

Structuring your writing

HOMEWORK

Submit all homework assignments on Canvas as a Word (.doc or .docx) file. So that I can grade anonymously, **please do not include your name** or any other identifying information.

In addition, some exercises include a word limit or word range. For these exercises, strive for concision and simplicity (while still using complete sentences), and **include a word count** for each of your answers.

Exercise 1. Carefully review my comments on your previous homework submission, as well as the answer key.

- (a) What are the most important mistakes that you made? If you did not make any mistakes on the homework, instead tell me the most important mistakes that you made in seminar. (Range: 30-60 words.)
- (b) What specific strategies can you use to avoid such mistakes in the future? Remember to apply these strategies to the rest of this homework! (Range: 30-60 words.)

Warning/invitation regarding the remaining exercises. This text is especially challenging! Be patient with it: read the key passages carefully, multiple times, and use the techniques that we have been practicing. Also be patient with yourself: you can expect to misunderstand a lot of what is happening. That is okay! You will arrive at a much clearer understanding in seminar.

Exercise 2. On p. 218, Zhuangzi claims that “the sage harmonizes people with right and wrong and rests them on Heaven’s wheel. This is called walking two roads.” Interpret this remark.

Hint: This question is very challenging! To answer it, you will need to interpret the entire paragraph that contains this remark. The paragraph includes both a story and a number of metaphors, so you will need to use the appropriate interpretive techniques for these. (Range: 50-70 words.)

Exercise 3. On pp. 221-222, Zhuangzi observes that different animals live in different places, eat different foods, and apply different standards of beauty. What conclusion does he mean for us to draw from these pieces of evidence? (Range: 10-25 words.)

Reading

There are countless ways that writing can be well-structured. In this handout, you will learn to apply just one form of structure, which we will call *headline structure*, to your writing.

The idea of headline structure is to do the following:

1. State your conclusion precisely.
2. Clarify this conclusion.
3. Support the conclusion with good (interpersonal) evidence.

Here is an example of what headline structure looks like within a single paragraph:

[Conclusion:] Mozi's central ethical tenet is that we should act with impartial care.
[Clarification:] For instance, Mozi holds that we should treat the parents of others with just as much respect as our own parents. [Evidence:] Mozi argues for this conclusion on the grounds that to act partially is to act hypocritically, and we should not be hypocrites.

Let us examine steps 1-3 in more detail.

Step 1. State your conclusion precisely.

The operative word here is "precisely"; a mere gesture in the right direction will not do. You can become more precise by making a habit of using clauses beginning with the word "that" instead of phrases beginning with words like "about," "of," or "how." For example, do not say any of the following:

Mozi's central tenet is about impartial care.

Mozi's central idea is the tenet of impartial care.

Mozi talks about how we should practice impartial care.

Instead say:

Mozi's central ethical tenet is that we should practice impartial care.

By the way, a common student error is to fail to make clear who is speaking. To avoid this error, make sure that whenever you are discussing the conclusion of anyone other than yourself, you identify the speaker. For example, do not introduce Mozi's view by saying:

We should practice impartial care.

Instead preface this by saying, "Mozi's central ethical tenet is that"

Step 2. Clarify this conclusion.

The most common student error here is to simply repeat the idea in slightly different language. However, this is just a waste of space. For instance, consider this attempt at clarification:

I will now explain Laozi's claim that "A Way that can be followed is not a constant way."¹ Laozi uses the metaphor of a Way, by which he means to refer to a path or avenue of some sort. His idea is that this path is not constant; instead it is changing, malleable, unfixed.

¹ Laozi (2001, p. 163).

This “clarification” effectively has *no substance whatsoever* and should be cut. To avoid giving such pseudo-clarifications, make sure that you are not providing synonyms for utterly mundane words.

How can you give useful clarifications, then? Well, one effective device is to explain the meanings of technical expressions (as opposed to ordinary expressions). Note that a technical expression should be italicized when it is first introduced, but an ordinary font should be used from then on. For example:

A *perceptual experience* is simply a perception, illusion, or hallucination.

A second effective device for clarifying an idea is to show how to apply the idea to a concrete case. For example:

According to Susanna Siegel, some perceptual experiences can be rational or irrational in and of themselves. Suppose, for example, that I have an irrational fear of snakes, which in turn causes me to perceive a garden hose as a snake. Then, according to Siegel, my perceptual experience of the garden hose would inherit the irrationality of my fear; my perceptual experience itself be irrational.

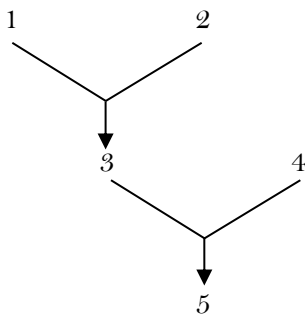
A third effective device for clarifying an idea is to identify common misunderstandings, and to replace them with correct understandings. For example:

Descartes famously argues that it is certain that the self exists. But the Cartesian notion of the self is not the ordinary notion – it is not the notion of a human being, an animal, or even a material body. Rather, the Cartesian notion of the self is the notion of anything that engages in mental activity.

There are many other effective ways to clarify an idea. See if you can identify some of these in the next philosophical text that you read.

Step 3. Support the conclusion with good (interpersonal) evidence.

You will often need to describe chains of evidence. For example, suppose that a particular claim – call it claim 5 – is supported by claims 3 and 4, and suppose that claim 3 is in turn supported by claims 1 and 2. In a diagram:



Students will often be tempted to present these ideas in reverse order, like so:

5. For 3 and 4. Moreover, 3 is supported by 1 and 2.

This is confusing! To be sure, it is indeed usually a good idea to begin with claim 5. But then you should return to the beginning of the evidential diagram and work your way down, like so:

5. For 1 and 2. Therefore, 3. Moreover, 4.

By the way, you may be tempted to repeat your conclusion – in this case, claim 5 – at the end of the paragraph. But unless your argument is especially complex, resist this temptation! Just give the final piece of evidence and *stop*.

Further tips. Here are a few more pointers to help you structure your ideas effectively.

First, keep in mind that it is better to divide your ideas into too many paragraphs than too few. A single paragraph should normally contain *just one central idea*. If an idea is complex, then it is wise to divide your discussion of it into several paragraphs, each of which focuses on a smaller idea. For example, one paragraph might contain nothing but clarification, and one or more further paragraphs might then be devoted purely to providing evidence.

Second, make sure to be generous in your use of *signposts* – devices that indicate the relationships between ideas. I typically use at least one signpost for every two sentences. Here are some concise signposts worth remembering:

- When you are clarifying what an idea means: *in other words, that is, for example*.
- When you are explaining how an idea is supported by evidence: *for, so, since, because, thus, therefore*.

Applying headline structure more generally. You now have a basic grasp of how to apply headline structure to a paragraph. But the same structure can be applied to an entire paper. The central conclusion of a paper is known as its *thesis*, and you can start your paper by stating your thesis. You can then use each body paragraph to provide a single piece of evidence or clarification for that thesis. For instance, in your introduction, you might state the following thesis:

Kant claims that all human beings ought to obey the categorical imperative.
[Conclusion.]

You might then begin your paragraphs with the following sentences:

Paragraph 1. The categorical imperative is the imperative to [Clarification.]

Paragraph 2. Kant first argues that it is irrational to disobey the categorical imperative.
[Evidence.]

Paragraph 3. Kant then argues that we should not be irrational because [Further evidence.]

There are no warm-up exercises for this topic. Just be sure to apply these ideas in your upcoming paper!