

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 papers 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 **summary** of your findings. Each step is explained in detail below.

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 arguments (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.

For each writing assignment you will be assigned a piece of text in which you must identify and articulate the focal argument for some claim. This task is more challenging than it might at first appear. Often, it can be difficult to distinguish the premises of an argument from its intended conclusion. Or, in many cases at least one premise or the conclusion will be left implicit (i.e. not explicitly stated in the text) and left for you to identify. Worse still, sometimes the author is confused about his/her own argument, and it will be required of you (by the principle of charity) to reconstruct a cogent argument on the author’s behalf.

What I expect of you exactly in the first section of the paper is a concise logical reconstruction of the author's argument. It will be your interpretation of the focal argument *written in your own words*. Premises should be individually numbered and the conclusion identified as such (see example below).

Example

In what follows I walk through an argument reconstruction. It is based on an excerpt from John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* where he argues that moral rules are not innate. The text is fairly difficult. Read it and see if you can identify the central argument.

Another reason that makes me doubt of any innate practical principles is, that I think there cannot be any one moral rule proposed whereof a man may not justly demand a reason: which would be perfectly ridiculous and absurd if they were innate; or so much as self-evident, which every innate principle must needs be, and not need any proof to ascertain its truth, nor want any reason to gain it approbation. He would be thought void of common sense who asked on the one side, or on the other side went to give a reason why "it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be." It carries its own light and evidence with it, and needs no other proof: he that understands the terms assents to it for its own sake or else nothing will ever be able to prevail with him to do it. But should that most unshaken rule of morality and foundation of all social virtue, "That one should do as he would be done unto," be proposed to one who never heard of it before, but yet is of capacity to understand its meaning; might he not without any absurdity ask a reason why? And were not he that proposed it bound to make out the truth and reasonableness of it to him? Which plainly shows it not to be innate; for if it were it could neither want nor receive any proof; but must needs (at least as soon as heard and understood) be received and assented to as an unquestionable truth, which a man can by no means doubt of. So that the truth of all these moral rules plainly depends upon some other antecedent to them, and from which they must be deduced; which could not be if either they were innate or so much as self-evident.

The first step in identifying an argument is to look for the conclusion. Clearly, Locke is arguing that moral rules are not innate, and he offers several reasons for believing this conclusion. But it is not immediately clear how those points relate to one another (some statements rephrase the same assumption in different terms. Other statements offer examples in support of particular assumptions. Your job is to work all this out. I suggest that you now attempt to provide a reconstruction of Locke's argument, identifying a series of (numbered) premises for his central conclusion. Then, when you are done, take a look at my attempt on the following page.

The next thing to do is paraphrase Locke's own words. In the above paragraph, Locke explicitly assumes that if a principle is innate then, "It carries its own light and evidence with it, and needs no other proof: he that understands the terms assents to it for its own sake or else nothing will ever be able to prevail with him to do it". Lock attempts to justify this assumption with a rhetorical question:

"Should that most unshaken rule of morality and foundation of all social virtue, 'That one should do as he would be done unto,' be proposed to one who never heard of it before, but yet is of capacity to understand its meaning; might he not without any absurdity ask a reason why?"

From the fact that moral rules are questionable, Locke concludes (firstly) that they are not innate and (secondly) that the truth of these moral rules depends on some other more basic proposition from which they are derived.

So far so good, we have just isolated some of the main points offered by Locke in support of two related conclusions. Now we need to put those points in our own words and itemize them.

Take the statement, "if a principle is innate then, "It carries its own light and evidence with it, and needs no other proof: he that understands the terms assents to it for its own sake or else nothing will ever be able to prevail with him to do it". What does Locke mean by "principle"? What does he mean by, "carry its own light and evidence?" These are tricky questions requiring careful thought and interpretation. Here is one attempt to state this idea clearly:

P1) If someone possesses a psychological rule innately, then it will make no sense to that person to question whether that rule is justified.

Now for the second premise, a reformulation of Locke's rhetorical question.

P2) In the case of moral and practical principles, it makes sense (especially to someone who might not have previously heard of them) to question whether they are justified.

From these two premises, Locke draws his conclusion:

C1) Therefore, moral and practical principles are not innate.

