

writing philosophy

Most students have no idea how to write for a philosophy class. The smart students realize this and try to do something about it. The dumb ones think that what got "A"s in high school will get "A"s in college, and if they get an "F" it's the instructor's fault. The following hints and advice are for the smart students.

The basic rule of writing for a philosophy class is to take a position and support it with arguments. This means taking a position that can be supported. Leave your usual way of thinking at the door. You don't have to agree with anyone else. You do have to be able to support what you say with evidence and argument.

When writing a philosophy paper it is better to do it right the first time than to waste hours and hours on a paper that's going to come back to you with a "C" on it. The idea here is to take mistakes that students have made, explain why they're mistakes, and tell you what to do instead. Most of it is simple, and some people will find that it makes writing philosophy much easier and less stressful.

Most students in lower division philosophy classes get bad, some might even say LOUSY, grades on their papers. At one level, those that get these bad grades do so because, instead of writing papers that demonstrate that they understand the topic and can justify an interesting and relevant opinion with argument and evidence, they turn in fluffy messes of unsubstantiated prejudices, recycled clichés and bad or missing arguments. (And that's only the good ones!) Of course there's nothing wrong with writing bad philosophy (glossy news magazines are full of it), but there is something wrong with turning in a bad philosophy paper in a philosophy class. Namely, you get a bad grade, and you don't learn very much.

Getting a bad grade isn't just unpleasant and bad for the self-esteem, it can keep you out of Med School! (Yes, philosophy classes do count towards your GPA.) Many students are TOTALLY SURPRISED by their bad grades. Sometimes a student is so outraged by his bad grade that he takes the trouble to explain to his teaching assistant exactly why he should get a better grade. For instance, each of the following was at one time tried on me: "My girlfriend is taking this class at UCLA and her instructor there thinks this paper should get a better grade." "Don't you think a paper of this length, with all these quotations and footnotes and references, should get a better grade?" "But I get A's in my writing class!" This kind of thing never works.

Despite the very occasional chiseler, the majority of students who bring their bad papers in after grading are sincerely interested in finding out what went wrong. Often, these students are surprised to learn that they didn't understand the assignment, or what is required in a philosophy paper, or even how to set about writing a paper, any paper in the first place. Sometimes, they are shocked to learn that the hours and hours they spent on their papers were almost completely wasted! These students often respond very well to suggestions about what they could have done differently, and their second papers are usually much better.

The other "writing" pages linked at the left are pitched towards students who don't have a clue, and those who think they have a clue, but don't. Thus it starts with fundamentals and "common sense" and moves on to more advanced topics. While everything in here can be mastered by the beginner, even the most advanced student can find something useful here.