

# What to Do for the Writing Assignments

Philosophical Perspectives - Ryan Simonelli

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- **The Assignments:** Will ask you to do two things:

1. Reconstruct an argument from one of the philosophical texts.
2. Make a claim in response and argue for that claim.

**Example:** “From 9e-11b of the *Euthyphro*, Socrates and Euthyphro consider the following account of piety: the pious is what all the gods love. Reconstruct and evaluate the argument that Socrates uses to reject this account.”

These are 4-5 page papers (12pt, double-spaced). The paper should be split roughly equally between the reconstructive and original/evaluative parts (so, about 2 pages for each part).

- **The Format of These Papers:**

- **Short and to-the-Point Introduction:** Nothing flashy needed here. Three sentences is fine. Just say clearly exactly what you’re going to do in the paper.

- \* **Example:** In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates argues the pious cannot be defined as that which all the gods loved because this definition will be circular. Socrates’s argument goes through only on the assumption that the gods love things because they are pious. Though Socrates does not argue for this premise, I’ll argue here that this premise is indeed justified, since it is needed to make sense of the love of the gods as rational.

- **Grammatical Conventions and Stuff:** Philosophy papers are likely be a bit different in terms of conventions than other academic writing you’ve done in the past:

- \* **Personal Pronouns:** It’s O.K. and encouraged to use the pronoun “I,” especially to say what you’re going to do, what you’re doing, and what you’ve done. Such sign-posts for your readers are very helpful. Sometimes first-person plural (“we” and “us”) and second-person (“you”) are also useful in this way. **Examples:**

- “In this paper, I’ll argue that *p*.”
    - “I’ve just argued that *q*. I’ll now argue that *r* follows from *q*.”
    - “Before I say what is wrong with this argument, I want to...”
    - “To start, let us note that...”
    - “We’ve now established that *q*. The only thing we need to show now is *r*.”
    - “You might think that *p* must be false for the following reason...”

- \* **Other Language/Grammar Things:**

- Contractions are fine if it feels more natural to use them. Generally, use your own voice—write in a way that feels natural—though don’t be overly informal.
    - Try to avoid passive voice. Don’t say “It is argued that *p*,” but rather “Socrates argues that *p*.” This makes things much clearer.
    - Be as clear and concise as possible. Be like Socrates: don’t use fanciful language unless it’s actually needed to improve clarity and conciseness (and also, this might be obvious, but don’t actually talk like Socrates—you’re not an ancient Athenian).

- **Sources, Quotes and Citations:**

- \* You shouldn't get caught up with external secondary sources. The only sources that you should engage with in the papers are the ones assigned for the course.
- \* Avoid block-quoting. Rather than block quoting a long passage, you can simply refer to it and explain what happens in it in your own words. Short in-line quotes are a good way of making contact with your text in your own explanations, but make sure the prose flows.
- \* Citing line numbers is preferable to page numbers, since it's more precise.
- \* Insofar as you're using the official course texts (which you should be), there's no need to provide detailed bibliographic entries. Just giving the name of the text and line number is fine.

- **Reconstructing an Argument:**

- Generally, an argument can be broken down into the *conclusion*—the main claim that the author is arguing for—and the *premises*—the claims that the author makes that are together supposed to establish that the conclusion is true.
- Your task will be to reconstruct a *specific argument* found in the text—not the whole text.
  - \* A bit of context from the rest of the text will likely be necessary to situate the specific argument, but your focus should be on the specific argument.
- “Reconstruct the argument” does not merely mean paraphrase the text, but, rather, extrapolate the argument from the in the text, and reconstruct it so that it's content and structure is more clear than it is in the text.
  - \* Try to make as clear as possible just what the premises of the argument are and how those premises support the conclusion.
  - \* A good reconstruction of an argument will often involve changing the order in which the claims are made, so that the structure of the argument is more clear.
  - \* Sometimes, you'll have to do a bit of charitable supplementation in order to have a clear argument for the conclusion.
    - **Example:** “Socrates doesn't explicitly say that  $p$ , but his argument clearly depends on the assumption that  $p$ , which seems to be a reasonable one.”
  - \* Use examples in order to make the claims and arguments clear.

- **Evaluating an Argument:** There are a number of things you can do in order to respond to an argument. You can respond to an argument either *negatively*, arguing against it, or *positively*, arguing in favor of it. Don't simply say that you agree or disagree, like it or hate it, but give arguments that aim to persuade the reader to adopt your position.

- **Some Examples of Forms of Negative Arguments:**

- \* Socrates argues that  $p$ . His argument that  $p$  is based on premises  $q$  and  $r$ .  $q$  is false, however, as we can see by the following counterexample...
- \* Socrates argues that  $p$ . His argument that  $p$  is based on premises that  $q$  and  $r$ . However, Socrates never establishes  $q$ . The only thing that he actually establishes is the weaker claim  $q'$ , and  $p$  does not follow from  $q'$  and  $r$ .
- \* Socrates argues that  $p$ . However,  $p$  has  $s$  as a consequence, and  $s$  is clearly false. So, we can't accept  $p$ . It's not clear which of the premises we should give up,  $q$  or  $r$ , but we must give up one of them.

- **Some Examples of Forms of Positive Arguments:**

- \* Socrates argues that  $p$ . His argument that  $p$  is based on the premise that  $q$ . However, he never argues for  $q$ . I'll now provide the missing argument for  $q$  that completes Socrates's argument.
- \* Socrates argues that  $p$ . His argument that  $p$  is based on the premise  $q$ , which one might think has a clear counterexample. However, this counterexample is not genuine, and  $q$  can be maintained.
- \* Socrates argues that  $p$ . One might object that  $p$  has  $s$  as a consequence, and  $s$  is clearly false. I'll argue, however, that, though  $s$  is counter-intuitive, it's not contradictory, and it's the sort of claim one should endorse if one endorses Socrates's account.