Notice what I have *not* included in this reconstruction. I have not included any of what Locke says about our responses to statements like, “it is impossible for the same thing to both be and not be”. Nor have I tried to pack in what Locke says at the end of the paragraph about how moral principles, like the principle that one should do unto others as one would be done unto, are justified. I have left these out in part because I plan to discuss them in section 2, where I examine the rationale Locke provides for premises 1 and 2. That is, I think that I have identified the core of Locke’s argument. The secondary points will be raised in what follows when we discuss each of these premises in detail.

Having reconstructed the central argument, you should conclude Section 1 with a brief statement of how you plan to proceed in the following section. For instance, you might say something like this.

“The argument as I have reconstructed it is deductively valid, so if the premises are true than the conclusion must be true. However, as I shall now show the argument is not sound. Specifically, both the first and the second premises are doubtful. Moreover, the argument equivocates on different senses of the term ‘innate’”.

Note that you might not be in a position to write this assessment until after you have considered each premise carefully. That is, you might need to write section 2 first and then come back to this final statement with which you should end section 1.

A final note for writing the first section. **What ever you do, do NOT start the paper off with a vague and general statement** such as the following: “Since the beginning of history philosophers have pondered the meaning of innateness and what it means for something to be innate”. Or this: “John Lock is a famous philosopher and psychologist who wrote extensively on the question of innateness”. Such far reaching statements are often used in undergraduate papers because students seem to think that they need to

pretend that they are writing for a general audience. This is a silly misconception, which only makes statements like these that much more irritating (can you tell that this is something of a pet peeve?). Your audience is a professional who has heard of Locke and probably knows, generally, what Locke's arguments against moral innateness are. Basically, your audience is a moderately well informed peer. So, when writing your intro instead of meandering around and sounding silly just jump right in like this:

In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Locke offers the following objection to the idea that some moral principles are innate.

P1) If someone possesses a psychological rule innately, then it will make no sense to that person to question whether that rule is justified.

P2) In the case of moral and practical principles, it makes sense (especially to someone who might not have previously heard of them) to question whether they are justified.

C1) Therefore, moral and practical principles are not innate.

The argument as I have reconstructed it is deductively valid, so if the premises are true than the conclusion must be true. However, as I shall now show the argument is not sound. Specifically, both the first and the second premises are doubtful. Moreover, the argument equivocates on different senses of the term 'innate'. Let us now consider the argument in more detail.

That is all you need for section 1. (See the final section of this handout for some more helpful hints on argument reconstruction).

Section 2: Analysis of each premise.

Once the argument has been identified and reconstructed, the next step is to determine whether it is sound. Each premise of the argument should be analyzed on its own in this section, not moving on to the next one until you are finished dealing with the

one before it (but see Critical Consideration below). Begin by restating the premise you are currently investigating at the top of a paragraph. Then proceed to explain (concisely) the author's rationale for adopting this premise. This might include evidence that he or she provides in favor of the premise, an intuition that he or she is relying on, or something of the like. 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 (note: this does not mean that you should recount *all* of the reasons an author provides in support of a certain premise. This could potentially take up too much valuable space, or include all sorts of bad arguments that just waste the reader's time. Be judicious!)

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). 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.

CRITICAL CONSIDERATION: As you might be imagining, even a relatively "simple" paper addressing only two or three premises and a conclusion could potentially go on for some time with all this to-ing and fro-ing (what philosophers call the "dialectic" of the argument). But your space constraints are limited to four or five pages - these papers must be concise. What to do? Often, an author will choose to focus on only one or perhaps two of what they take to be the key premises behind an argument. If you go this

route, make sure to alert the reader as to why you are focusing on one particular premise over the others (e.g. because its more controversial, because the argument hinges on it, etc). Do not simply neglect a premise, without so much as a nod, thereby leaving your position open to criticism.

Section 3: Conclusion

If you have done your job well in the previous section, 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. For example, you might say in your conclusions something like this:

“I have argued that Locke’s conception of innateness is ambiguous. This term has multiple meanings and not all of them support his conclusion. In particular, I have argued that there is one conception of innateness where it doesn’t matter whether a rule is self evident. So, in order for Locke to support his conclusion, he would have to explain why this alternative definition of innateness is unacceptable.

