. Then add the corresponding caveats, signposts and disclaimers along the way.

3. Thinking you have an original idea

If you think you have an original idea, find out who thought of it first, then find out what others said about it. The importance of a thorough literature survey cannot be overemphasised. Whatever your arguments and conclusions, you need to relate them to what has gone before, and show how you've made a contribution to the debate. The best way to explore the literature is by following the references in the most recent articles, then going backwards in the debate. This technique allows you to track the development of the debate, something you don't see easily in an alphabetical (and possibly incomplete) bibliography.

4. Using an argument without discussing potential counter-arguments in a systematic way

Instead of arguing for and against *ad infinitum*, try to show how the pattern of arguments and counter-arguments exposes an underlying synthesis, middle-way or alternative route. Michelangelo once said that every block of stone has a statue trapped inside and the sculptor's task is to release it. Your paper should explore the literature in the same expository way, gradually and systematically prying apart arguments to release underlying truths, rather than randomly smashing arguments together to see what

comes out. A bad paper looks like a bad sculpture, contrived and unnatural, with arguments just stuck together like bits of plasticine.

5. Using a quote, example, or conjunctive expressions like 'thus', 'therefore', 'thereby', 'however', 'it follows that', 'etc'...in place of an argument

Even if a quote says exactly what you want to say, you're better off paraphrasing it in your own words and adding 'value' with your own observations. Unless, of course, you're quoting for the record. Philosophical writing has a tendency to be abstract, and it pays to anchor your arguments in concrete examples and realistic thought-experiments, provided you're not using them in place of arguments.

A well thought-out example is priceless in embedding your arguments in reality, but on its own, it explains nothing. Examples have to be thoroughly explicated and embedded in arguments, not just thrown in as an afterthought. Be mindful of potential counter-examples and discuss them too. If you've done a good job of showing what you mean you don't need hints like 'thus', 'therefore', 'however' and so on. Such conjunctive terms are often too vague for the purpose, giving an impression of intellectual laziness. You're better off spelling out the connection.

6. Confusing a definition with what it defines

The meaning of an expression is never exhausted by its definition. Definitions serve to narrow the scope of an expression in order to highlight those aspects of it that you wish to discuss. Even seasoned philosophers make the mistake of defining a term, then arguing that whatever applies to the definition applies to what it defines (just look at the literature on the meaning of 'art!'). Language isn't a precisely engineered machine. As Wittgenstein puts it memorably “Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses” (*Philosophical Investigations*, §18). Words always overflow their definitions, like plants outgrowing their pots.

7. Using a technical term (especially an '-ism') without checking if it really means what you think it means, and not just in a dictionary!

Don't assume that because a term is used a certain way by one philosopher, that it's used that way by all of them (or by the same philosopher the same way twice!). Many technical terms in philosophy have more than one meaning (e.g. 'ego': is that the Cartesian or the Freudian ego?), and many terms have a different meaning in philosophy than they do in a dictionary. Even dictionaries of philosophy may not capture the full sense or all meanings of an expression. The only reasonably safe way to discern the meaning of a technical term is to follow it through the literature from its first use onwards, noting any deviations and mentioning them in your paper if necessary (to avoid confusion).

8. Conflation and over-distinction

Two (or more) concepts are conflated when we use them interchangeably when we shouldn't. The classic examples (arguably) are the concepts of 'mind' and 'brain' in the argument that mental activity is nothing more than brain activity. Often, only one of the conflated concepts is used, but conclusions are drawn that really apply to other 'suppressed' concepts (for instance, Frege attempted to de-conflate the concept of 'meaning' by splitting it into two other suppressed concepts, 'sense' and 'reference'). To avoid conflating concepts, always ask yourself if a particular difficulty could be resolved by splitting a vague or ambiguous concept into several that are more precise. Conversely, watch out for 'death by a thousand distinctions'! Only make a distinction if it really clarifies your point.

9. Using metaphors and analogies

Avoid metaphors and analogies where possible, as they tend to be vague and ambiguous. If you absolutely have to use some, be sure to point out precisely in what respects A is analogous to (or a metaphor for) B, and mention any potentially misleading disanalogies. Think of the New York subway map, it's analogous to the actual subway in the order of stations, but not in distances between stations (it isn't a precise scale model). All

analogies and metaphors are potentially misleading in that way, hence the danger in their use and the need to carefully delimit their application.

