Applying to Grad School
Hopefully not more than you wanted to know...

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June 17, 2023

1 Setting Out

You can probably find a lot of different guides to applying to graduate school online, and once you're in the process, you'll get a lot of advice. And a lot of that advice will be conflicting. With that in mind, I don't just give you advice, I also explain why I give you that advice: how I think about the graduate school application process, and how different pieces of your application fit together. That way, when you hear conflicting advice, you're in a position to make informed choices about what to heed and what to discard.

When you apply to graduate school, you'll compile a dossier. That dossier, as a whole, is supposed to provide evidence that you will do well in graduate school, and that you're in a position to take advantage of the opportunities the school and department can offer you. Let's actually take a moment to review the structure of most US graduate programs (the UK is different in this regard).

- Students complete several years of course work—usually two or three.
- Students pass some sort of qualifying exam in order to be admitted to the thesis stage, usually at the end of course work, i.e., the end of year 2 or 3.
- Students write a dissertation.

Here's the crucial part for our purposes: graduate schools expect, and many explicitly desire, to train their students in philosophy. They are not looking for students who are, or who consider themselves to be, fully formed philosophers just looking for an academic home to execute their already conceived and planned dissertation. This is the crucial difference between the US and the UK—that's exactly what UK Ph.D. programs are for, having a place to sit and execute. But that's also why, in the UK, you first apply to a Master's program.

Graduate school admissions committees in the US will look for students who can take advantage of the training and other resources the school can offer them in order to grow and mature as a philosopher while in grad school.

So let me emphasize a couple of consequences of what I've just said. You do not need to have a research project at the time that you apply to graduate school. In fact, it's better if you don't. And everybody, but everybody, expects that you will come to graduate school with some significant holes in your knowledge, and that your areas of interest will shift as you are exposed to more and more ideas.

Your dossier therefore has to provide evidence that you're ready to learn and take advantage of the resources that the program offers its students. More concretely, I think that means:

- Having enough background in skills and doctrine.
- Fit with the department.
- Showing excitement about working in philosophy.

Different parts of your dossier will speak to these points.

2 The Dossier

Here are the key elements:

(1) Transcript

(2) Writing Sample

(3) Personal Statement

(4) Letters of Recommendation

(5) Standardized Test Scores (where applicable)

The transcript, writing sample, and letters, and secondarily the standardized tests, speak to your preparation. The letters and personal statement speak to your fit with the department. The personal statement also speaks to your commitment, excitement, etc.

3 Transcript

This is the only aspect of the dossier that it makes sense to think about long term. If you want to go to graduate school in philosophy, you should take *at least* the equivalent of a major in philosophy in terms of number of courses. Look for a broad range of courses, too. If your school doesn't offer a major, talk to your professors about other opportunities.

Graduate school isn't just about pursuing a narrowly defined research topic via your dissertation. It's also about being able to engage with a broad range of philosophers about their work. All things equal, it's better to start laying that foundation in college by exposing yourself to a lot of different topics in philosophy, including ones you might not find super exciting intrinsically.

The point of taking a lot of courses is for you to acquire both skills and content knowledge. Graduate schools want to see some evidence that you can, for example, take a text and extract an argument, identify the argumentative steps, and even get a little critical distance on it by asking some questions about that argument. They also want to see some evidence that you can convey your ideas in writing. A great way to give that kind of evidence is by taking a bunch of courses where you actually have done that work.

In that respect, there aren't any particular courses or fields you should definitely take. What matters is just that you take a bunch of courses with a reasonable amount of breadth. That'll give you a perch from which to learn and explore more areas once you're in grad school.

4 Letters of Recommendation

These are very important parts of your dossier. Ideally, your letter writers will add texture and detail to your dossier. It's their job to speak credibly about what you've done, what you're like as a student, and their best estimation of your promise.

If at all possible, your letter writers should be professional philosophers. So having letters from professors outside of philosophy is often not as helpful. Of course there are exceptions, especially if you're applying to a program that is interdisciplinary.

The better the letter writer knows you, the better. Concretely, that means a couple of things. If you have the chance to take more than one course with some of your professors, do that. And even if you only take one course, make a habit of going to office hours and talking to your professors. You'll reap a lot

of intellectual rewards, and as a bonus, you put your professor into a much better position to write an informative letter.

