1 The Thesis

Every paper you write has the same goal: To state a thesis and defend it. In a history of philosophy course, this will require giving an interpretation of an argument in the text and evaluating that argument. Let’s break this down a little bit:

1. You need to pick something that counts as a thesis. A thesis must be arguable—it must require argumentation to defend, but it must also not be obviously true. “Socrates was an Athenian” is not arguable, but neither is “Plato believed in the immortality of the soul.” The last would be appropriate for a book report, not a philosophy paper.

2. You need to state your thesis. It should be clearly stated in your introduction. You will need to make sure your thesis is clear by defining ambiguous terms. You should not change your thesis over the course of the paper.

3. You need to have a thesis. Your paper should not be a collection of thoughts about a topic; it must be unified around a central point.

4. You need to defend your thesis. You need to defend it with arguments, rather than opinions. When giving your interpretation of the text, you need to defend your interpretation with texts (see below). When evaluating Plato’s arguments, you need to put forward arguments for or against his account of knowledge, or of virtue. You should also always consider at least one objection to your view, but make sure to reply to that objection!
2 Structure and Length

Your paper should have an introduction, which will clearly state the thesis, explain terms in the thesis, and outline your argument in the paper. The purpose of the introduction is to state your thesis and outline your argument for the thesis. Actually say what your argument is: Don’t say, “First I will show whether Socrates believes in Gods. Then I will evaluate this argument.” Instead, say “First I will show that Socrates argues by analogy that he believes in the spirits because he believes in spiritual activities. Then I will object that Socrates’ argument by analogy fails because it trades on an ambiguity.”

Each paragraph in the paper should then make each step necessary to outline your interpretation of Plato, evaluate it, and consider objections to your argument. Each paragraph should either directly take up part of your argument, as outlined in the introduction, or directly supplement the previous paragraph. (Look back at the handout on how to read a paper for advice on how sentences can contribute to a complete paragraph.)

In these short papers, you do not need a conclusion. You do need to offer a final evaluation of your thesis in light of the objections and replies that you make. This can serve as a kind of conclusion. But you do not need to summarize everything you have done in the paper.

Because these papers are short, do not try to make too many arguments. One good argument, one good objection, and one good reply, should be all that you need. (However, as you make your argument, you will often find yourself considering small objections to fine-tune it.) If you feel like your paper is too short, that probably means you didn’t go into enough detail or didn’t find a good enough objection.

3 How to Compose the Paper

Step One: Think about it! Read the texts again. Write notes in the margins. Think about what passages you find most relevant to the prompt. How do they tie together? Are they successful?

Step Two: Write an outline. Writing a thesis and outlining your argument go hand-in-hand. Your thesis might change as you draft your paper and develop your understanding of the argument. Just make sure that by the end you have a single, clear thesis that you stick to throughout.

Step Three: Write a draft. There are a lot of strategies here. Some
people skip the introduction and write some body paragraphs first. Some people write the whole paper as a single page, then expand each part of it. Some people just put their outline in a document and start expanding it.

Step Four: Revise the draft. Here are a few tips:

1. Read the paper aloud, or imagine you are going to give the paper as a presentation.
2. Make sure your thesis is the same throughout the paper.
3. Even though I said above that you don’t need a conclusion, I often write a conclusion after I’ve written the paper, and then delete the introduction, and make the conclusion my introduction.
4. Make sure your topic sentences match the paragraphs.
5. If you have enough time, don’t be afraid to make pretty radical changes. If you come up with a really good objection, it’s OK to be convinced by it—change your thesis!
6. Go to the Writing Center and ask for help.

4 Working with Texts

As a history of philosophy paper, you should be working with some texts. Sometimes, you will just cite Plato and paraphrase him. Other times, you will be quoting Plato. Every time you quote Plato, cite clearly the dialogue and page number. Every time you quote Plato, explain what the quote means, with the eye to explaining what the argument in the quote is.

Example: Suppose we are writing a paper on whether or not Socrates is guilty in the *Apology*. You may want to discuss Socrates’ argument that he believes in the spirits. What will this require? First, you might want to cite the relevant part of the text; here I have use ellipses to remove a rhetorical device that is not necessary:

Does any man, Meletus, believe in human activities who does not believe in humans? [...] Does any many who does not believe in horses believe in horsemen’s activities? Or in flute-playing activities but not in flute-players? No, my good sir, no man
could. If you are not willing to answer, I will tell you and these men. Answer the next question, however. Does any man believe in spiritual activities who does not believe in spirits? (Apology 28b-c)

Then, you want to describe what Socrates does:

1. Make clear that this is an argument by analogy.

2. In an argument by analogy, show that you understand what is the relevant part of each half of the analogy. Is the analogy that every activity presupposes the existence of the person doing the activity? Is the analogy that every activity presupposes the existence of the object of the activity?

3. Make clear any terms that are unclear: In this case, do you understand spiritual activities to be Socrates’ worshipping (or something else like that), or to be the gods’ doing things?

4. Add any premises that are missing. This text ends with a question. To make this into an argument, you need to supplement it with a missing premise: That Socrates does believe in spiritual activities.

5. Explain why this quote is important. What does it establish? Does it establish that Socrates believes in the gods in the way that Meletus is challenging that he doesn’t?

One thing you will notice is that evaluation and interpretation go hand in hand. Your answer to 5 will already start to evaluate whether Socrates is really successful. Your answers to 2 and 3 go together: If the shared feature of the analogy in 2 is different from what Socrates means in 3, then Socrates’s argument is invalid. Your answer to 4 will probably help determine the soundness of the argument: If Socrates doesn’t really believe in spiritual activities, then the argument has a false premise.

This is hard, but you will get better at it with practice!

5 The Little Things

1. The structure of your paper can never be too obvious. Use connectives. Use the introduction to shamelessly outline exactly what the paper argues. Have clear topic sentences.
2. Strive for clarity and conciseness. If a sentence is unclear, rewrite it! If two sentences, say the same thing, remove it.

3. It’s fine to end sentences with prepositions, to split infinitives, to use the word “I”, and to use the same words over and over. It’s better to use the same words when that is what you mean than to introduce confusing variety for the sake of variety.

4. Don’t be afraid to use examples. But do be careful to distinguish between two uses of examples: Sometimes, you use examples to clarify what you mean. Sometimes, you use examples to provide support for a premise in an argument. Don’t give an example that does the former, and think that you’ve now done the latter!

6 Other Resources

Please note that these other resources are mainly directed at writing general philosophy papers, not for writing papers in the history of philosophy. But they still have a lot of good resources.

