A Guide to Philosophical Writing
By Michael Huemer; expansions by Jay Quigley

This is my adapted version of philosopher Michael Huemer’s excellent, brief guide to philosophical writing. The original can be found here: http://home.earthlink.net/~owl233/writing.htm (as of 28 Dec. 2010).

This is not a comprehensive style guide; rather, it focuses on the most common problems Huemer and Quigley have found in student writing. Sections A and B give general tips on how to write a paper (esp. a philosophy paper). Sections C-F list common errors. Again, these are common errors, so don’t feel bad if you make a few occasionally. And please don’t be intimidated by the direct nature of the advice.

This is strictly for personal, non-commercial use and is not to be sold or otherwise distributed for profit without written permission from both Michael Huemer and Jay Quigley.

Contents:
A. The Content of a Philosophy Paper
B. Clarity & Style
C. Misused Words
D. Punctuation & Formatting
E. Grammar
F. Other Writing Mistakes
G. Recommended Reading

A. The Content of a Philosophy Paper
1. Thesis: A philosophy paper should have an easily identifiable point, something that you’re asserting. Make sure your paper does not (a) ramble on for a while without direction, (b) merely recount things that someone else said, or (c) ask a series of unanswered questions.
2. Arguments: It should present specific reasons for believing that thesis, not mere opinions. Ideally, a good argument should be:
   1. Plausible: the premises, for example, should be things that would initially seem true to most people.
   2. Support-providing: the premises should support the thesis you’re arguing for.
   3. Non-trivial: something that is not immediately obvious to most readers.
   4. Original, not just a repetition of something you read or heard in class.
   5. Non-question-begging (non-circular): the reasons given for your thesis should each be statements that are significantly different from the thesis itself, and that someone might accept before having made up their mind about your thesis.
3. Objections: Try to think of reasons someone might give for doubting your thesis, and indicate why those reasons are ultimately not persuasive.

B. Clarity & Style
1. Key Point: The purpose of (most non-fiction) writing is to communicate. It is not to make art or to impress the reader with your sophistication. Therefore . . .
2. **Be forthcoming**: State your thesis explicitly, right at the beginning. Here’s a good opening sentence: ‘In this paper, I argue that incest is praiseworthy.’ At the beginning of each section of the paper, state the conclusion of that section.

3. **Avoid journalistic “fluff”**: Many students have the habit of starting their papers with little stories, elaborate examples, or series of rhetorical questions. This is effective for some expository essays—for example, essays great for a newspaper, English class, or college application essay—but wastes valuable space in a philosophy paper (see B6). It is better merely to state your position and preview the reasons you will advance to support it. It is important to be able to adapt your writing style to different forums.

4. **Be organized**.
   1. **Use sections**: A paper should usually be divided into sections—much as this document is—unless the paper is very short and simple. Each section should have a name that clearly indicates what is in it. For example, you might have:
      1: Common views of incest
      2: Failed arguments for the common view
         2.1: The argument from birth defects
         2.2: The argument from emotional harm
      3: The virtues of incest
      4: Objections and replies
   2. **Give a roadmap**: It often helps communication to preview what will happen in a piece of writing. In addition to stating your thesis (see B2), this usually involves previewing the reasons you’ll advance to support it.

5. **Stick to the point**: Do not insert remarks that are not necessary to forwarding your central thesis.

6. **Be brief**: If you have an unusually long sentence, break it into shorter sentences. After writing a paper, go over it looking for words, sentences, or paragraphs that could be deleted without weakening your point.

   **Bad**: The question as to whether fish can experience pain is an important one. [13 words]
   **OK**: Whether fish experience pain is important. [6 words]
   **Bad**: It has not often been the case that any mistake has been made. [13 words]
   **OK**: Few mistakes were made. [4 words]

7. **Be specific**: Do not use a vague word or phrase when a more specific one is available. The first sentence below is bad because ‘related’ is one of the vaguest words there is; also, it doesn’t say what sort of obligations are being discussed.

   **Bad**: Rights are related to obligations.
   **Bad**: Rights imply obligations.
   **OK**: If someone has the right to do A, then others have the obligation not to stop him from doing A.

