Some Guidelines for Writing Philosophy Papers[1]

As we stress in our discussion of the goals of the IUS philosophy program, philosophy aims to develop creative and independent thinking on a variety of complex and difficult problems. There are distinctive benefits to be gained from organizing one's thoughts on a specific problem clearly and carefully in a form in which they can be examined critically by others. So we place considerable emphasis upon the presentation of written material. Essays and reports are thought of not merely as a means of mastering assigned material, although in a new subject there will necessarily be some element of this, but as an opportunity for reflection upon the questions raised by the subject matter of the course. Students are encouraged to think seriously about these questions, so that they may make their own contribution to the subject from the start.

Many students who are relatively unfamiliar with the study of philosophy have found, at least initially, that written assignments present certain difficulties. The notes that follow provide some guidance for those who may be uncertain as to what is expected of them. They should not be regarded as cannonical. They do not prescribe any one method of working on assignments as the correct one, nor are they intended to cramp individual style. Experienced students may prefer to disregard them entirely. It is hoped, however, that most will find some of the suggestions helpful in improving their grasp of the discipline no less than in meeting the formal requirements of a course. They are based upon experience of what makes for fruitful discussion, and of the problems commonly encountered by those for whom philosophy in a new subject. They are offered with the special requirements of philosophy in view, although they have some application to academic reporting generally.

Philosophical Assignments

1. It is a good idea to start an essay by outlining what you propose to do. Alternatively you can end with a summary of what you have shown. In any case, the reader needs to know at the beginning where you are going, and at the end where you have got to, It Is helpful to keep paragraphs fairly short, and to structure them so as to establish a sense of direction within each paragraph and between paragraphs.
2. The opening sentence of a paragraph should catch the reader's eye. Usually it will emphasize the main point which the rest of the paragraph will develop. Bear in mind the value of logical connectives like "and", "for", "therefore" and "but" in showing the direction of your argument. Make sure you use these words

appropriately. Ask yourself whether what follows "therefore", for example, really does follow from what precedes it.

3. The use of reading material as support for essays is sometimes misunderstood. An essay is supposed to be your own response to the problem under discussion, and not merely a reproduction of material from another source. Occasionally a close paraphrase of part of another work may be appropriate, but it should always be phrased in your own words and the source should be indicated. More often, you will be conscious of a general debt to an author for a line of thought that you are developing. Any such debts should be acknowledged. A list of books consulted should be provided.
4. Direct quotations should not be too numerous or too long. They are beat used (a) when you propose to subject a writer's exact words to close scrutiny, so that it is essential to get him dead right; (b) when supporting your interpretation of him by citing evidence for it (but mere references to his text are often enough for this); (c) when he has said something so well that his words cannot be improved upon or paraphrased adequately (but this should be used sparingly). Put all quotations inside quotation marks and acknowledge their exact source. If you do not clearly distinguish them from your own words, it looks an if you are trying to pass them off as yours. Direct quotation without acknowledgement is plagiarism. It can usually be detected by experienced readers, has no academic value, and is unacceptable in university work.
5. Avoid quoting commentaries on a point where the original work speaks best for itself. For example, quote Socrates rather than a modern commentator to the effect that the unexamined life is not worth living. If, however, you wish to quote a passage which you have not read in the original work (A. B.) but which has been quoted by someone else (X. Y.), it is best to document it as "A. B. quoted by X. Y." rather than to imply , without mentioning X. Y., that you are using the original as a source.
6. Try to avoid technical terms where plain ones will convey your meaning as well. Technical terms in philosophy do not always have a clear and universally accepted usage. Sometimes the propriety or value of a term is itself a point for philosophical argument. For example, is the use of the terms "sense datum" or "efficient cause" justified? Are the distinctions they are supposed to mark clear ones? Or should they be abandoned altogether? Make a point of explaining any technical terms you use.
7. Examples often play a crucial role in expounding and criticizing philosophical arguments, and are a sign of philosophical imagination and originality. Make up your own examples as freely an you can. Do not stick rigidly to the textbook or standard case. You can show that you have grasped an abstract point by considering a number of concrete examples, Imagined in as much detail as you may need. Consider also whether a point that has been made in terms of one or two examples will stand up equally well if it is tested with others,
8. There are no authorities in philosophy whose statements are to be taken as not sub3ect to criticism. Eminent philosophers such as Aristotle and Kant are not infallible. They deserve respect but not reverence. On the other hand, it is arrogant simply to charge them with superficial errors or fallacies and leave it at that. In

general the evaluation of a philosopher should be integrated with an attempt to understand him. If, on a given interpretation, he has said something obviously foolish, it is usually worth looking for an alternative interpretation, However, if on reflection an author seems to you to be mistaken, you should not hesitate to draw this conclusion.

9. There are special problems which arise when dealing with philosophers of earlier periods, especially when they wrote in foreign languages. You cannot assume, without knowledge of their language and culture, that you have come to terms with them adequately. It is extremely difficult to interpret such thinkers in depth or detail. Translations can be misleading. It is often instructive to consult several different translations of a single passage, to see what a vital difference the translator can make to the sense. Beware of the associations of modern English words:

    > One who opened Jowett's version of Plato's *Republic* at random and lighted on the statement that the best guardian for a man's "virtue" is "philosophy tempered with music" might run away with the idea that in order to avoid irregular relations with women, he had better play the violin in the intervals of studying metaphysics. There may be some truth in this; but only after reading widely in other parts of the book would he discover that it was not quite what Plato meant.
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    > --- F. M. Cornford, translation of the *Republic*, p. vi.

