

## **Guidelines for Writing Introductory Philosophy Papers**

One major obstacle when writing a philosophical paper is deciding how to bite off a manageable chunk of material. Often, students will raise issues too broad to be given thorough treatment in the allotted space. Inevitably, such papers lack focus. The arguments become flabby and full of holes. The aim in philosophy is clarity and precision. Better to address a narrow set of issues, and do so well, than to try and address every possible issue connected to your topic of interest. To assist you in this goal I offer the following guidelines for writing your final paper in this class. (Incidentally, a similar strategy was demanded of me as an undergraduate. I still find it helpful when navigating my way through difficult topics. I hope you find it similarly useful).

Your paper will consist of three sections: **a reconstruction** of the focal argument, an **analysis** of that argument, and a **conclusion** or summary of your theoretical findings. Each step is explained in detail below. In terms of grading these papers, we will be evaluating each section independently. Students receive a maximum of 30 points for their reconstruction, maximum 55 points for their analysis, and maximum 15 points for the conclusion. So, make sure that your paper includes all three components, or else you will lose a significant amount of marks.

### **Section 1: Argument reconstruction.**

In philosophy the central unit of analysis is the argument. Philosophers will often say things like, “what is the central argument for this claim?” or “Quine’s argument for rejecting the analytic/synthetic distinction is...” When used in this sense, “argument” refers to a connected series of statements offered in support of some conclusion. Your job as a philosopher is to identify the author’s argument for some claim (i.e. explicitly state the premises and conclusion) and to analyze its merit to the best of your ability. The first task, when done well, will greatly assist you with the second.

- *Start with the conclusion*

When reconstructing an argument, it is often helpful to first read entirely through the article. This provides a sense of what the paper is about and how the argument is laid out. In your second pass, begin by identifying the conclusion(s) being defended. In English we tend to identify conclusions with words like “therefore”, “thus”, “it follows that”, or “in conclusion”. Once you have identified the conclusion, you can work backwards to identify the premises. But be careful.

Sometimes the premises for a conclusion come after the conclusion has been stated. Or, sometimes an author does not explicitly state the conclusion being argued for, for example, if the author considers it so obvious. See if you can identify the conclusion of the following passage, taken from the David Suzuki Foundation website<sup>1</sup>.

“To gain an understanding of the level of scientific consensus on climate change, one study examined every article on climate change published in peer-reviewed scientific journals over a 10-year period. Of the 928 articles on climate change the authors found, not one of them disagreed with the consensus position that climate change is happening and is human-induced.

These findings contrast dramatically with the popular media's reporting on climate change. One study analyzed coverage of climate change in four influential American newspapers (New York Times, Washington Post, LA Times and Wall Street Journal) over a 14-year period. It found that more than half of the articles discussing climate change gave equal weight to the scientifically discredited views of the deniers.

This discrepancy is largely due to the media's drive for "balance" in reporting. Journalists are trained to identify one position on any issue, and then seek out a conflicting position, providing both sides with roughly equal attention. Unfortunately, this "balance" does not always correspond with the actual prevalence of each view within society, and can result in unintended bias. This has been the case with reporting on climate change, and as a result, many people believe that the reality of climate change is still being debated by scientists when it is not.”

This passage is somewhat tricky because the author is not using one of the standard clue-words to identify the conclusion. As you comb over the passage, you will also see that some of the points being raised are offered in support of other points besides the conclusion (i.e. in support of the premises) For example, the author mentions a research paper that looked at the degree of consensus about climate change in the scientific literature, and another research paper looking at the way climate change is reported in more popular media. These are points cited to defend premises. But what is the overall conclusion the author wants to draw? I will tell you what I consider to be the conclusion on the next page. First see if you can spot it.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.davidsuzuki.org/issues/climate-change/science/climate-change-basics/climate-change-deniers/>

In this case, I think that the conclusion is somewhat implicit. We get an important clue in the final passage where the author claims,

“Unfortunately, this "balance" does not always correspond with the actual prevalence of each view within society, and can result in unintended bias. This has been the case with reporting on climate change, and as a result, many people believe that the reality of climate change is still being debated by scientists when it is not.’