8. **Use plain language**: Do not use “sophisticated” or bombastic words in place of simpler, accurate words. Doing so makes your paper harder to read, and can make you look silly when you misuse the word.

---

1 This example is jocular; I am not advising you to write a paper on this.
2 From The Elements of Style, p. 67.
Bad: I am disinclined to acquiesce to your request.
OK: No.
Bad: I utilized a fork to ingest my comestibles.
OK: I used a fork to eat.

9. **Give examples:** When discussing an unfamiliar concept or claim, give examples that illustrate it. Give examples for every major thesis you defend or attack. For example, see the examples used in this document.

10. ‘View’ is a good word to use to refer to someone’s view. E.g., “Marquis argues for the view that abortion is pro tanto seriously immoral.” Also good: ‘position’. Sometimes good: ‘theory’ (connotes a position/view which is significantly developed; by contrast, someone might have a ‘view’ or ‘position’ without consciously deciding to adhere to it). Usually vague (and thus bad): ‘notion’, ‘idea’, ‘opinion’, and ‘belief’.

11. **Using little letters or numbers** can be helpful if you’re writing a list of items. E.g.: ‘Ernie believes that Bert should i) go home; ii) pack his suitcase; iii) get a ride to the airport; and iv) find his flight gate.’

12. **Err on the side of short paragraphs.** This makes it easier on the reader’s attention span.

13. **Don’t use obscure words and phrases**—not without defining them, anyhow. Make as few assumptions as reasonably possible about the reader’s background. For example, don’t assume she or he will be familiar with very many theories or terminology. Also, be consistent about the level of audience to which you are addressing your paper.

### C. Misused Words

God gave me golden tablets with all the rules of grammar inscribed on them. Actually, no. Grammatical rules are conventions adopted over time. One of their important functions is to regulate the ways that people communicate with each other (especially in writing, for example). Like it or not, writing conventions affect the tone of our writing. Making too many of the below mistakes could be compared to showing up to a high school graduation wearing flip-flops and a Natural Lite tank-top.

**The most common mistakes**

1. **feel/feel like:** Do not say ‘I feel’ or ‘I feel like’ when you mean ‘I believe that’. ‘Feeling’ generally refers to sensations or emotional states. Beliefs and views are (usually) not emotional (although sometimes people do have strong emotions about their views).
   - **Bad:** I feel like George Washington was the first U.S. president.
   - **Bad:** Nozick feels that property rights should not be violated.
   - **OK:** Nozick believes that property rights should not be violated.
   - **OK:** Tanya feels like a handful of almonds will satisfy her hunger.
   - **OK:** Tanya believes that a handful of almonds will satisfy her hunger.

2. **based off/based off of:** Do not use these phrases.
   - **Bad:** Hume’s argument is based off of three premises.
   - **OK:** Hume’s conclusion is based on three premises.

3. **argue:** ‘Argue’ is normally followed by ‘that’ or ‘for.’
   - **Bad:** Dennett argues compatibilism.
   - **Bad:** To argue this, he uses an analogy of a chess-playing computer.
   - **OK:** Dennett defends compatibilism.
OK: Dennett argues that free will is compatible with determinism. To argue for this, he uses an analogy involving a chess-playing computer.

4. *begs the question*: ‘To beg the question’ means ‘to give an argument in which one or more of the premises depend on the conclusion.’ It does not mean ‘to raise the question.’ For a good time, visit this ‘BTQ Awareness’ website: http://begthequestion.info/.

Bad: Honderich said that “there is no experimental evidence in a standard sense that there are any [quantum events],” which begs the question of what he thinks “experimental evidence in the standard sense” is.

OK: Jon argued that we should believe the Bible because it is the word of God, and we know it is the word of God because the Bible says it is the word of God. This argument begs the question.

5. *being that*: Never use this phrase.

Bad: Being that I just had a tofu sandwich, I am no longer hungry.

OK: Since I just had a tofu sandwich, I am no longer hungry.

6. *is when*: Avoid this colloquialism.

