

**Some comments on writing papers for Philosophy 488/594  
Pelletier, Winter 2012**

The requirement was a 8-12 page (double-spaced) paper for 488 students and 10-20 pages for 594 students. It is due on April 16<sup>th</sup>, electronically to me before midnight that day. Remember that they should be in .doc, .docx, pdf, ps, dvi, rtf, txt, .tex. I will return them either electronically or in paper to be picked up outside my office (2-65 Ass. Hall) sometime afterwards.

This set of comments covers four points: (a) where to get ideas for a paper, (b) what sort of style to follow (including organization, etc.), (c) other stylistic matters (citation style, grammar, etc.), and (d) issues about intellectual honesty.

One thing you should keep in mind is that your paper needs to be relevant *to this course*. Although you might be interested in epistemology, or political philosophy, Foucault, or Spinoza, you cannot simply write a paper on that topic. Instead, you need to show how it impinges on the topics of this course—intuitions and surrounding issues. This sort of relevance is assumed in all the discussions below.

**A. Ideas for Papers**

Since you are all either senior undergraduate students in philosophy or graduate students, I expect there to be at least a little of your own original thought in your paper. This is not as scary as it might sound, for there are many ways you can incorporate your ideas.

Perhaps the easiest paper to write that still shows some originality is to compare two authors who are writing on the same topic but who have different conclusions. (This can be by two authors we have been considering, or by two authors who are writing about the general topics we have been considering). A paper would then contain:

- a. A statement of the general issue that is under discussion by the two authors, including some indication of why it is important (or why the authors think it is important).
- b. A clear account of the positions taken by each of the authors which highlights where their disagreement is and what sort of ramifications this disagreement has for our understanding of the general topic.
- c. [Here's where your originality comes in]. A criticism of one (or both) author(s), explaining something that they have overlooked, or a bad argument that they gave, or new data that you have, etc. Often it will turn out that the author has foreseen that someone might object, and will have given his/her own further reasons for his/her position. In this case you will want to further argue that none of these supplementary reasons was any good.
- d. It might happen that one of the authors disagreed explicitly with the second author, and gave some reasons or arguments as to why the second author was wrong. But you disagree with the reasons given by this first author, and want to defend the second author. In this case you will want to dissect the first author's reasons, and show that they are bad.

- e. You might decide that both authors are wrong, but for different reasons. That too can be dealt with in this same fashion, by bringing forward new evidence or showing that the authors' arguments are bad, etc.

That was the easiest sort of original paper to write because all the "deep ideas" are already out in the open in the writings of the two authors, and it is your job merely to evaluate which one is not cogent and why. Nonetheless, this counts as original work, and is the sort of work that can get published and is important for the advancement of the field.

It is somewhat more difficult when you do not pick up an on-going dispute, but just one article (or a series of articles that all put forward the same general ideas) which you think is wrong. Nonetheless, you can use your original thought here also. There is a lot of overlap with the first type of paper in this type, but there are some differences. This paper would contain:

- a. A statement of the general issue that is under discussion by the author, including some indication of why it is important (or why the author thinks it is important).
- b. A clear account of the position taken by the author which highlights where your disagreement is with the author's account, and what sort of ramifications this disagreement has for our understanding of the general topic.
- c. [Here's where your originality comes in]. A criticism of this position of the author, explaining something s/he has overlooked, or a bad argument that s/he gave, or new data that you have, etc. Often it will turn out that the author has foreseen that someone might object, and will have given his/her own further reasons for his/her position. In this case you will want to further argue that none of these supplementary reasons was any good.
- d. One of the things that makes this be a more difficult paper to write than the former type is that you have to come up with the criticisms yourself and that will usually mean that you have some idea of what the alternative position would be (rather than relying on the second author). But an even more important reason that it is difficult is that you are under an obligation to make sure that this criticism you are making hasn't already been made over and over again in the literature. (Actually, to be original, it should not have been made at all.) And this means that you will have to go to some databases (such as Philosopher's Index) to discover whether it is already in the air. Even if it really was you yourself that came up with the criticism and alternative theory, if someone has already done it, then it is not an original theory. (Of course, you might still be able to work it out in your favour if you decide that the other authors who have put forward these criticisms and alternative theories have bad reasons...you can then criticize them.)

And finally, a grander type of paper takes a general problem or topic that was identified in one of the published works, but characterized as "an unsolved problem" or a "direction for further research" or some such thing. And you then follow up their hints and comments, and "solve the problem". In this case a paper would contain:

- a. A clear statement of the problem/new direction and how it was seen as fitting into the author's overall theory. This would include saying why the problem is important for the author's original theory and how it would help our understanding of the general topic.