When it comes time to ask professors for a letter, it's perfectly alright to ask them outright whether they're in a position to write you a strong letter. If they aren't, and you have any other options, don't ask them for a letter.

Once you've settled on your letter writers, it's a good idea to talk to them about your dossier. For example, if there's something in your dossier that you think deserves special mention, your letter writers are in a great position to talk about that. For example, if you've had a rough semester for some reason, it can be very valuable for your professor to say something to the effect that it was an aberration.

I recognize that this is a tricky terrain to navigate, since you may not want to share a lot of personal information with your letter writers. So let me say this: it's OK to explicitly strategize with your letter writers to figure out how their letters can be most helpful. What form that takes, concretely, is up to you.

5 Personal Statement

The Personal Statement can be tricky because you're supposed to talk about yourself. But what do you say?

My approach to this question is functional: what is the statement supposed to achieve?

- Give a sense of what you might be like as a philosopher and as a member of an intellectual community.
- Give evidence that you'd be a good fit for the program.
- Give evidence that you're a serious worker and committed to the program if you are admitted and you choose to attend.

These are broad ideas, and there are lot of different approaches. Here are some suggestions. I'll also give you some "don'ts" at the end.

5.1 What you're like

What do you value about doing philosophy? Are there questions or problems that orient you? An answer to that question can of course originate from your experience. You might say that there is an aspect of your identity or experience that you want to understand more deeply, and there are resources in philosophy that you've found particularly compelling.

But you can also say that you're just really excited about, for example, language, or the mind, or whatever. So you don't need to connect what's valuable about philosophy to your self or your identity.

Relatedly, is there a kind of work that you find particularly rewarding? Do you like to spend a long time with a historical text and really get deeply into someone else's mindset? Do you enjoy trying to synthesize work from lots of different areas, such as different times or traditions in philosophy, or different fields that all address some question?

If it's true, it's a good idea to talk about the social aspect of work. Maybe you really enjoy sharing drafts of papers with a couple of other people as undergrads. Maybe you enjoy discussions, be it in seminars or in informal settings.

5.2 *Good Fit*

Remember, being a good fit is not a matter of having a ready-to-go dissertation project and having identified three professor at the school who you want to supervise that dissertation. Instead, fit is a much broader notion. What broad areas of philosophy are you interested in learning about? Those could well be areas that you've only encountered briefly as an undergraduate, maybe even just outside of class. Talk about the topics you want to learn more about, and say something about how you can imagine pursuing these interests at the program you're applying to.

You might say, for instance, that you're really interested in ethics but have, in your undergraduate, only been exposed to utilitarians, and now you'd like to study alternative approaches like virtue ethics and deontic approaches, and you'd be excited to study with Professors X and Y.

Or you might say: I am really interested in exploring connections between epistemology and political considerations, and seeing the broad coverage that the department offers in both areas makes this a great fit.

5.3 *Seriousness and Commitment*

You should convey that you want to work hard, and that you'll stick with the program even when the going gets hard. And it always gets hard, even if things go really well. Picking a dissertation topic that can play a big role in determining whether you get a job is scary. Transforming the way you think, and acquiring the expertise in your area, is a lot of work. And philosophy, in particular, is a field in which you invest a lot of time for relatively little tangible output: it takes so darn long to write a good paper, and it takes many drafts to get to something genuinely good. There are a lot of days without a lot to show for your efforts.

But for all that, you should not try to make the case that you cannot possibly imagine yourself doing anything other than philosophy. For one, it may not be true of you. (It's never been true of me.) I can understand why someone might give the advice that you should only attend graduate school if you can't imagine doing anything else. It's intrinsically hard, the pay isn't great, and the prospects for future employment are dicey. And so it's natural to say that someone should only undertake these difficulties if their choice is forced.

I get that, but I don't think that's the best way to think about it. Instead, acknowledge that you may spend five or six years working really hard on a bunch of problems, and you may not have an academic career at the end of it. And if you don't, the time might still be well-spent. You'll have had the opportunity to think about something you value, surrounded by other people who value it, too, and all wanting to work together.

Here's an approach: you might talk about whatever it is that you value about philosophy (see above) and then say that you'd really love to do that a whole lot more.

5.4 *Some Don'ts*

Avoid being too cute, or generally over-writing the personal statement. Don't reach for flowery or inspiring language. It's maximally important to not induce cringes in your audience.

