

## Ten Commandments of Philosophical Writing\*

### 1. *Thou shalt not obscure thy ideas with turgid prose.*

In the Anglo-American Analytic tradition of philosophical writing, we show respect for our ideas, our readers, and ourselves as committed intellectuals by attempting actual communication, not just verbal self-expression. This means articulating difficult and complex ideas as clearly as we can. It means avoiding an inflated vocabulary, neologisms, long sentences and multiple dependent clauses whenever possible. It also means heeding our intellectual conscience when it alerts us that something we have just written is unclear or half-baked. *It is not a good idea to wait for a low grade to confirm this intuition.* When we get a twinge or sinking feeling in the pit of the stomach or get muddled by rereading what we have just written, it is likely that our thinking was muddled when we wrote it. This is our intellectual conscience signalling us to go back to it and try to reformulate our thoughts more clearly. Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* (Macmillan) provides excellent guidance on the basics of clear writing.

### 2. *Thou shalt define thy terms.*

Often we may use key philosophical terms without defining them. This assumes that our readers and we agree on what these terms mean and how they should be applied. But often they may mean different things to different people. Evaluative terms such as "just", "unfair", "worthwhile", "beneficial", and "immoral" are particularly susceptible to multiple interpretations. Try to be sensitive to terms and concepts that are crucial to your argument or that reoccur frequently in it. Explain what you mean by them, either by defining them or illustrating how you are using them with examples. You may find that clarifying to yourself the meaning of such terms requires revising your argument somewhat.

### 3. *Thou shalt not sully the rationality of thy arguments with rhetoric.*

Some terms that have entered into our shared philosophical vocabulary not only mean different things to different people. They also evoke intense emotional reactions from nearly everyone, short-circuiting careful thought about the issues. These are *buzzwords*. Examples include "liberal", "right-wing", "racist", "feminist", and "radical". Instead of relying on these terms to drive home your point of view, try to *replace them* with a detailed analysis of the attitude or actions to which you think they refer. That way your readers will neither shut down if they disagree with your viewpoint, nor be seduced into premature agreement with it. Rhetoric, bombast, and appeals to authority are easy ways out of the hard work of thinking through an issue ourselves and of persuading others of our views. They are no match for the power of a sharp analysis or logical argument, and are strictly forbidden.

### 4. *Thou shalt illustrate thy generalities and abstractions with concrete examples.*

In philosophy we argue and analyze at a very high level of abstraction. Although philosophy traditionally has had a strong influence on social and political events (as, for example, Locke did on the American Revolution, Rousseau did on the French Revolution, Adam Smith did on capitalism, Marx did on Communism, and Nietzsche did on World War II) it is all too easy to lose track of the practical force of our philosophical claims and even the concrete meaning of the concepts and principles we invoke (and when we do not, our readers may). Avoid this by showing how these claims apply to particular cases, either actual or hypothetical, or by describing some of their implications for particular cases. This is an excellent way of getting clear in our own minds about exactly what we mean to say.

### 5. *Thou shalt not pad thy discussion with filler.*

What follows is an example of filler:  
"From time immemorial, this question has been one of the deepest issues to vex mankind and to occupy the thoughts of philosophers. Many different thinkers have attempted to solve it but

none have fully succeeded. This is due in part to the intractability of the problem, in part to the depth of insight and reflection required to address it. This particular attempt should be regarded as a contribution, even if not a definitive one, to the thinking about this issue etc."

Essentially, filler takes up space on the page without contributing anything to your discussion. Most readers are adept at spotting filler (much more so than many writers). It sends them the message that you have nothing to say. Even if you must indulge in a certain amount of filler in order to get your own writing process started, be sure to eliminate it in your final draft. Each sentence of your discussion should elaborate your view or advance your argument.

### ***6. Thou shalt not neglect the distinction between the order of thought and the order of exposition.***

After we have reviewed and taken notes on the relevant sources, and discussed and thought about the issue we are going to write about, ideas often occur to us that we want to include in our discussion: relevant quotations, insights about what the author meant, ways of rebutting a particular objection to our own view, etc. This is a crucial part of the creative process in philosophy. It is important to write down these ideas and insights as they occur, and it may be useful to carry around a small notepad for this purpose. The order in which these ideas and insights occur to us is *the order of thought*. It is a process of free association, and is almost never identical with the order in which these ideas should be presented in the final draft of our discussion.

*The order of exposition* links these ideas in a coherent and logical form determined by the content of the main ideas and arguments themselves. So, for example, if you are writing about Aristotle's concept of voluntary action, you might begin with a paragraph stating this theme and summarizing what you are going to do; a second paragraph might cite passages in which Aristotle defines this concept; a third might explain what Aristotle is saying; a fourth might develop some of the significant implications of Aristotle's claims, a fifth might raise objections to them, and a sixth might try to answer those objections; etc. Philosophical ideas do not usually occur to most of us in such a systematic and logical way. But they should be organized in such a way when presenting our thoughts to our readers, in order to minimize confusion about what we are saying and why.