Bad: The straw man fallacy is when you attack a view that you falsely attribute to your opponent.

OK: The straw man fallacy is committed when one attacks a view that one falsely attributes to one’s opponent.

Common mistakes of meaning

7. *reference*: ‘To reference’ means ‘to cite a source.’ It does not mean ‘to talk about.’

Bad: He should make the argument for sense-data without referencing physical objects.

OK: He should make the argument for sense data without mentioning physical objects.

OK: He referenced his colleague’s work.

8. *infer, imply*: Do not use ‘infer’ to mean ‘imply.’ (To say or suggest something indirectly is to *imply* it.)

Bad: Are you inferring that I had something to do with the assassination?

OK: Are you implying that I had something to do with the assassination?

9. *as such*: Do not use ‘as such’ in place of ‘therefore.’ (‘As such’ may be used only when the subject of the sentence following is the same as that of the sentence preceding.)

Bad: Clocks usually tell the time of day. As such, an appeal to a clock may be used to support a belief about the time of day.

OK: Clocks usually tell the time of day. Therefore, an appeal to a clock may be used to support a belief about the time of day.

OK: W is commander-in-chief of the armed forces. As such, he can order bombings of other countries. [The last sentence means: As *commander-in-chief*, he can order bombings, etc.]

10. *such/as such*: Do not use ‘such’ to mean ‘this’ or ‘as such’ to mean ‘in that way.’
Bad: I believe the last step in the argument—that because x will most likely appear as such in the future means that x is as such—is a mistake.

OK: I believe the last step in the argument—that because x will most likely appear a certain way in the future, it is that way—is a mistake.

Some irregular suffixes

11. *phenomena* is the plural of *phenomenon*.

OK: We discovered an interesting phenomenon.

OK: We discovered many interesting phenomena.

12. *data* is the plural of *datum*.

Bad: Russell thinks that when you look at a table, all you see is a sense data.

OK: Russell thinks that when you look at a table, all you see is a sense datum.

OK: Russell thinks that when you look at a table, sense data are all you see.

Mistakes pertaining to truth and knowledge

13. *really*: This term is vague. Sometimes it means ‘truly’ or ‘in fact’. In other instances, it means ‘very’. You should avoid using ‘really’ in writing so that you don’t accidentally use it ambiguously.

14. *reality*: Do not use ‘reality’ to mean ‘appearance’ or ‘belief.’ Do not talk about whether reality is real or whether reality is true. ‘Reality’ means everything that is real (everything that exists).

Bad: Whose reality is true?

OK: Whose beliefs are true?

Bad: There are many different realities.

OK: There are many different beliefs.

15. *true*: Do not use ‘true’ to mean ‘believed.’

Bad: To the medievals, it was true that the sun went around the earth. But to us, this is not true.

OK: The medievals believed that the sun went around the Earth, but we do not believe this.

OK: The medievals believed that the sun went around the Earth, but that is not true.

16. *know*: Do not use ‘know’ to mean ‘believe,’ and especially do not use it to mean ‘falsely believe.’

Bad: Back in the middle ages, everyone knew the sun went around the earth.

OK: Back in the middle ages, everyone thought the sun went around the Earth.

17. *refute*: ‘To refute’ means ‘to prove the falsity of.’ It does not mean ‘to deny.’

Bad: Clinton refuted charges that he had sex with Monica.

OK: Clinton denied that he had sex with Monica.

Common, basic apostrophe issues

18. *it’s*: ‘It’s’ means ‘it is,’ not ‘belonging to it.’

Bad: My car lost one of it’s wheels on the freeway.
OK: My car lost one of its wheels on the freeway.

19. *their*/they’re/there: The first means ‘belonging to them.’ The second means ‘they are.’ The third refers to a place.

Bad: Their sure that there cat is still they’re.
OK: They’re sure that their cat is still there.

20. *You’re*: contraction (you are)
   *Your*: possessive

21. *Use contractions sparingly*, except when you’re making efforts to sound colloquial.
   **INFORMAL**: It’s . . .
   **USUALLY BETTER**: It is . . .