Even if this point could be demonstrated, there are additional reasons for rejecting Locke’s argument. I have argued that some moral principles are in fact self evident (it makes no sense to ask for their justification). Therefore, for these principles at least, Locke would have to admit that they are innate.”

Some more helpful hints for reconstructing arguments

Consider the following example taken from a previous student’s paper. It is a reconstruction of Descartes’ argument for the distinctiveness of mind and body.

P1) I clearly and distinctly have a concept of myself as a thinking, non-extended thing. I also clearly and distinctly have a concept of body as a non-thinking, extended thing.

P3) A non-deceitful God would not have me perceive things other than how they exist. Since God is non-deceitful by definition (He is all good), it follows that my clear and distinct perception of myself and my body are accurate.

P4) I have a clear and distinct concept that the mind is separate from the body.

C) I am distinct from my body and I can exist without it.

This reconstruction is pretty good in that the premises are clearly stated in the students' own words. However, there are several respects in which it could be improved.

Suggestion 1: Avoid bloated premises.

When reconstructing an argument do not pack too many points into a single premise. Each premise should contain a single thought or "move" in the argument, not two or three. This practice makes sense when you think about the purpose of argument reconstruction. A good reconstruction reveals the individual logical steps in an argument, making them amenable to individual analysis. Thus task becomes difficult when several many thoughts are crammed together into a single premise.

Notice that P1(above) contains two distinct thoughts: (1) that my concept of self is that of a thinking, non-extended thing, and (2) that my concept of body is that of a non-thinking, extended thing. These are distinct assumptions defended on different grounds. To defend point 1, Descartes argues that it is logically impossible to doubt his own existence. To defend point 2, Descartes reflects deeply on the piece of wax. The argument should be reconstructed with these two points as distinct premises.

Suggestion 2: Avoid redundant premises.

Authors often repeat the same assumption more than once in a given paragraph. Students who are new to argument reconstruction sometimes include these redundancies in an attempt to remain true to the author's reasoning. This is a mistake. Take a close

look at P4 in the previous argument. Notice that this is just a restatement of P1 (it adds nothing new). Hence P4 should be omitted from the reconstruction.

Suggestion 3: Avoid “mini arguments” in the premises.

A given philosophical passage often contains a primary argument supported by one or more sub-arguments. Students are often tempted to include these sub-arguments in the reconstruction. P3 (above) is a case in point. To avoid this problem, one needs to be judicious about what is NOT included in the reconstruction. It would have been better in this case to exclude P3 from the reconstruction. Instead, this sub-argument could be raised in the body of the paper, when the student is considering Descartes’ justification for P1. Sometimes students will attempt to include such sub-arguments in the reconstruction, not as a single premise, but as individual premises. For example:

P1) I clearly and distinctly have a concept of myself as a thinking, non-extended thing. I also clearly and distinctly have a concept of body as a non-thinking, extended thing.

P3) A non-deceitful God would not have me perceive things other than how they exist.

P4) God is non-deceitful by definition (He is all good).

C1) It follows that my clear and distinct perception of myself and my body are accurate.

P4) I have a clear and distinct concept that the mind is separate from the body.

C2) I am distinct from my body and I can exist without it.

Technically this is correct. However, this approach makes the argument unnecessarily long and complicated. It is better to include only the central argument in the reconstruction, and save the supporting argument for the body of the paper.

Suggestion 4: Include implicit premises.

Suppose that suggestions 1-3 have been incorporated, so that the reconstruction now reads as follows:

P1) I clearly and distinctly have a concept of myself as a thinking, non-extended thing.

P2) I clearly and distinctly have a concept of body as a non-thinking, extended thing.

C) I am distinct from my body and I can exist without it.

Notice that the conclusion does not strictly follow from the premises. In order to make the conclusion follow logically from P1 and P2, one must include an additional premise linking these assumptions to the conclusion. For example:

P3) If I clearly and distinctly perceive that I am a thinking, non extended thing and that my body is a non-thinking, extended thing, then I am distinct from my body and can exist without it.

Often, such linking premises are not explicitly stated by an author (hence they are said to be “implicit” premises). Sometimes implicit premises are excluded from the original text because it would interrupt the natural flow of the prose to include them. On other occasions the author has failed to notice that the implicit assumption. Your reconstruction should always render such implicit steps in the argument explicit, thereby exposing them for analysis.