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.

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*: imaging how your sentences will seem to someone who has been thinking about different things in different terms.

Mistake: Assuming background knowledge 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.

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.

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: 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: 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.

Words and phrases to avoid

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."
- "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.
- "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.