D. Punctuation & Formatting

1. *General formatting*: Papers for classes should generally have:
   - All pages numbered
   - A staple in the corner
   - Double-spacing
   - 1-inch margins
   - 12 point font

2. *Indenting Quotations*: quotations of 3 or more lines should be indented, without quotation marks, and with a blank line before and after.

   **Bad**: Robert Nozick writes:
   “Taxation of earnings from labor is on a par with forced labor. Some persons find this claim obviously true: taking the earnings of n hours labor is like taking n hours from the person; it is like forcing the person to work n hours for another’s purpose.” (Nozick 1974, 169)

   **OK**: Robert Nozick writes:
   Taxation of earnings from labor is on a par with forced labor. Some persons find this claim obviously true: taking the earnings of n hours labor is like taking n hours from the person; it is like forcing the person to work n hours for another’s purpose.  

3. *Source citations*: **Any time you say that someone held some view, cite the source, including the page number where they said that thing.**

   For citation methods, I prefer the *Chicago Manual of Style*’s author-date system. Brief online guidelines to this system can be found here. (Use the ‘T’-style citations in your

---

3 *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 169. [Note: In this footnote, I do not need to name the author I’m quoting, because the text already indicated that it was Robert Nozick.]

4 A properly-cited document looks more professional and thus more impressive. That said, citation is just a matter of etiquette, and not worth fussing too much about. *If you’re not sure how to cite something, there is no need to bend over backwards to make sure you are doing it properly if Jay Quigley is grading you.* (Postpone worry about those details for your senior honors thesis or a professional publication.)
text and the ‘R’-style in a bibliography at the end of your paper.) The idea is that your in-
text citations give the author and date (and page, if applicable), and your bibliography
entries start with the author and date.

EXAMPLE: IN TEXT: “There are many faces of nationalism, just as Janus had
many faces” (Nairn 1997, 73).

EXAMPLE: IN BIBLIOGRAPHY:
Books: Author. Year. Title of Book. City of publication: publisher. E.g.:

York: Verso.

Articles: Author. Date. “Article Title.” Journal Title volume #: pages of the
article. Example (note punctuation):

Michael Huemer and Ben Kovitz. 2003. “Causation as Simultaneous and

4. Spacing: Put spaces before opening parentheses, and after punctuation.

Bad: Nozick compares taxation to forced labor(p.169).
OK: Nozick compares taxation to forced labor (p. 169).

5. Punctuation & parentheses: Punctuation goes outside parentheses if the parenthetical
material is less than the complete sentence/clause that the punctuation is for.

OK: Hare’s definition is too narrow (it makes some physical facts “subjective”), while
Adams’ is too broad (it makes everything “objective”).

OK: In the weak sense, to undertake an obligation is, roughly, to purport
to place oneself under an obligation. (The exact analysis is not important here.)


Bad: “The past consistency...calls for some explanation...”
OK: “The past consistency . . . calls for some explanation. . . .”

7. Dashes: A dash ( -- or — ) is longer than a hyphen (-). Dashes do not come with spaces.

Bad: Our inalienable rights- to life, liberty, and handguns-are under constant attack by
liberal sissies.

OK: Our inalienable rights--to life, liberty, and handguns--are under constant attack by
liberal sissies.

OK: Our inalienable rights—to life, liberty, and handguns—are under constant attack by
liberal sissies.

8. Titles: Use italics for book and journal titles; use quotes for article and short story titles.

OK: Unger’s celebrated paper, “Why There Are No People,” first appeared in Midwest
Studies in Philosophy, volume IV.
9. **Scare quotes:** Do not insert gratuitous quotation marks around perfectly normal words. (How would you like it if I told you that I “read” your “paper” over the weekend?)

**Bad:** Scientists use experiments to “prove” the “truth” of their theories.
**OK:** Scientists use experiments to prove the truth of their theories.
**OK:** Scientists use experiments to try to prove their theories.

### E. Grammar

1. **Modifiers placed at the beginning of a sentence** attach to the **subject** of the sentence. The first example sentence below is bad because it means that John was carrying a mouse in his mouth (it also rudely calls John “it”). The second just doesn't make sense.