- b. Usually the author will have given some hints or statements about the problem and why s/he didn't solve it in the original paper. (E.g., maybe the author said "this theory needs to be tested against languages that differ in this-or-that respect" but that the author didn't have the relevant data. Or "this theory might also be relevant to philosophical views that take so-and-so position", but doesn't study this any further.) You would then say why you have the resources to undertake the challenge.
- c. You should follow up this general research of yours, and carefully show how it does or doesn't fit in with what the author had predicted or presumed or wanted.
- d. You would close with a general statement of how your discoveries have altered the state of the general research area, and give some hints of further problems that still need to be addressed.

As you can see, "original research" builds upon the work of others, and any decent piece of work needs to show how it fits into what facts we already know and in what way it interacts with existing theories. A large part of writing a research paper involves these aspects.

## **B. Organizing your paper**

The discussion above already gives important hints about how to organize your paper.

**Introduction:** You want to place it into the ongoing research in an area, so you need to start with a description what the area is and some claims of why it is an important topic.

**Background:** If you are going to talk about some specific topic brought out in an earlier paper, you need to be explicit about what the specific issue is, explaining it and how it fits into the author's overall theory. You will be expected to show that it is an important part of the theory, and if it is relevant, you will need to say what others have already said about the topic.

**Critical Remarks:** You want to say what you think is wrong with the author's claims, giving whatever evidence you have and whatever analytic comments (e.g., pointing out invalid arguments) you are planning on making. Again, if you are mentioning other authors also, you will want to explain why your criticisms are different from theirs. And if the original author has already considered the sort of remarks you are making, you need to further show why s/he wasn't right in his/her statements about this.

**New Ideas (if you have this type of paper):** If you are going to put forward a different account of some phenomena, or some new evidence to a different overall theory, you should put it forth and state why it is relevant, what it proves, and exactly how this is different from the author's original theory. And if the author already considered this sort of theory and rejected it, you need to show why s/he was wrong to do so.

**Conclusion:** You want to give a quick summary of what the problem is, what you said about it, and what type of overall theory we are left with. You might also wish to mention some further work that needs to be done.

### **C. Stylistic Matters**

You should write in a suitably academic style. This means that you should have a title, your name, the course number/title, the date, etc., somewhere at the beginning of the paper (title page, or top of first page). It means that you should take care to spell words correctly (use a spell checker, but be careful, since they recognize correctly-spelled words that are not the ones you want). Although you can use grammar checkers, most writers think they are terrible because they claim things to be wrong that really aren't. If English is not your native language, you might try to get a native speaker to just read over it for "naturalness". (But don't get too bothered by this, if you're not a native speaker. Most of us just read things without noticing that. I mention it more for purposes of published writings and theses/dissertations.)

You need to use some suitable method of referencing other work. On a different document I mentioned the "Name-date" method that I prefer. On a separate document I mention some other versions of referencing.

If you receive very general sorts of help...for instance, discussing the matter with another student, or presenting the material in front of an audience and getting feedback...then one typically puts in an Acknowledgement. This can be any of: a footnote from the title of your paper or the last sentence of the paper (these footnotes usually start out "I am grateful to...for their help in...") or it could be a separate section that is labeled "Acknowledgements". In this case it normally goes at the end of the paper as a concluding section.

### **D. Intellectual Integrity**

It is a fundamental principle of academic research that you credit the work of others. This means that it is *not* a good piece of research if you either misappropriate the work of others as your own or if you do not take reasonable steps to find out what others have done on the topic you are working on.

Plagiarism is defined as:

Submitting the words, ideas, images, or data of another person as one's own in any academic writing, essay, thesis, research project, or assignment.

Two related types of cheating are:

Submitting, without the written approval of the course instructor, all or a substantial portion of any academic writing, essay, thesis, research report, project, or assignment for which credit has previously been obtained by the student or which has been or is being submitted by the student in another course in the University or elsewhere.

Submitting any academic writing, essay, thesis, research report, project, or assignment containing a statement of fact known by the student to be false, or a reference to a source which reference or source has been fabricated.

Plagiarism and cheating are contrary to academic research standards, and are just plain not nice. Do not do them. You can easily get around plagiarism simply by citing all the sources you use, and giving the credit that the original authors deserve. It even makes your paper become more scholarly. As I said, knowledge advances by people making improvements on the work of others. You need to give the others their full credit, and then continue with your thoughts about how they are wrong in this way or that, or that their work could be extended like such-and-so.