When you are writing on a directed topic or question, the question itself can often be used as an outline for organizing your answer: It may contain key terms that need to be defined, ideas or problems that need to be explained, and an implicit order in which to address these issues. The goal is a discursive, coherent, easy-to-follow presentation of your ideas. Although certain famous philosophers write in dialogues or aphorisms, you are strongly advised not to present your ideas in either of these forms.

### ***7. Thou shalt give reasons or evidence for thy assertions.***

When defending our own philosophical positions, we often have occasion to assert our own beliefs. When your beliefs are supported by facts, state these facts - accurately. When your beliefs are supported by values, explicate these values and defend *them* with reasons as well. When your beliefs are supported by reasoning and inferences from facts or values, state your reasoning and be sure to check it for inconsistencies and fallacies. If you find that your beliefs are supported by none of the above, rethink them. Such statements as "I *feel* that this position is true," or "I *deeply believe* this position to be true," carry no philosophical weight.

Anticipating objections to your view and replying to them will strengthen your position. Even if you cannot refute an objection, you increase the credibility of your position by showing that you recognize its existence. This is an opportunity for you to exercise your philosophical imagination: Try to envision how an opponent of your view would criticize it, or how the target of your criticisms would defend her- or himself. Interpersonal dialogue about the issues with others - in class or casual discussion - will help you clarify your ideas and see the issue from other perspectives. The goal is to internalize these other perspectives into a dialectical and *self-critical* perspective on your own views.

When writing about another philosopher's position, you will often have occasion to assert that she or he said or believes a certain thing. You must support *all* such assertions with relevant quotations or textual citations. The more philosophy you study, the more familiar you will become with those positions and claims that are so widely identified with a particular philosopher that you no longer need to support those assertions with textual citations. Also see Commandments 8-10, below.

**8. *Thou shalt not lift quotations out of context.***

It is almost never possible to understand a philosopher's views by isolating one or two sentences from a longer discussion. Situate the quote in its context, first, by describing the more general topic of discussion in which the passage occurs. Explain the point the author is trying to make. Second, explain what you think the author is saying in the quote itself, in your own words. Make sure there is a discernible relation between the concepts that occur in the quote and the concepts that occur in your interpretation of it. This will help your reader understand why you think the quote is important, and it will help you clarify to yourself what you think the author is saying.

**9. *Thou shalt not neglect proper footnoting and bibliographic procedure.***

These procedures are part of sound intellectual discipline in any field, and *should be second nature by the time you graduate*. It is very easy to misread complex or subtle arguments, or to project our own preconceptions onto the text. When you state that a philosopher holds a certain belief or makes a certain assertion, support your statement with a specific and detailed reference indicating exactly where this assertion occurs in the text, in which text, and where any reader can find it in case she or he wishes to double-check your reference. This (a) demonstrates that you know what you are talking about; (b) develops your own capacity to read, interpret and think precisely; (c) helps you to distinguish between what the philosopher actually says and what you believe or want the philosopher to be saying; (d) guards against the accusation of plagiarism. Sources for standard footnoting and bibliographic procedure include Kate Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (Chicago) and *The Modern Language Association Manual*. The recommended formats in each differ slightly, but all include such basics as Author's Name, Book or Article Title, date, Press, Place of Publication, page, etc. Professional careers and reputations have been ruined due to failure to adhere to this dictate of intellectual conscience.

**10. *Thou shalt engage with thy author or opponent as with a respected equal.***

Philosophers write books and articles in order to communicate their views to us. And they argue philosophically in order to convince us rationally that their views are right. So they implicitly invite us into dialogue with them about these views. Our role is to attend carefully and respond. If you view these works as authoritative deliverances of fact that it is your job to accept and memorize, you will boggle, get bored, and miss the point. On the other hand, if you too quickly dismiss them as faulty or unclear when you encounter something in them that you do not understand, you will sacrifice the opportunity to gain new insights and extend your philosophical imagination beyond its habitual limits. So "*respected*" means that when you encounter such a difficult passage or text, you give the author the benefit of the doubt and assume that since she or he has labored hard to produce this work, any lack of understanding on your part means you must labor harder to grasp the author's point. If you have objections to the author's claims, try to imagine how she or he might answer them before concluding that they are devastating to the author's project. And "*equal*" means that when you encounter such difficulties, you also consider seriously the possibility that the unclarity may be in the text and *not* in your understanding of it. Try to formulate clearly what it is that you do not understand or what seems to be missing (the definition of a key term? a key step in the argument without which the conclusion does not seem to follow? reasons or evidence for a controversial assertion?). This is your contribution to the dialogue. It may require revising or refining the author's position, or your understanding of it; or it may require formulating your own.