

Writing skills: the master plan¹

By the end of the semester, you will have written a sophisticated paper in which you develop an original argument for a substantial philosophical conclusion, identify a strong objection to that argument, and rebut that objection, while also incorporating ideas from at least two texts that we have studied. This will be an impressive accomplishment.

As stepping stones to this final goal, you will progress through the following sequence of exercises and papers:

1. Recognizing **evidence** (claims which rationally support other claims) and diagramming simple arguments.
2. Distinguishing evidence from explanation.
3. **Signposting** (clearly indicating the structure of your ideas) within paragraphs.
4. Writing a **thesis statement** (the central argumentative claim of a work) and **topic sentences** (sentences indicating the purpose of a paragraph or section).
5. Explaining an argument.
6. Understanding basic rules of grammar and style.

Paper 1: Interpret a central idea of a thinker whom we have studied, citing the text to support your claims.

7. Identifying good and bad forms of argument involving the conditional (“if ... then”).
8. Criticizing an argument in the two most illuminating ways: by criticizing its claims or criticizing its inferences.
9. Identifying two good forms of **argument by elimination**.

Paper 2: Reconstruct an argument from a thinker whom we have studied, paying special attention to logical form and citing the text to support your claims. Then develop a strong objection to that argument and explain how the argument can best be defended against the objection.

10. Identifying **reductio ad absurdum** (another good form of argument).
11. Quoting texts effectively.
12. Writing an introduction and a conclusion.

Paper 3: Develop an original argument for a substantial philosophical conclusion. Then identify a strong objection to your argument, and finally rebut the objection. Your discussion should incorporate ideas from at least two texts that we have studied.

Since you will regularly practice the skills listed above in seminar exercises, homework assignments, and discussion seeds, you will be fully prepared to write these increasingly ambitious papers.

¹ I owe a large intellectual debt to Jay Garfield for his extensive and thoughtful suggestions on this handout.