**Bad:** Carrying a mouse in its mouth, John saw the cat enter the room.
**Bad:** By using this premise, it makes Hume's argument more plausible.
**OK:** John saw the cat enter the room carrying a mouse in its mouth.
**OK:** By using this premise, Hume makes his argument more plausible.

2. **Parallelism:** Phrases or sentences that have similar functions (such as items in a list, or items joined by ‘either . . . or’) should have grammatically parallel forms. In the **OK** examples below, I have added emphasis to the key words that are grammatically parallel. In the **Bad** examples, I have added emphasis to the relevant non-parallel words.

**Bad:** Guns are for family protection, to hunt dangerous or delicious animals, and keep the King of England out of your face.
**OK:** Guns are for protecting your family, hunting dangerous or delicious animals, and keeping the King of England out of your face.
**OK:** The purpose of guns is to protect your family, hunt dangerous or delicious animals, and keep the King of England out of your face.\(^5\)

3. The **impersonal ‘you’** is acceptable, but make sure that you don’t make the reader think you are talking about him or her (unless you are). Less natural, but more accurate, is the locution ‘one’. This is part of making writing clearer than everyday speech.

**SOMETIMES UNDESIRABLE:** If you’ve committed murder and you’re convicted, you’ll go to jail.
**BETTER:** One who has committed murder will likely be sent to prison if convicted.

4. **Avoid the using ‘they’ in the singular.** If you don’t want to use ‘one’ or ‘you’, and instead talk about ‘someone’ or ‘a person’, the correct objective case pronouns are ‘him’ or ‘her’, and the correct possessive pronouns are ‘his’ and ‘her’. Usually, all of this is avoidable by just using the plural and talking about ‘people’.

**Bad:** You might want a pine tree in your house for Christmas.
**OK:** One might want a pine tree in one’s house for Christmas.
**OK:** Someone might want a pine tree in his or her house for Christmas.

---

\(^5\) Paraphrase of Krusty in The Simpsons, “The Cartridge Family.”
Bad: Someone might want a pine tree in their house for Christmas.
OK: People might want pine trees in their houses for Christmas.

5. Avoid *run-on sentences*.
6. Avoid *sentence fragments*.

F. Other Writing Mistakes

1. *Who is to say?:* Sometimes people use the phrase ‘who is to say . . . ?’ to indicate that either i) someone’s argument isn’t a good one or ii) that a certain issue is unresolvable. Even if you think that (i) or (ii) is true, you should argue in more direct and substantive terms that the argument is bad or the issue unresolvable—giving reasons to think so—rather than using a phrase like this. (Technically, when you use this phrase, you’re asking who is well qualified to argue about an issue. The answer is: anyone with sufficient evidence [is ‘to say’]!)

2. *Avoid rhetorical questions.* Instead, make statements which clearly state your point.

3. *Avoid cliché words and phrases.*

Bad: You know you’re really over the hill, and may well kick the bucket, if you use clichés, because they’re not really very black and white, and they can pave the way to a catch-22. Some say they’re immaterial, neither here nor there, but they’re just missing the forest for the trees.

4. *Misquoting:* When taking a quotation, copy down exactly what appears in the text. Avoid introducing grammatical, punctuation, or spelling errors of your own. If you omit something from the text, use ellipses ( . . . ). If you need to add something to the text, put it in square brackets, [like this]. For example, the following appears (exactly as written here) in a book by Russell:

His theoretical errors, however, would not have mattered so much but for the fact that, like Tertullian and Carlyle, his chief desire was to see his enemies punished, and he cared little what happened to his friends in the process.

I might quote this as follows:

**OK:** Russell writes:

\[
\text{[Marx’s]} \text{ theoretical errors . . . would not have mattered so much but for the fact that . . . his chief desire was to see his enemies punished, and he cared little what happened to his friends in the process.}
\]

I insert “[Marx’s]” in place of “His” so readers who can’t see the context know whom Russell was talking about. I use square brackets to indicate that this is my insertion/substitution. I use ellipses where I omitted unnecessary words. (Obviously, do not omit anything whose omission changes the meaning of the passage.)

