



Working with Sources and Writing About Philosophy

This handout offers students an introduction to how academic writers in a particular discipline work with the texts of other writers. We suggest that students new to writing in this academic field carefully review this introduction and discuss any questions it prompts with your instructor or with a writing specialist in the Hixon Writing Center.

Introduction

You may be familiar with Plato's *Dialogues*, written records of his oral lessons that dramatize the work of posing questions, comparing ideas, and figuring out what seems to be true. While few modern philosophers write dialogues, the spirit of the dialogue continues to infuse the writing in the field. The writing is often direct and reads more like conversational language than writing in other academic fields. Almost all modern philosophical writing includes substantial, explicit engagement with the writing and ideas of other philosophers. The ability to represent the ideas of other writers clearly, fairly, and accurately is central to successful writing in this field, where differences in interpretation are of paramount importance.

Types of Sources

Many other humanistic scholars make use of the terms “primary” and “secondary,” and “tertiary” to categorize types of sources, with primary texts being the main (textual) object of study, secondary texts being the argument-driven scholarly writing about those objects, and tertiary texts being reference materials that provide useful background information. This system works less well for philosophy. This is because the separation of primary sources and secondary sources makes less sense in philosophy, since what may be considered primary sources—key original texts in the field worthy of explication and study (e.g. Plato's *Dialogues*)—are themselves argument-driven writing that may have similar goals to secondary texts being written about them (e.g. trying to explain what reality is).

So, philosophers, like scientists, do not really rely upon the primary/secondary/tertiary language to distinguish texts. Instead, they would distinguish between:

- **critical philosophical texts** that advance original arguments about philosophical questions (e.g. Plato's *Dialogues*; Kant's *Prolegomena*; their own critical writing)
- **textbooks** which present simplified, condensed versions of the philosophical arguments developed in critical philosophical texts (e.g. Sober's *Core Questions in Philosophy*)
- **encyclopedias** which are reference texts that collate basic information about the field (e.g. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [<http://plato.stanford.edu/>])

As in other fields, your professor may not allow the consultation of textbooks or encyclopedias; sometimes you will be expected to grapple with a new critical philosophical text without outside aid, as this is often a fundamental part of the learning process.

Bringing other texts into your writing

One feature that generally distinguishes writing in philosophy from that of other humanistic fields is the pervasive use of the first person and the direct, conversational nature of the writing. Philosophers also tend to appreciate metalanguage, writing that explains to a reader what the author will attempt to do in the paper (both overall or at a particular moment in the paper). Metalanguage can be especially important for beginners in the field, as it both helps you organize

your approach as a writer and gives your reader a clear roadmap of your paper. The resulting directness of most philosophical writing means that when you bring the work of other writers into your own writing, there is typically a good deal of explicit preparation done by an author, so that the reader understands both the origin and the nature of the ideas being shared from another text. So, if a social scientist might write, “We know that the majority of people will lie more when put into stressful situations (Jones 2009),” putting the author of that study into the background, a philosopher will more likely foreground the author:

Valdez’s work on the question of how to distinguish the truth from lies poses an important question: is someone lying if they say something factually incorrect but truly believe themselves to be telling the truth? In a recent article on this topic, Valdez (2014) breaks with the general consensus on this question and argues that we should indeed consider such a misstatement of fact to be a truth. What seems to me most important about this is...

In this fabricated example, you will notice that Valdez almost becomes a character being introduced and discussed by the author.

While all fields are insistent on rigorous attribution and citation, philosophers will be particularly insistent that the lineage of your own ideas is clearly shown and that student writers do not absorb an idea from another thinker and present it as their own. Explicitly presenting a genealogy of ideas and the way your ideas grow from engagement with others—either through your desire to extend their ideas or to challenge them—is at the heart of much philosophical writing.

Philosophers will also insist that when you present someone else’s argument, you present the strongest possible formulation of that argument. This should be done in all academic writing, but it is particularly important to philosophers. Many philosophy essays fail specifically because they mischaracterize the work of other philosophers, leading to a straw man argument.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that many examples in philosophical writing are not drawn from other texts, but instead are generated by the writer to illustrate his or her point. A well developed, original example can be central to the success of an essay in this field.

Citation practices

Philosophers generally favor citation systems that rely on footnotes or endnotes, like Chicago Style (notes-bibliography) and the closely related Turabian style. However, professional philosophers use a variety of styles depending upon where they are publishing their work, so there may be other expectations in your classes; it is important to ask your instructor what expectations they have for citation style.

Links to detailed information about style systems can be found on the Hixon Writing Center website: <http://writing.caltech.edu/students/handouts>

What to look for in examples

Students new to philosophical study should look at models and note all of the varied ways philosophers introduce a new author’s idea into their own writing. Note how the author connects him or herself to the other thinkers on a topic, and examine the ways in which philosophers sometimes seem to be telling the story of our evolving understanding of a given idea or argument. Notice when quotation, rather than summary or paraphrase, is used, and seek to refine your understanding of what prompts writers to quote. Study how writers in this field produce clear summaries of other writers’ complex ideas, a task that seems simple but it actually quite challenging. Try to assess what it looks like when a writer presents a strong, charitable reading of another philosopher’s work, even when he or she opposes or finds fault in that work. Finally, look at how much context or background writers provide by using the work of others and consider what choices they made in doing so, given their own goals.