

# Guidelines for Written Work and for Composing a Term Paper

Prof. Sebastian Luft  
Department of Philosophy  
Marquette University  
(January 2005)

These guidelines are not compulsory but, apart from the General Comments, only suggestions. You are free to choose your own format *after* discussing it with me.

## General Comments on Writing

For **stylistic, linguistic and grammatical** questions consult the standard resources (OED, Chicago Manual of Style, Grammar and Style Reference Works etc). Grammatical, linguistic and stylistic errors are absolutely not acceptable in written work; ignorance in questions related to these areas is not an excuse. For the love of God and your deceased ancestors: Proofread! Always have someone else proofread or work with the Writing Center. Good writing is the bedrock of a liberal arts or, for that matter, any higher education.

A note on **Gender inclusiveness**: While it is not grammatically compulsory (and hence will not be marked down in grading), Gender inclusiveness has become almost standard in written English, oftentimes in the news media and it *certainly* is standard in scholarly publications (scholarly journals and books). This is not the place to argue for or against the worth of, or commitment to, political correctness but you should adopt a pragmatic attitude towards this: *just learn how to do it*. You will save yourself a lot of trouble and hassle and also (should you ever get to this point) many journals and other printed sources do not accept papers that are not written using Gender-inclusive language. So you might as well just internalize it. (*And it's not rocket science.*)

Examples:

“When the scientist does X, she will etc.,” or the more cumbersome “he or she.” It has also become permissible to write the following (which is, strictly speaking, grammatically incorrect): “s/he.” Or leave Gender out by writing “one.”

*However, absolutely wrong*: “If one does, X, *they* will etc.”: Wrong under *all circumstances*, never ever permitted: singular (one) and plural (they) *do not agree*.

While this has become customary in speech and informal writing (Email), it is *absolutely false* and impermissible at all times in serious writing (such as exams, papers, tests, etc.).

Correct, however, is the following: “When everyone does X, they will etc.,” because “everyone,” though a singular pronoun, implies plurality (“everyone” = “all”).

Furthermore: Instead of “men” use “people,” instead of “man” or “mankind” “human” or “humankind” (or “humanity”).

What's an **argument**? What it's *not*: I think that X/X is bad/I don't agree with Y/What Y says isn't true/X is clearly false.

Rather: I think that X, *because* abc/X is bad *because* of abc/I don't agree with Y *because* of abc/What Y says cannot be true *because* abc/etc. You get the point; you are only making an argument when you back up a proposition with *reasons* (an example is not a reason but can support one). Also not an argument: *ad personam*. Examples: "X is opposed to abortion because s/he is a Catholic," or "Y cannot understand American politics because s/he is from Russia." (To be precise, *argumentum ad personam* is an argument, but not a good one and not appropriate in philosophical or any other serious reasoning.)

**The level of writing and style:** Don't ever write to impress the professor (or whoever it is you are writing for). You want to pitch your writing at a level such that it is understandable to the average, educated John and Mary Doe. This is sometimes a fine balance. Avoid "street talk" or words and phrases that might seem off or inappropriate given the overall style of your writing (e.g., don't write "Aristotle is stupid" even when you disagree with him—he's *not*). In writing, especially when you are dealing with complex issues, simplicity and clarity are virtues (an overly convoluted and complicated style more often than not masks, or attempts to mask unsuccessfully, the lack of content and substance). As the ancient rhetoricians said: *variatio delectat* (variation pleases), so try to vary your word choice (vary "use" with "employ," "but" with "however" etc.). At the same time, don't overdo it: Don't use words like "supercilious" or "metaphilosophical" or "idiosyncratic" unless you know *exactly* what they mean (this makes for unintended laughs).

## **Composing a Term Paper**

### **Introduction**

In the introduction you do as the title says, you introduce the problem or issue or topic or theme that you are to deal with. You may want to introduce it by way of an example, an anecdote or a quotation, citing the source. You will want to state what the issue or problem is here and indicate what you are going to argue (for or against) and how you are going to go about doing so, e.g., which method you are going to use (in philosophy, a method can be modeled on a school or system of thought, e.g., epistemology, phenomenology, or a particular thinker, e.g., Aristotle or Kant) or which evidence you will use (newspaper clip etc.). You should mention what your overall argument, thesis or point is going to be, but only briefly. In general, an introduction shouldn't be longer than one page. You are not giving the reader the "real beef" quite yet, so a lengthy and rambling introduction is tiresome for the reader. The introduction should be crisp, terse, and straight-forward and has the purpose to wet the reader's appetite to read on.

## Main Part

In the main part, you will develop and make your points in the fully fleshed-out fashion. Here you will start out with a full presentation of the issue/problem/topic that you going to tackle and mention why it is interesting/problematic/compelling/important (to you or to a particular group of people or to the world at large), although you indicated that briefly in the introduction. You will support your thesis/claim with *arguments*. Thus, before writing, make an *outline* of what points you want to make. These points can be arguments for or against something, or points of evidence that either speak for or against a certain thesis (note that evidence in itself is never an argument but you have to explain and argue why this piece of evidence speaks for the point you are making). Make sure you group your points logically. If you are merely arguing for (or against) something, you will want to group your points in a logical, cogent, coherent order, starting from the weakest and moving to the strongest point. Or if you argue both in favor and against something, you can organize the points in a dialectical fashion (point 1: 1<sup>st</sup> pro, then con [or vice versa]; point 2: pro, con; point 3: pro, con, etc.) *or* list all pros first and then the cons (or vice versa, again in a climactic fashion starting from the weakest going to the strongest) in an order (pro 1, pro 2, pro 3; con 1, con 2, con 3). State first what you personally argue against, then what you are for (e.g., if you are against X, you will make all the points that speak for it before arguing against). All of these points should be supported by arguments and elucidated by examples or quotations from cited sources. You can start out your point with the example or evidence and then explain why it supports your point or state the point first and then give an example for it.

**Examples:** Again, don't ramble on when citing an example. State it briefly and make clear what the point is, i.e., why you are using it in this context (this is not always immediately clear—it might be clear to you but not to the reader). Sometimes it is hard to find examples and in some cases it can make sense to use one example repeatedly, e.g., one story that lends itself for several aspects or facets of your points.

## Conclusion

In the conclusion, you summarize briefly the overall argument or sum up the result(s) that was (were) reached in the main part. You may want to return to the example/anecdote you started out with (maybe offering an answer to a question you raised there) or end on a similar interesting/jocular note, though this is not necessary (nothing is worse than a lame joke made in the desperate attempt to be funny). Make sure, if your overall argument is multi-faceted or broken down into several sub-points, that you mention and repeat all of these briefly. Do not introduce new evidence or arguments in the conclusion or open up a new can of worms (it's perfectly acceptable to say that, while point X raises point Y, dealing with Y lies beyond the scope of this paper—after all, you have a limited amount of space allotted to you). In the conclusion, you want to make sure you hammer your points home, not confuse or distract the reader from your main intention in your paper. The conclusion should be even shorter and terser than the introduction and merely round off the presentation nicely.

*Good luck!*