10. Mere summary of a writer's position is Inadequate and should be distinguished from creative exposition of his text. The most effective presentation of his view, even if you are going to attack itp is a sympathetic exposition. Enter Into his position: 'get inside' his argument, and try to see things, at least temporarily,, from his perspective. There is nothing objectionable about devoting an entire essay to the interpretation of a difficult work or passage, illuminating the structure of an argument, e.g., by using one passage to throw light upon the meaning of another, or by exploring an author's use of key terms. Constructive philosophical scholarship demands no less creativity than destructive polemic.
11. Omit biographical data, unless they have a direct bearing upon something that you want to discuss. A philosopher's life story, although it may help towards a historical or psychological understanding of him, may well be of little relevance to the understanding or rational assessment of what he has written, The same tends to be true of cultural influences upon him. The way in which a man acquired a certain belief need have no bearing upon its truth, or upon the validity or soundness of his arguments for it. For example, Descartes' *cogito* argument, or his proofs of God's existence can be discussed and evaluated without reference to his espousal of the Catholic faith or the place where he was born.
12. Style is an individual matter, but some general guidance may be offered. It has been rightly said that a writer's style should be like a pane of clear glass, through which the reader can see his meaning. It is best to try to say exactly what you

mean and not to leave your reader to fill in gaps or interpret your remarks. Philosophy Is quite difficult enough as it is: it does not need to have its obscurities compounded by jargon, oracular profundities or wolly rhetoric.

13. You can sometimes clarify a difficult passage by analyzing its argument into a series of ordered propositions, so that its premises and conclusions stand out clearly, and the various stages of the argument can be considered separately. The argument thus stated may be more formally structured than its author intended, but it may by useful to bring out in this way its strengths and weaknesses, questionable assumptions or faulty inferences.
14. In evaluating an argument, distinguish between considering whether its premises (or unexpressed assumptions) are *true* and considering whether its conclusion *follows from* those premises. Note that you do not disprove a conclusion either by showing that it is based on false premises or by showing that It does not follow, or even by showing both these things. All you do, thus far, is refute an argument. By refuting a person's argument for his thesis, you have not thereby refuted his thesis itself.
15. Begin work on a paper by reading, making notes on what you find significant as you go along. Don't read too much. You must leave enough time to 'reflect upon and organize what you have read. When you are ready to do this, start by jotting down, with as little reference to your notes as possible, ideas that are in your head, which could form the raw material for your paper. Next, try to formulate a pattern into which these ideas could fall, or a skeleton of the work to be written. This should consist as far as possible in the raising of specific questions, and the marshalling of arguments for or against alternative answers to them, There can be no independent thought without asking oneself questions and trying to answer them. In philosophy, as in other disciplines, asking the right questions Is more than half the battle. When you have done this, possible answers will often suggest themselves and the paper will be much easier and more fun to write,
16. After you have completed the skeleton, you should write at least one rough draft before writing a fair copy. You can prune excess verbiage from the drafts, or cut out points that look less effective on reading them over. Careful proof-reading of all written essays is essential, An instructor will not expect to make your corrections for-you. Nor will he went, in discussing the paper, to spend time on elementary points of punctuation, grammar and style. Read this carefully and ask yourself how many errors of this sort occur in it (there are at least twelve):

    Descartes felt that the existence of a diety could be rationalized. He came up with several arguments, i.e. the ontological, cosmological etc., but as this was not true, therefore he was not too successful in what he brought forth.

17. Often the most difficult part of planning an essay is the arranging of ideas in a coherent pattern. A number of alternative possible patterns for a paper are suggested below. These are only rough and flexible plans, and may be varied or combined according to the purpose and subject matter of the paper.

1. Outline a writer's main thesis and concentrate upon his major arguments. Supplement them with others of your own, or suggest objections to his view that he may not have considered.
2. Fasten upon a single striking statement from an author and consider what he meant by It in the light of other things he wrote, or use a statement of this kind as a talking point, i.e., as a subject for discussion in its own right, without special reference to the author.
3. Take some issue discussed by an author and reformulate it in contemporary terms, using his text as a peg upon which to hang an independent discussion of a problem that you find of special interest.
4. After reading around the subject, put away your books and write on the problem out of your head. This does not mean writing off the top of your head, or stating the first thing that comes to mind. It means only that you do not have to relate your discussion explicitly to any other writers at all. Your grasp of what others have written will show through what you write yourself.
5. Concentrate in detail upon some Particular passage in an author which you think repays close study. Explore its structure in depth, and its relation to the wider context in which it occurs,
6. Build your paper around an author's treatment of a single problem in two or more different passages or works, comparing and contrasting these treatments, and considering the pros and cons of his different positions (if they are different).
7. Do the same thing for two or more different authors who discuss the same problem. Consider which of them comes off better, whether they both have part of the truth, whether there are alternatives that neither of them has considered.
8. A common and effective pattern for a paper is to begin by reviewing a number of existing solutions to a problem, show that none of them is free from difficulties, and then offer a new and improved solution of your own.

18. Footnotes should be used with discretion. Try to avoid what has been called "foot and note disease" (or "fuss-notes"). The main use of footnotes is for incidental remarks or for stretches of difficult subsidiary argument, which would distract attention from the main argument of the paper if included in the text. Footnotes can also be used for references, although these can just as well be placed in brackets in the text immediately after passages quoted. Wherever placed, references should be sufficiently accurate and detailed to enable a reader to find the passage easily.

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[1]These guidelines are adopted from those prepared for use at Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario. They are reproduced with the permission of Professor David Gallop, Chairman, Department of Philosophy, Trent University. We thank Arash Sepehri for scanning them.