

Structuring your ideas; paper-writing tips

STRUCTURING YOUR IDEAS

There are countless ways that writing can be well-structured. Thus, here is the single most important technique, and the most general one, that I can offer you:

Experiment with the order in which you present your ideas.

For example, suppose that you arrive at this first draft of a paragraph:

One view is that H₂O just is the kind of thing that causes our water-beliefs, and in virtue of that our concept of water refers to H₂O. This was the view of Kripke himself, and I will call it the *reference-fixing view*. This is the view that we need not have any personal-level understanding, not even implicitly, of how facts about causation, natural kindhood, etc. guide our application of the concept of water. Our encounter with a sample of water simply *fixes the reference* of our concept of water.

When you reread this paragraph, you will notice that the ideas are poorly structured. So you can put all of the claims from this paragraph into a list, like so:

- One view is that H₂O just is the kind of thing that causes our water-beliefs.
- In virtue of that our concept of water refers to H₂O.
- This was the view of Kripke himself.
- I will call it the *reference-fixing view*.
- This is the view that we need not have any personal-level understanding, not even implicitly, of how facts about causation, natural kindhood, etc. guide our application of the concept of water.
- Our encounter with a sample of water simply *fixes the reference* of our concept of water.

Then you can re-order the claims in this list – probably many times! – until you hit on an order that feels especially easy to understand. At that point, you can put the claims back into paragraph form, making sure to add plenty of *signposts* (devices that indicate relationships among ideas):

Some theorists think that our encounter with a sample of water simply *fixes the reference* of our concept of water; we need not have any personal-level understanding, not even implicitly, of how facts about causation, natural kindhood, etc. guide our application of the concept of water. The idea might be that H₂O just is the kind of thing that causes our water-beliefs, and in virtue of that our concept of water refers to H₂O. In fact, this was the view of Kripke himself, and I will call it the *reference-fixing view*.

That said, I would like to give you one specific structure, call it *headline structure*, that you can frequently apply in 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:

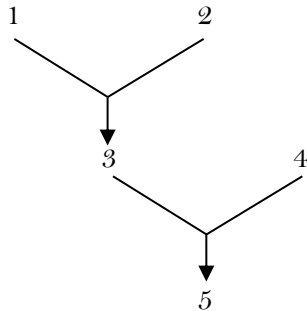
Mozi's central ethical tenet is that we should practice impartial care.

Step 2. Clarify this conclusion.

Some useful techniques here are (i) to clarify the meanings of any technical terms, (ii) to illustrate the idea using concrete examples, and (iii) to clarify an idea using both negative and positive terms: first you would explain what the idea does *not* mean, and then you would explain what the idea *does* mean. For more details on these techniques, see the handout on explaining an idea.

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

You will often need to describe chains of evidence. For example, suppose that you are discussing an argument with the following structure:



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, usually, it will then be clearer to return to the beginning of the 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! Give the final piece of evidence and just *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 another paragraph 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 use the introductory paragraph of 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.]

PAPER-WRITING TIPS

(Alternative title: “How I learned to stop worrying and love writing papers.”)

As an undergraduate, I loved philosophy. I loved reading philosophical texts, I loved discussing them in class, I loved debating them over lunch, and I loved mulling them over at any hour of the day. *But I hated writing philosophy papers.* I felt a keen sense of agony at the midpoint and end of every semester, when I had to gather my ideas onto the page in polished form.

Twenty years later, things could not be more different: writing philosophy is a joy for me – it is one of my favorite parts of my job. (The other is teaching!) I typically write for several hours per day, and I get utterly absorbed in the work. What changed?

Here I will share my answer in the form of three paper-writing tips.

Tip 1. Start right away.

In an earlier handout, I recommended that you start every day, not with the easiest task, but with the *hardest* one. This is a perfect time to apply that advice! Writing a paper is a very hard task, so set aside time, as early as possible in your day, to do it. Try reserving just 20 minutes each day for this, and if you get swept up in the work, feel free to do more.

Tip 2. Celebrate failure.

Mistakes are a necessary, even fruitful, part of the writing process. You will rarely get a good philosophical idea on your first try, and usually not on your second or third, either. Writing is like picking your way through a labyrinth: you will pretty much always make many wrong turns, and even the right turn often leads away from the exit.

Thus you should reward yourself, not only for your good ideas, but for your bad ones – which will be far more numerous! Celebrate when you discover that your objection is unsound, or that your evidence is weak. You are that much closer to finding your way out of the maze!

Tip 3. Solve problems on the page, not in your head.

This is my most important tip for you.

Sometimes you will be stuck. Perhaps you have realized that you have no evidence for a key premise in your argument, or that your opponent has a devastating objection to your idea. Most students will try to solve this problem in their heads. They will stare into space, waiting for a solution that never comes.

This is a poor strategy, and a painful one.

The problem stems from an important psychological finding: that human working memory is *extremely limited*. The human mind can hold 5-9 ideas at a time – no more. So, if there is a 10-step solution to your philosophical problem, *you will never discover it*. You will continue to retrace the same few ideas over and over again, with no sense of progress. (I bet that description sounds familiar to you!)

A much better approach is to *write* your way through a problem. You can start by writing down exactly what the problem is. You might say, “My argument needs the premise that x , but I don’t have any evidence for this premise.” Then you can brainstorm solutions, jotting down any idea that occurs to you. You might write, “Maybe y is evidence for x .” If you realize that these solutions do not work, you can write that down, too: “No, that isn’t right. y isn’t evidence for x because ...” You can then look for other pieces of evidence for x , or you might try to develop a different argument that relies on some other premise. But, no matter what, do not try to figure things out in your head. Write down your thoughts the entire time.

This technique works because, unlike your mind, your brainstorming document has no space limitations: it can hold as many ideas as you can write. You never have to get stuck – you always have something new to try. Thus you *will* eventually hit on a good idea – and you will feel a sense of progress the entire time!

Tip 4. Separate brainstorming from revision.

I find it useful to separate my writing into two very different stages.

The first stage is *brainstorming*. In this stage, I am figuring out what I think – on the page, not in my head, as per the previous tip. I write very quickly and without concern for grammar or style. I am just brainstorming and seeing what works and what doesn’t. As long as an idea seems compelling to me, I keep it in my main document, but if I discover a problem with an idea, I move it to a scrap document, where I can revisit it later if I wish.

The second stage is *revising*. Here I first work out how to organize my ideas effectively, both across and within paragraphs. Then I polish each sentence for grammar and style.

Here are some tips about these stages:

- Do not revise while you are brainstorming. You will end up throwing out most brainstorming anyway, and there is no point in polishing what will go in the trash. Revise only once you are satisfied with the ideas.
- One round of revisions is not enough. Many rounds are needed. It will take several rounds to get the structure right, and several more rounds to find the most precise, concise, and ordinary way of expressing your ideas.