Put simply, I take the conclusion to be this:

C) The popular media often misinform the public about the amount of scientific consensus over climate change.

- *Reconstruct the argument in your own words*

You will notice that I rephrased the conclusion in my own words. This is an important part of argument reconstruction. It is especially important in cases where the conclusion is implicit (i.e. not stated by the author). Restating the premises and conclusion in your own words helps to eliminate any confusing jargon and remove unnecessary information. For instance, I do not think it is necessary to include the claim that the media bias is *unintended*. That is a separate issue. The point of the argument is whether the media are misrepresenting the science.

Turning to the premises, see if you can identify the premises offered in support of this conclusion. Here is what should stand out to you. First, the author makes a claim about the degree of consensus about climate change. Second, the author makes a claim about the way that popular media presentations report on climate change by allotting equal time to both sides of the debate. Once again, the author also supplies information to support these premises. This supporting information should not appear in your reconstruction. It will appear in the analysis section of your paper, where you explain how the author defends each premise. For the purposes of reconstruction, focus only on what is needed to draw the conclusion. On the following page you will see my reconstruction. Try doing your own first.

- P1) There is broad scientific consensus about the occurrence of climate change.
- P2) Popular media presentations of climate change science assign approximately equal time to both sides of the debate.
- P3 (implicit)

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C) The popular media often misinform the public about the amount of scientific consensus over climate change.

I have left a space in my reconstruction for an additional premise. The reason for leaving this space is because, on their own, the premises do not entail the conclusion. That is, one could accept the premises and still deny the conclusion. My guess is that this might not be immediately obvious. This is part of the reason why philosophers engage in such careful reconstructions, in order to help them notice implicit assumptions that might otherwise get taken for granted.

Notice that the conclusion states the media is “misinforming” the public about the degree of scientific controversy over climate change. But P2 only states that equal time is allotted to both sides of the debate. Clearly, this argument assumes that if the media assigns equal time is assigned to both sides of a debate over which there is broad scientific consensus, then the media is misinforming the public about the degree of controversy surrounding that topic. In other words, it assumes that the only way to identify a consensus is by reflecting that consensus in the way that time is allotted to a subject. This is a crucial assumption for the argument. So let’s go back and include it. For the purposes of clarity, you might want to label these sorts of implicit premises in your reconstruction:

- P3) If the media assigns equal time is assigned to both sides of a debate over which there is broad scientific consensus, then the media is misinforming the public about the amount of controversy surrounding that topic.

In your actual reconstruction, you will of course present the premises in sequential logical order. I present P3 at the end of this argument just for illustrative purposes.

- *Outline your analytic strategy and conclusion*

We are almost done the first section of the paper. The section should contain a reconstruction outlined explicitly in premise/conclusion form, as I have done here. It should also contain a brief outline of how you plan to analyze the argument. Your plan of analysis will depend partly on what you take to be the most interesting or controversial aspect of the argument. It also depends on how much space you have to conduct your analysis. Often, you will have limited space. So, you should focus on the most interesting or controversial premises. Just make sure that you are perfectly clear about what you are doing and why. Here is an example of what you might write:

“In what follows, premise P2 will be accepted for the sake of argument. However, there will be some discussion about P1, the assumption that there is a broad scientific consensus about climate change. I will show that this depends on which aspect of climate change one is talking about. This paper will also critically examine P3, the assumption that consensus must be represented in the media by an equal allotment of time to both sides of a debate. I will argue that this premise is flawed, and that therefore the argument does not provide a strong reason to accept the conclusion.”

And that is it as far as outlining your strategy is concerned. You are almost ready to move on to the analysis stage. First let me briefly discuss what comes before the reconstruction, at the very beginning of the section.