When you talk about fit, don't just list the names of professors you found on the department website and say "I'm looking forward to working with such distinguished professors as [alphabetical list of everyone ever associated with the department]". If you don't have detailed plans, just don't say it.

6 Standardized Tests

Many philosophy programs tend to not weight these very highly, but some schools use them at higher levels of the administration to decide on school wide funding competitions. If you have the time, get yourself some test prep books and work on it a bit.

7 The Writing Sample

During the application process, this is the thing that you will spend the most time one. Be prepared to put your writing sample through a lot of drafts. When I applied to grad school, I put my writing sample through 18 significant revisions, not counting edits.

A lot of the advice I'm going to give about writing samples is driven by what I've said earlier in re: what admissions committees are and aren't looking for. Let me repeat that here: schools are looking for students who are ready to learn and take advantage of the resources the school provides. They are not looking for someone who is, or at least things of themselves, as intellectually formed and just looking for a place to execute on their pet project.

For the writing sample, in particular, that means

- Your writing sample should be on whatever topic you can produce your best work on at the time that you're applying. It need not be on a topic that you think you'd like to focus on in graduate school.
- Your writing sample should not talk about your plans, in the way that a research proposal does. You can talk about your plans for the future in your personal statement. The writing sample is supposed to show off where you are as a philosopher right now.

7.1 Logistics of the Writing Sample

- Most Writing Samples should be 20–25 pages (5000–6000 words).
- Double-spaced for ease of reading and annotating.
- Don't worry about citation formats or anything like that; so long as an interested reader can figure out what sources you're working with, you're fine.
- The writing sample can be a developed version of a paper you wrote for one of your classes, but it need not be.
- Write as formally or informally as you feel comfortable (well—no swearing).

7.2 What Qualifications is the Writing Sample Evidence For?

I told you a minute ago that a writing sample is supposed to be evidence that you're ready to take advantage of the resources that the department makes available to you. Let's talk more about what that means in the context of the writing sample.

(1) The ability to work with texts, considered singly: interpret them charitably, achieve critical distance from them, emancipate yourself from the terms of the debate that others set out.

(2) The ability to work with texts, considered in concert: say what several texts agree on, what they disagree on.

(3) The ability to make arguments, both in thought and on the page.

(4) The ability to follow a dialectic through several steps: claim, response, rebuttal/modification, further critical development.

(5) The ability to separate issues according to relevance.

(6) Creativity in making arguments.

Your writing sample is supposed to give evidence for all of these. For this reason, a writing sample that is more likely to lead to success is one that has in mind (**??**)–(**??**), **in addition to** what makes a philosophy paper good on its own terms. How do you do this?

7.3 What Makes a Writing Sample a good Writing Sample*?*

Let me repeat something I've said before: A good writing sample is the best piece of philosophy you can write at the time that you're applying. It need not be related at all to the topic that you want to study. Graduate School admissions committees know that you study what your school offers. There's no presumption that you know all fields of philosophy, let alone know them all equally well.

Your writing sample need not make a novel contribution to the existing literature. In practice, that means that you don't need to know every piece of writing that's been done on whatever topic you're addressing. *However*, the writing sample is also supposed to show that you have the basic skills of research, so you should make sure that your writing sample at least acknowledges the most important work in the area you're addressing.

Relatedly: don't be afraid of writing about a topic that has been around for a long time and hence spawned a huge literature. You can write a paper about a famous historical figure and be very successful, even if the paper ends up saying something that other people have said before. Your choice of topic should only be constrained by where you think you can do your best work.

Usually, a more tightly focused paper is better than a large, programmatic paper. That's because of the kind of evidence the writing sample is supposed to provide. If you write some big, sweeping thing, the arguments will by necessity be incomplete, open to lots of objections. You also won't have the space to engage closely with other people's writings. Nor will you be able to show off your good judgment in which ideas to pursue in depth, which to set aside, since in a big sweeping paper, nothing is pursued in depth. By contrast, if you have a tightly focused paper, you can pick a few texts to work with closely: quote, interpret, and then engage. You can spell out your arguments, consider concerns that one might have about them, and so on.

