

## Writing at Denison: Philosophy

### **Description of the Discipline**

Philosophy is one of the broadest disciplines offered at Denison. As one of the oldest academic disciplines, philosophy is a precursor to many other fields, particularly the sciences, and remains closely linked with many. Philosophers study ethics, science, language, aesthetics, politics, logic, and more.

### **Citation Style Used**

Denison's department is generally flexible when it comes to citation styles. Officially, the department uses a slightly modified version of Chicago style. A style sheet with details on Denison's modifications to standard Chicago style is available from the Philosophy Department. Most professors will accept any style on assignments, however, provided citations are both present and consistent with that style's guidelines.

### **Organization/Required Components**

A clear sense of argumentative flow is important to success in writing Philosophy papers. Because of the complexity of philosophical arguments, it is often helpful to explicitly lay out the intended organization of the paper in a "blueprint statement" or short paragraph early in the paper.

A unique element of writing in philosophy is the consideration of counterarguments to one's claims. A particularly strong philosophy paper will have approximately this structure:

- I. Introduction
  1. Thesis
  2. Organizational "blueprint"
- II. Summary and Background on Relevant Issues and/or the Philosopher in question
- III. Argument
- IV. Potential counterarguments
- V. Revised argumentative
- VI. Conclusion

It is generally insufficient in philosophical writing to make an argument and call it a day. In almost every case, it will be necessary to anticipate holes and foils to your argument and to offer answers to these. In some

cases, it is appropriate to do this over several iterations, considering counters to the answers to the first round and answering these as well.

## **Voice**

Active voice is encouraged. The first person is very common in philosophical writing, both as “I” referring to the writer and as “we,” either referring to the writer and his or her readers or to the community as a whole. Sexist language is strongly discouraged, and inclusive pronouns should be used wherever possible.

## **Types of Writing Assignments**

Many assignments are responses, in which professors ask students to consider the arguments or some portion thereof presented by a particular philosopher. Tasks in these papers can include evaluating the strength of arguments, consider connections with other arguments and philosophical positions, or applying the particular argument to further examples and situations.

Research assignments are also a possibility, though “research” in philosophy can be quite different than in other disciplines. “Data” in the conventional sense is hard to come by, so philosophy research tends to involve a very in-depth examination of academic literature either on a particular philosopher or a particular area of philosophical argument.

Many philosophy assignments can be very open-ended. It is not uncommon for a professor to assign a paper where the only explicit requirement is a length. Students generally have a great deal of freedom to pick topics for papers according to their interests. Even length requirements tend to be flexible; professors rarely mind reading a slightly longer paper than requested if the content of the paper is strong enough to merit the extra length.

## **Research Process**

Philosophy research is very academically-rooted. The best sources come from academic, peer-reviewed journals. Denison's library links to a number of strong philosophy databases on their website. Philosophy research tends to follow a similar model to a standard argumentative paper. It is differentiated by being primarily student-driven in finding sources and by the depth and/or breadth of the argument.

## **Common Mistakes**

An argument is necessary for a good philosophy paper. Papers that do poorly tend to be composed almost entirely of summary and do very little argumentative work.

Philosophy is an exceptionally broad discipline, and this can make it all the more tempting to bite off more than one can chew in a paper assignment. Papers that examine one thing in great detail and specificity tend to be stronger than those that attempt to cover too much. Especially at the undergraduate level, it is rarely feasible to write a paper that claims to examine a philosopher's whole body of work, or even an entire book. Take care to limit papers to a manageable scope.

### **Preferred Language (jargon, pronouns)**

Philosophy is a discipline with an incredible amount of jargon, some of it contradictory. As such, it is important to use jargon very carefully and in context. A particular philosopher's terms are generally the best to use in reference to that author. Any other jargon should be used with care, explained, and cited to make its use clear. A great deal of the task of a philosophy student is to grasp and use various philosophical terms, so it is wise to choose words with care in philosophical writing. Misusing a "loaded" term will not only confuse a reader, but can lower one's grade.

### **References**

"Citation Styles." Denison University Department of Philosophy. Available from the Philosophy Department (Knapp Hall, second floor).

Martinich, A. P. *Philosophical Writing*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996.

Portmore, Douglas W. "Tips on Writing a Philosophy Paper." Arizona State University. (Online). Available: <http://www.public.asu.edu/~dportmor/tips.pdf>. (January 17, 2009).