PARTS OF A PHILOSOPHY PAPER OR PRESENTATION

[Includes excerpts from *About Philosophy,* 5th ed., Appendix, by Robert Paul Wolff, 1992, Prentice Hall; edited by jmw]

A philosophy paper is a defense of a thesis, in which the controversy is clearly and fully identified, the thesis is explained and analyzed, arguments (with supporting evidence) are given in support of the thesis, possible objections to the thesis are stated and examined, and responses are given to the objections. **Thus, a philosophy paper has five main parts:**

1. Introduction (includes controversy and statement of *thesis)*

Pick a side. The particular position you take is not important, and it does not matter whether your instructor (or you!) agrees or disagrees with that viewpoint. These are very complicated issues where people can rationally come to very different conclusions. The critical part will be how you will support your position—how you argue for it (discussed below).

You should know your position well before you start writing your paper. Without a thesis, your paper will be prone to tangents. Do your research. Get into the literature. Find enough articles that discuss the controversy so that you better understand it. Examine all sides. What positions do the authors take?

A thesis is a simple statement that makes some *clear,* ***definite assertion*** about the subject under discussion. **It is a statement that takes a *position* on the morality/ethicality/fairness of the subject at hand.** A good thesis statement should state precisely what you intend to prove in your paper (the position you plan to argue for). Make sure that the reader knows your position on the controversy early in the paper, and KEEP IT IN MIND THROUGHOUT.

Your thesis might be something you believe in personally, or not; either way, it is what you will strive to prove. It is very much like one side of a debate, although you must address the opposing view. The upshot is: choose a clear, simple, straightforward thesis that you think you can do a good job of *defending*.

NOTE: The important thing here is that you take a particular stance and stick with it. The stance does not have to be "all or nothing"—but you must make your stance **perfectly clear**, from the start. For example:

> "Hate speech should not be censored or banned from the Internet, because blah blah blah, and there are better ways to address this problem. However, precautions must be taken by parents to protect children from harm, blah blah.

This shows you have a clear stance, but that you also have caveats. In some cases, you will argue for one particular side, but only within certain very strict parameters (whereas someone else, such as your partner, will argue that the parameters must be very liberal). In either case, do not waiver from your stance.

You should be able to state your simple thesis in one statement (although you may, of course, use more).

Simple thesis examples:

> Abortion is morally wrong under most circumstances because it involves the ending of innocent human life, it is blah blah blah, and it leads to yadda yadda yadda.
>
> The responsibility for filtering television and game violence should be left primarily to parents, not to the networks, to the electronics industry, the gaming industry, nor to the government. Neither the government nor related industries is in a position to determine yadda yadda. Further, filters are problematic because blah blah blah...

The following look like but are NOT theses:

> Filtering: pro and con.
>
> Who should filter television and game programs to protect children?

The latter statements are not theses because they do not *assert* anything; they are simply topics. Moreover, they do not serve as good titles, either—a good title gives a clue about your stance.

You can write a philosophy paper *about* one of these topics, *but you first must choose your thesis*.

2. Analysis and explanation of the thesis; and a little *background*, as needed

Analysis. Now explain what you mean by the **terms** used in your thesis. In our example, "Abortion is morally wrong under most circumstances because it involves the ending of innocent human life….," you must state exactly what you mean by the terms "abortion," "morally wrong," and "innocent human life." This may seem trivial, but in philosophy, a lot can get loaded into an innocent-looking definition. For example, by *morally wrong*, we mean something quite different from "against the law" or "illegal."

Notice that at this stage, you are not presenting arguments yet—*you are simply explaining what you mean by your thesis.* In our example, "most circumstances" could exclude "unless the mother's life is in grave danger." You can choose any thesis you wish, and interpret it in any plausible manner you wish, so long as you make it clear to your reader what you are doing.

The explanation helps to set the tone before moving on to the arguments.

Background. Remember that the major focus of your papers should be on the controversy that deals with some social effect of information technology, not on the technology itself. For example, if you write a paper related to computer networks, do not spend your time focusing on the speed of the networks—instead, focus on the related social ramifications and controversy presented. You may include here a very brief explanation or some background about the technology you are discussing, if needed, but do not overdo it.