Admissions Committees routinely see several hundred applications per application cycle. Your reader(s) will be tired and pressed for time, both of which make them less ideal readers than we might hope for. Tired and rushed readers are sloppy readers. Write with that kind of readership in mind. Don't be afraid of writing with flair, once you've nailed down the philosophy, to capture their attention. But don't be afraid of being extremely obvious about what you're doing. They will be happy to read a paper that is easy to follow.

As you'll see as we go along, your writing sample is going to require a lot of work. Your choice of topic should be informed in no small part by whether you can see yourself spending a lot of time on it.

Finally, and I have some perhaps extreme views on this. Some students produce an honors thesis as part of their undergraduate education. These honors theses are usually significantly longer than a writing sample. If that's true of you, don't submit excerpts of your thesis if you can at all help it. Excerpts that are cut and pasted together just don't show off your ability to write a single, coherent piece of philosophical

prose where the philosophical ambition and judgment matches the constraints of the format. This is not to say that you can't produce a writing sample on the same topic as your thesis. But if you do, you really need to think about this writing sample as its own paper in the same area, with a more tightly focused thesis, etc.

7.4 Finding The Right-Size Topic

Perhaps the writing sample is the first longer paper you have to write. So how do you go about doing it? My advice: don't worry about finding a topic that is the right size for a writing sample at the outset. Instead, start with a topic that interests you. As you learn more about it, you can make a decision about whether to expand or limit, and you will most likely have to revisit that decision.[1]

Depending on your thinking style, your proclivities, and the particular project, you may have a really big picture idea, in which case the challenge will be to find some aspect of the big picture idea to drill down on. Alternatively, you might find something very small that strikes you as interesting and that you want to understand better. Perhaps it's a puzzling paragraph, a confusing concept, or an astounding argument. As you think more about it, you'll come to see connections to other topics, you'll see the depth of the problem, and your thesis will expand to fill up a whole writing sample.[2]

Many people use a paper they've written for a class as the basis of their graduate school writing sample. That's great. If you do this, you'll already be sure that there is at least one professor who knows something about your topic, the one who taught the class. But even if the paper for the class was the right length for a writing sample, you should still expect to do a lot of significant revisions on that paper.

7.5 Who To Ask For Help

As many people as possible. A couple of points.

- Yes, your professors are busy people, but *it is not your job to protect your professors' time*. Your job is to ask for help. It's your professors' job to do what they can to give that help to you within the constraints the rest of their lives impose, and many of them will. In fact, for many of us, helping students is one of the most rewarding parts of the job since there's some concrete good we can do.

  If a professor turns you down without offering a time-frame that works for them, it's totally appropriate to follow up: "Do you think you'll have time in a week or two?"

- Asking for help from many people is not looking for an unfair advantage, or somehow an indication that you cannot do it on your own. Philosophy is a cooperative enterprise, and it's a desirable feature of how we work that we talk to each other and learn from our interactions with each other. This is what you're signing up for. Might as well get started right now.

- If you're at a school that doesn't have an expert in whatever area you're writing about (for whatever reason), ask your professors to make an introduction to philosophers at other schools. They probably won't be in a position to read your whole writing sample, but they can answer questions. This can be especially valuable in helping you identify key sources. It takes them only a few minutes, and saves you hours of time. Since you don't have as much of a claim on their time and attention as you do the professors at your school, don't expect a reply. But it's definitely not bad to ask for help.

[1] There's a general methodological point here: I don't believe in outlining papers early on in the writing process, since how an argument or paper actually goes depends on the details, and you can't work out the details without actually trying to write the paper. Once you've spent a lot of time writing the paper, you'll be in a position to outline. (See also the section on Workflow below.)

[2] Neither of these strategies is totally fool-proof. The details of the big picture might not be coming into focus. The little problem doesn't reveal its connections to broader issues. You might find that you're not getting anywhere. That's OK. The work you did in finding out that this very particular idea didn't pan out is going to be valuable when you look for a related idea that will. Start early!

7.6 How To Ask For Help

With teachers you trust, give them the paper and see what they have to say. But don't just rely on them to identify everything that's relevant or important.

It's often a good idea to ask for very specific kinds of help. If you identify a problem in the paper, your thinking, or your writing, ask specifically about that. That's fine, and a lot of your teachers appreciate that kind of guidance.