5. *Negative phrasing:* It is not best to phrase things negatively. ‘Rarely’ is better than ‘not often.’ ‘Unnecessary’ is better than ‘not necessary,’ while ‘needless’ is better than either.

---

Bad: It is not often necessary to use the expression ‘the case.’
OK: The expression ‘the case’ is rarely needed.

6. **Needless qualifiers:** These are phrases that, I think, unnecessarily weaken your statements. The following are often (but not always) needless qualifiers: ‘I think,’ ‘I attempt,’ ‘it seems,’ ‘could be,’ ‘if I am correct,’ ‘my claim is,’ ‘we are justified in concluding.’ Confidence makes for more impressive reading (but this is not to encourage overstating your case).

   Bad: In this paper, I will attempt to defend moral realism.
   OK: In this paper, I defend moral realism.

   Bad: My speculations on this score are at best the roughest approximations to the truth. Still, I try sketching a naturalistic picture of human normative life, and enough in it coheres and fits the phenomena to make me think the truth may lie somewhere in its vicinity.\(^7\)
   OK: The naturalistic picture of normative life that I sketch is probably approximately correct.

   Bad: My claim is that \(x\). If I am right, then it follows that \(y\).
   OK: \(x\). Therefore, \(y\).

7. **Redundancy:** Omit unnecessary or redundant words.

   Bad: It could be said that it is a fact about the world that clocks usually tell the time of day.
   OK: Clocks usually tell the time of day.

   Bad: Testimony is not sufficient enough to defeat a perceptual belief.
   OK: Testimony is not sufficient to defeat a perceptual belief.

   Bad: It may be possible to rephrase this sentence more concisely. [This means, ‘It is possible that it is possible to rephrase this sentence more concisely.’]
   OK: It is possible to rephrase this sentence more concisely.
   OK: This sentence can be phrased more concisely.

8. **Passive voice:** This should usually be avoided.

   Bad: That people exist has been denied by Peter Unger.
   OK: Peter Unger has denied that people exist.

9. **Repetition:** Don’t repeat yourself. Do not say the same thing over and over again. Additional sentences should add something that was not stated earlier.

10. **Undermining your credibility:** Although I’m not claiming that you should listen to me, here are some things that make readers wonder why they’re wasting their time reading your paper:

   1. *Admitting that you don’t know what you’re talking about,* as in ‘This is just my opinion,’ or ‘The conclusions defended in this paper may well be mistaken.’ If you find that have nothing definite to say about a topic, you shouldn’t write on it. Choose a different topic.

---

\(^7\) This is a quotation from Allan Gibbard, Wise Choices, Apt Feelings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. viii.
Bad: I believe we have free will, but I don’t really know anything about it. [Then what reasons are there for agreeing with you?]
Bad: I am not claiming that my argument establishes the reality of free will. [Then why bother writing on it? You should at least claim that it makes it more plausible that people have free will.]

2. Assertions about things you are ignorant of. When you discuss things you are ignorant of, more knowledgeable readers are apt to find your remarks ignorant, whereupon they will mistrust the rest of what you have to say. For instance, if you have not read any of the literature on free will, you should avoid comments about what most philosophers think about free will, and indeed should probably avoid saying anything at all about free will. If you have to say something about it, go to the library (or the internet) and at least read an encyclopedia article about it.

3. Overstated claims. While avoiding problem (1), do not go to the opposite extreme of making overstated claims that are not justified by your arguments.

Bad: Obviously, I have conclusively refuted direct realism. [The unlikeliness of your having done this undermines your credibility.]
OK: I have given grounds for preferring representationalism over direct realism.

4. Overly polemical or emotional style. This undermines your credibility by raising doubts in the reader's mind about your ability to give objective reports or assessments. Also, readers who are initially skeptical of your position will just be pushed farther away.

Bad: Such generalizing nonsense needs to be put in its place.
OK: This objection is fallacious.

G. Recommended Reading

---

Long list of word usage errors. Also discusses some non-errors (such as splitting infinitives and ending sentences with prepositions).