- *Avoid wordy introductions*

Whatever you do, do NOT start the paper off with a vague and general statement such as: “Climate change is one of the most perplexing issues facing contemporary society.” Or this: “for decades people have debated the appropriate way to present scientific issues in the media”. Undergraduates often start papers in this way, I think, because they assume that they are writing for a general audience. This is a silly misconception. You are writing for a semi-professional audience – people like you. Presumably, anyone reading your paper doesn’t need to be told platitudes about why the issue is relevant. Just get to the point. Here is a perfectly good opening:

“The David Suzuki Foundation offers the following objection to the way that climate change is reported in the media.”

Clear and straight to the point is a good way to start your paper.

## **Section 2: Argument analysis**

Once the argument has been identified and reconstructed, the next step is to determine whether it is any good. Ideally you will analyze each premise. However, for reasons of space, as I have mentioned, you might have to focus on just one or two premises.

Each premise that you do analyze should be treated separately in this section, not moving on to the next one until you are finished dealing with the one before it. Begin by restating the premise you are currently investigating at the top of a paragraph. Then proceed to explain (concisely) the authors rationale for adopting this premise. This might include evidence that he or she provides in favour of the premise, an intuition that he or she is relying on, or something of the like. For example, part of the rationale for P2 (above) is a single study. If an author offers no rationale for a given premise, then it is up to you to develop one on their behalf. The goal is to state the best reasons for why someone might endorse the premise under consideration.

Once you have outlined the rationale behind a particular premise, the next step is to turn around and attack it. Begin your reply with a new paragraph. In this stage you will want to address the points raised on behalf of a premise, or to bring up new points that the author has possibly failed to consider, or both. It is here (and in the following move) that your creativity and philosophical acumen will be most taxed.

Once you have outlined the author's rationale for endorsing a premise, and offered your own reply, you might want to consider a reply on the author's behalf. How might they respond to the points you just raised? (Note: always make it clear to the reader that this is what you are doing when you adopt the voice of your opponent – otherwise they are bound to become confused. For example, use phrases like “one might respond that...” or “on behalf of the Suzuki Foundation, one might defend this assumption by...”). Above all, strive for clarity.

If you do consider a reply to your criticism, go on to explain how you would reply in turn (note: many a philosopher has been swayed by their own ability to argue for a position that they, at least initially, did not agree with). Following this format the analysis of a single premise might involve several back- and- forths. Do not move on to the next premise until you have finished dealing with the previous one. I often compare this process of to-ing and fro-ing to what happens in a court room. Except, in this case, you need to play both the roles of the prosecution and the defence. This is how you will eventually come to a philosophical result: when the argument bottoms out at some point.

### **Section 3 – Statement of theoretical findings**

In philosophy, the results of an analysis look a little different than in other disciplines.

Philosophers recognize the simple clarification and analysis of an argument as a valuable and difficult achievement in its own right. Occasionally, your analysis will identify some further assumption or question on which the whole argument turns. For example, it might turn out that Suzuki's argument hinges on an unexamined psychological question about how people respond to different presentations of scientific evidence. Identifying this further question, and its logical relationship to Suzuki's argument, is a kind of result in its own right. You have shown how one set of issues hinges on some other, previously unconnected issue.

If you have done your job well in the previous sections, the conclusion should be straightforward. This is a brief summary of your philosophical results. State what is wrong (or good) about the argument, what sorts of evidence would favor it, what questionable assumption it presupposes, etc. You might want to reflect briefly in this section on the significance of your findings, or allude to possible issues raised during your analysis which, perhaps, you did not have the space to explore thoroughly. I often suggest that this section is only a few sentences long. Though, this of course will depend on how much ground you cover earlier in the paper.

- *Keep it modest and accurate*

Some students feel compelled to finish the paper off with bold, sweeping statements. For example, "This paper demonstrates that environmentalists systematically ignore important considerations when promoting their cause." Unless this is something you have defended earlier in the paper, do not state it here. As a rule, try to avoid introducing new, undefended claims in your conclusion.