This handout, and especially the Dimensions of Excellence I'm giving you below, are intended to prompt very specific questions you can ask of your paper, and which you can ask your readers to keep in mind as they read your paper. This is particularly helpful if you give your paper to your peers. They're also good prompts for you to ask yourself as you revise. Pick a few items, go through the paper with these front of mind, and make changes as needed. Then repeat.

Finally, when you get feedback, spend a lot of time listening to the problems your readers see. Spend less time on their suggestions for how to fix things, since they haven't thought about the paper, your overall goals, and the trade-offs you need to make, nearly as much as you have.

7.7 Dimensions of Excellence for Philosophy Papers

I've split up the dimensions of excellence into subheadings. That's not because they're independent of each other, but just as a way of helping to make the task of evaluating your writing more manageable.

Thesis

Your thesis needs to be the center-piece of your paper. It gives the goal you're trying to reach, and it structures the rest of the paper insofar as every part of the paper somehow has to be there to contribute to your reaching that goal.

Key desiderata:

- The thesis must be easily identifiable as such.
- It should be a single sentence.
- It should be the most interesting thing you can say about the topic in the space allotted.
- Get the wording of the thesis right once and for all. One of the ways for a paper to be coherent and easy to follow is that you pick up the wording from your main thesis at various parts of your paper. An objection to your thesis, if you consider one, should be couched in the very same terms as the thesis so that your reader immediately sees how the objection goes.

Common Problems:

- The thesis might be too ambitious (you might not have arguments for it, or if you do, you cannot present them without exceeding the page limit).
- The thesis is vaguely qualified. As I'll discuss in a moment in the section on arguments, your argument will most likely fall short of being a valid argument, at least in its most interesting moments. That's OK. And it's important to be self-consciously aware of that fact. But don't let that affect how you write over-much. You'll still have a good argument, and only qualify exactly as your argument requires.

Framing

Framing concerns how you set up the discussion of your thesis. While your thesis gives the goal of your paper, the framing of your paper explains why that is a goal worth pursuing. What is the significance of the topic? This is particularly important for shorter papers like your writing sample, where the particular thesis is probably fairly circumscribed and specific. Such a thesis may be interesting in its own right, but it'll also bear on more general philosophical issues. Part, perhaps a large part, of the thesis' interest derives from this bearing. The framing of the paper explains this connection.

[Exercise] Try doing this for individual meetings of classes as you go along through your semester. Do it in less than 100 words. Actually write it down, edit and revise. Seriously, get a lot of practice.

As you think about answering that question, don't think about your interlocutor as one who is suspicious of your thesis and who you need to move off a fundamentally antagonistic attitude. Think of your audience as someone who doesn't know why the goal is important and wants to know.

There's a very general point here: when you write a philosophy paper—or any paper for that matter—you implicitly define your ideal reader. They are the person who is moved by where your framing begins, who knows everything that you take for granted, and who knows nothing of what you say. Actual readers will attempt to accommodate to your ideal, but you can't ask too much of them. The readers are, in the end, just who they are.

This is particularly important because of issues of scope: chances are that you'll address a fairly specific problem raised by a few texts (see the section on *engagement* below). One of the key things grad admissions committees look at is whether you can explain what's at stake in a debate in a direct way that allows non-specialists to get into the debate. This is easier for some topics than others, obviously.

Key desiderata:

- You motivate the problem you're addressing in terms that are independent of the philosophical texts you're discussing.[3]
- Don't state the problem in terms of philosophically charged terms if you can at all avoid it. Instead, introduce the key philosophical terms via your motivation of the problem. This is a useful exercise since it lets you say explicitly what some of the presuppositions of a debate are—a nice skill to show off!
- You say exactly as much in framing the issues as is required to understand your thesis and the importance of that thesis.
- Examples are extremely helpful here to orient the reader.
- If relevant, you explain some nearby claims with which your thesis might be confused. This is where feedback from others can be really helpful. If you find yourself saying something like "No, No, that's not what I'm saying. What I'm interested in is rather *this*", then that's a contrast that belongs in your framing.
- Some papers explicitly discuss options in the relevant literature. If so, this review should be structured: what are the commonalities among different papers, and how do these commonalities relate to the problem you've identified? A very common strategy is to put the problem in terms of a puzzle or tension or inconsistency among claims, and suggest that different strategies in the literature respond to puzzle by rejecting different claims.