3. *Arguments* in support of your thesis; *counter-arguments to refute opponent's thesis*

To a very considerable extent, the success of your paper will depend on how well you can dig up strong arguments, with evidence, that directly support your thesis, and how well you can anticipate and refute potential arguments from the opposition.

This is the heart (main body) of the paper. This is where you show your stuff.

Make a bulleted list of your main arguments. It will help you to stay ORGANIZED. First, you must come up with arguments that are designed to persuade your reader that your thesis is true (assume the reader is either on the opposing side or still undecided). An argument for a thesis is a solid **reason** for believing that the thesis is true. Before you state an argument, ask yourself these questions: "If I didn't already believe my thesis, would this reason help to convince me that the thesis is true? Would it at least make me more inclined to believe that it could be true? Would it tend to convince a reader who is open-minded enough so that he or she is willing to listen to this reasoning? Did I provide good, solid evidence for this argument?" If the answers are yes, then you have a genuine argument to support your thesis. If not, leave it out of your paper.

Do not make unsupported assertions—that is, statements that are left unsupported (and that you expect the reader to believe without providing real and convincing evidence). You must provide evidence for every point you make. "It is ridiculous to assume that parents will ...." Such an assertion screams for support—tell the reader why (example: A 2003 PEW Report shows that….), else she'll have no reason to believe you. (And notice how condescending the word "ridiculous" will sound to the reader should he/she disagree with you; avoid such terms.) Also question the authority of the sources you use. A quote (or paraphrase of a quote) from the Secretary of Education or from a school superintendent is very credible when writing about K-12 educational issues, for example.

You can also use simple parity of reasoning:

> We would agree that smothering a baby in its crib is morally wrong, and that shooting down someone walking along the street is morally wrong. What do those have in common with abortion? What makes them all morally wrong is the fact that they are all cases of taking an innocent human life.

The test here is to make sure that all cases have something <u>important</u> in common; in this case, that all the victims were *innocent*.

Counter-arguments to show that *opponent's* thesis and arguments are faulty

For example, an opposing view might be that having an abortion is choosing to do something with your own body, and "persons have an absolute right to do with their own bodies whatever they choose." You can try to come up with a counter-example to this 'rule' that will show it is not, in fact, a true universal principle. You might point out that using your own hands to strangle someone you do not like is an example of doing what you want with your own body, yet few would argue it would be morally acceptable to do that.

If you disagree with someone else's ideas, strengthen your position by providing some alternative proposals, and say why they would be preferable to those proposed. You will be far more credible.

4. **Examine *objections* to your thesis/arguments, and give your *response* to them**

   Here's where you play devil's advocate. This is the part of your paper in which you put yourself into an imaginary opponent's shoes and try to figure out what objections he or she might raise to *your* arguments. (For your term project, that shouldn't be very difficult!) Try to come up with some really compelling objections to your arguments (not cream-puff objections that anyone could refute), and then refute those objections. Think of what the reader (who may currently embrace the opposing view) might have in mind as she reads your paper. *There is nothing that wins a reader over more than to anticipate her intelligent questions, and then come up with plausible replies.*

5. **Risks, tradeoffs of your position**

   By now, you should have successfully argued that your thesis is true. However, you must acknowledge that we do not live in a perfect world with perfect solutions. There are some risks or tradeoffs to your position. For example, you might have argued for the right to free speech on the Internet, but the inherent risks must be brought up. However, you must still convince the reader that it is worth taking those risks (and accepting some tradeoffs) because it is better than the alternative (your opponent's thesis), and why (the alternative being censorship, in our illustration). Also, point out how some of those risks can be minimized. The basic idea is that you do not want to appear as though you are presenting a perfect, risk-free solution in a perfect, risk-free world. **Note:** watch how you present the risks—do not do it in such a way that it directly contradicts your main thesis, or annihilates one or more of your arguments.

6. **Your conclusion**

   Briefly summarize your main points, state your conclusion, and wrap it up. Important points need to be dealt with in the main body, not thrown in as an afterthought in the conclusion. You could leave the reader with something *additional* to think about, but take care not to end with a cliffhanger, or another argument that should have been explored and developed fully in the main body.

*You may use the above subheadings (e.g.: 5. Risks, tradeoffs...), or subheadings of your own, in your outline, of course, but they do not belong in your written papers. Written papers are **formal academic papers** and should be treated as such.*