10. Appealing to intuition

Sometimes unavoidable, but try to avoid it as best you can. Intuitions are always subjective and often highly context-dependent, though particular intuitions may be widely shared. Never appeal to intuition alone, always use other supporting arguments. Arguments solely based on what 'people generally think' or what seems 'self-evident' just don't cut any ice philosophically.

11. The floating indexical

This is more of a grammatical point, but a floating indexical like 'it' or 'this' can be fatal in a philosophy paper, where subtle distinctions can make a big difference. An indexical floats when it isn't clear exactly what it refers to, as in the statement 'The reference of an expression is its meaning'. Is the statement saying 'The reference of an expression is whatever the expression means' or 'The meaning of an expression is whatever the expression refers to'? A good example of conflation, thanks to one floating 'its'.

12. Hidden premises or logical fallacies

Philosophers love to dig out hidden unquestioned assumptions or logical fallacies that may be fatal to your thesis. Unfortunately, there's no sure-fire way of uncovering hidden premises, just try to make sure that you've thoroughly excavated and justified the assumptions in your argument.

Use more than one argument to make the same point; if all roads lead to Rome it matters less if one gets blown up! To insulate yourself further, use a range of argument forms apart from the strictly formal syllogism (few philosophers employ just that, because it doesn't fully reflect natural reasoning). It may help to study argument forms in comparable disciplines outside philosophy (such as law or literary studies). More about this in point 13 below.

13. Ignoring research in other disciplines

Most philosophers are wary of straying beyond the discipline in terms of subject-matter and (especially) methodology, so you'll need to be careful not to offend them by bringing in empirical data or methods to 'prove' a philosophical point. However, many interesting and important philosophical problems arise from encounters with other disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, physics and mathematics.

Experiments in psychology are cited in support of philosophical arguments about human nature, and some philosophers question the materialist assumptions of physics. By referencing other disciplines in your paper, you show that you're thinking for yourself and pushing the boundaries. The best place to look would be philosophical literature at the margins of disciplines, so you don't stray too far into unfamiliar territory and lose your fellow-travellers.

14. Not writing a proper conclusion

Think of your paper as an hourglass. It starts off broadly with a survey of the literature and gradually narrows down to the core of your thesis. The paper then broadens out again after you sum up your arguments and conclusions, as you discuss the wider implications (in amending or supplementing the literature, and raising issues for further study). This way, your paper comes full circle and re-connects with the Great Conversation that is philosophy. Otherwise, you'll end up in a dead-end.

15. Only doing your bibliography after finishing your paper

More of a logistical point. It's tempting to just jot down your references as you go along, in short-hand on little scraps of paper. But this tends to result in less time to actually write your paper, since you'll have to prepare your bibliography at the end. More than likely, you'll end up rushing your bibliography and making a mess of it. There are plenty of tools (like EndNote or ProCite) to record your references as you go along and automatically create a bibliography. If you find such software too cumbersome, try using an online database like CiteULike

(<http://www.citeulike.com>). Online or offline, bibliographical software's a great way to organize your notes for the long haul. You may also find mind-mapping software useful for planning essays. A freeware version is FreeMind (<http://freemind.sourceforge.net/>).

Author Note: This is very much a work-in-progress. Your comments are most welcome. Email them at <http://www.contactify.com/417da>

About the Author: Ben is the editor of *Ordinary Language Philosophy on the WWW* (www.biggerliving.com), a leading Internet resource on the 'Ordinary Language', 'Linguistic' or 'Oxford' School of philosophy, practiced by Gilbert Ryle, J. L. Austin and 'Later' Wittgenstein among others. Ordinary Language Philosophy (OLP) was a leading Anglo-American school of philosophy from 1930 to 1970, but was pronounced 'dead' in the late 60s.

The website aims to revive interest in OLP, by facilitating research and discussion on its principles, objectives, scope and significance. *OLP on the WWW* is featured in *Les Signets de la Bibliothèque nationale de France* ('Bookmarks of the National Library of France') at http://signets.bnf.fr/html/categories/109philo_eng.html. Ben is also a writer and researcher in Media and Communications, and his work has been published in the *Journal of Publishing*, *Publishing Research Quarterly* and *The Philosopher* (Journal of the Philosophical Society of England).