Common Problems:

[3] As Judy Thomson once told me: the fact that [name redacted] wrote about the topic is insufficient reason to write about it. Judy was the best.

- You say everything about a topic.
- You start in the middle. Again: think about the ideal reader you're implicitly constructing. Who has exactly the amount of background knowledge that gives out where you begin?
- In framing the issue, you give a sequential, unstructured report of what a bunch of people have said.

Engagement with Others

I said above that working with texts, both singly and considered in concert, is one of the key skills you can show off in your writing sample. So let's talk some more about scope.

It's a great idea to talk about a single text as your focus, or about a debate between two or three texts, no more than that. Other texts may be helpful to draw on briefly for a distinction, a key concept, as part of framing, or as a pointer to something that you can't talk about because of space. But in most successful writing samples, one, two, or three texts are the center of gravity. These are the texts that you'll do some really detailed work interpreting, critically engaging with, etc.

These texts can be contemporary articles, they can be books, what have you. Just narrow your focus enough so that you have the space to quote, interpret, etc.

Also, this is where it makes sense to ask for help: there are often a few key writings that anybody writing on a topic is expected to have read. For better or worse, admissions committees look askance at papers that miss this sort of thing. The reasoning, I think, is that there's a difference between doing enough research to know the key works, and doing enough research to know whether anyone has said what you're saying. An applicant to grad school can be asked to do the former, but not the latter. Ask your professors about this.[4]

Key Desiderata:

- The interpretation of another's text is charitable. It's the kind of presentation that should make its author say: "Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying. I'm glad you put it so well." I really do mean *should* in the point above. Actual, flawed human beings might well get defensive if their position is put very precisely and clearly, especially if in the course of doing so, you show that their position isn't great. Don't shy away from that if this is really the intellectually honest thing.
- The other's position is motivated: you explain the attraction and why it's worth taking seriously, especially if you end up critiquing it.
- The interpretation of the other's text is emancipated: you don't take their terminology and way of framing the issues for granted, but explain it in your own terms, and are aware of possible shortcomings.

  [Example] Let me give you an example from the history of philosophy. Hume in his writings on the mind just starts off the *Treatise concerning Human Understanding* by saying that all ideas—roughly, concepts—are derived from impressions—roughly, experience—and so the problem for Hume is to explain where our most interesting ideas come from, such as causation. Hume then spends a great deal of time and ingenuity on this geneological question. But if you were to write about this, you shouldn't just dive right in and put the questions you're writing about in terms of impressions and ideas. You would have to explain the topic in as theory-neutral a way as possible, by explaining the underlying picture Hume is taking for granted.
- The interpretation is clearly grounded in the text.

[4]Reminder: it's totally reasonable to ask professors at other schools, especially with this sort of question which takes a few minutes to answer.

- You present enough of the text so that your audience can judge for themselves whether you accurately present the other's views.
- If you are writing about a debate, you can formulate exactly what one side accepts while the other rejects, ideally in the form of a single sentence.

Common Problems

- Cherrypicking.
- Constant editorializing or offhand snide remarks.

Argument

Strange thing: a lot of students have to take logic, where they study valid arguments and we hold those up as paragons of argumentation, yet we basically never give valid arguments. And when we do give valid arguments in our papers, they are little more than the skeletons around which our papers are structured, and a lot of the interesting philosophy happens in arguing for (or "motivating") the premises.

OK, so the most interesting argumentative parts of your paper won't be valid arguments. They're somehow going to support your thesis, and it's a good idea to be self-consciously aware of how they do that. It might make sense for you to say how your argument goes, and how much it does and doesn't establish. This isn't necessarily something you'd do in all philosophical writing, but showing an awareness of this kind of thing can go some way with a graduate admissions committee.

Key Desiderata:

- It's completely obvious what your main premises are.
- The most controversial and important premise gets the most discussion.
- If you don't have a good argument for one of your premises, own it. Say something about why it makes philosophical sense to accept the premise, at least as a working hypothesis. Then move on.
- You take a single dialectic and pursue it: argument, objection, clarification/rebuttal/development/revision.
- In that dialectic, it's completely obvious what part of your argument is being discussed, and how each step of the dialectic connects to that part. For example, if you're considering an objection to one of your premises, you need to
  - identify the premise,
  - really connect the objection to that premise, ideally by stating the objection in the very same terms as the premise.

  Being able to write in such a way that your audience doesn't get lost in the turns is a challenge.[5]

Holistic Considerations

One of the hardest parts of putting together a writing sample is maintaining the philosophic and dialectical discipline to make the full 20+-page undertaking hang together. Specifically:

- Paper is structured by the thesis, i.e., the thesis states a clear objective for the paper to achieve:
  - Every component (thesis, interpretation, argument) of the paper contributes to that objective.
  - No component of the paper contributes to some other objective.

[5]This is a good thing to ask your readers about quite specificallly.

  - Every paragraph has a clearly describable job to play in reaching the objective.
  - Every paragraph only has one such job.
- There are no extra words. You can always tighten your prose.
- There are no points that don't contribute to your thesis.
- The paper is well-proportioned: the most interesting part of your paper receives the most discussion.
- You close all the loops you open up in your paper.
  - If your thesis is qualified in various ways, each of the qualifications is explained at some point in your paper. Perhaps it reflects a limitation of your argument; perhaps it's needed to distinguish your thesis from other claims with which it might be confused.
  - Here's a really common structure to philosophy papers.

    (1) You present a problem.

    (2) You present someone else's solution.

    (3) You offer an objection or some other reason to be unhappy with that solution.

    (4) You offer an improvement.

    If that's what you do, you must explain how your improvement doesn't fall prey to the objection you urged to motivate further discussion of the problem beyond the other author's.
  - It often makes sense to postpone discussion of a point until the time is right—I've done that a lot in this document, it's a concession to the mismatch between the fact that text flows in a line while the philosophical ideas you want to discuss stand in all sorts of dependence relations. If you do, make sure that you actually follow through on your promises to discuss later, and that your reader isn't left totally at sea until you follow through on your promise.

Common Problems

- You have a really cool idea that doesn't really fit into the paper, but it's just so *cool*, and you leave it in. Don't do that.

7.8 Workflow

I fully appreciate that different people have different work styles. I also think it's really important to try out different practices, so I'd like you to give this one a try. It's helped a lot of my students when writing more complex papers, and it's been invaluable to me in my own work.

(1) Start early, ideally over the summer before you're applying. Even if you're planning on taking classes that are relevant to your writing sample, start reading and writing early.

(2) Chances are good (Read: I'm totally certain) that your thinking about the topic of your paper will evolve over the course of working on the paper. But the finished paper shouldn't be a record of how your thinking evolved. It should be a statement of the state your thinking has reached by the end of the process. To ensure that:

   a. Take a copy of your paper, number the paragraphs.

   b. On a separate sheet of paper, write down what each paragraph does in the paper, one sentence per paragraph. If you need more, your paragraph is doing too much.

c. Annotate each description with information about relationships between paragraphs: which paragraphs the reader needs to have read in order to understand this one.

d. Annotate each with a description of the role it plays in accomplishing the overall goal of your paper. Having that information presented in a compact way will let you see structural infelicities much more clearly.

   - You might be addressing the same point in several places in the paper.
   - You might explain something more than once.
   - A paragraph takes something for granted that you don't explain anywhere in the paper.
   - A paragraph is still in the paper from back when you thought about the problem and the paper differently and doesn't actually connect to the paper as it is now.

e. This structural re-engineering will likely allow you to cut a bunch of prose and thus allow you to deepen your most interesting discussion.

f. Once you've done this big picture structural work, go through the paper picking one or two of the dimensions of excellence and focus on those. If you try to look at too many at once, you'll miss things.

g. If your paper is coming together, making changes in one place will usually require changes in other places, as well. In other words, you'll most probably have to evaluate your paper according to the various dimensions of excellence more than once.

7.9 Closing Thoughts on Writing Samples

(1) Philosophical writing requires lots of judgments calls. They're not obviously right or wrong. They're just yours. Be at peace with the calls you make.

(2) Make a point of finding something you really like about your writing. Try to understand why it works.

(3) Do the same with other people's writing you admire. Seriously. We spend way too little time thinking about what makes good philosophical writing work, and a huge amount of time being critical. It'll be worth your while. I promise.

(4) Even if something you read about, think about, or write about doesn't make it into the final draft, you haven't wasted your time.

(5) If it bugs you, fix it until it doesn't bug you anymore. Trust your philosophical sensibility.