TEN CLUES TO BETTER PAPERS IN PHILOSOPHY

1990–91

The most challenging and rewarding pieces of work you will do for this course will be in response to paper assignments. Every solid course and every competent instructor will have some fairly definite expectations as to what makes for an adequate, a good, or an excellent paper. Rather than leaving these expectations a matter of conjecture—or taking valuable class time to spell them out—these "clues" have been formulated. Please take out some time to read them and use them as a basic guide when you work up your papers for this course. *Your papers will be evaluated with the assumption that you have mastered these "clues*." For example, a paper without a title will be unsatisfactory.

1. TITLE PAGE—Any paper benefits from having a title. It gives you and your reader a sense of focus. The challenge is to find a title that is apt—neither too vague, e.g., "Kant Paper," nor too idiosyncratic, e.g., "Why Lockes top Hegels"—and will lead you and your reader to expect *an argument suitable to the number of pages you have available*. Helpful additions to the title page are: your name, the name of the course, the date, and the like.

2. FIRST PAGE—It is conventional to begin your page numbering at the top of your second page. Whatever convention you follow, do *number the pages*. To do so is a simple matter of good form. The harder question, of course, concerns content: With what should I begin? The question is important because your beginning will largely determine what follows. So remember, as you sit before that blank page: You are about to write *an argument* concerning a philosophical problem. Use your *opening paragraph* to state the problem and indicate what you propose to do about it. Since the materials you have to work with are original texts and interpretations, oral and written, your most obvious task will be to put together your own *interpretive argument*. Thus it is often useful to begin with a short and provocative text, one which clearly provokes the need for interpretation. If you choose this route, use your opening paragraph to show why you find the text provocative, why it is open to a variety of interpretations, and what interpretation you plan to argue for. In short, your opening paragraph can continue the work already begun by your title. A good opener invites your reader to consider the problem you plan to discuss and it gives you a sense of direction and momentum to develop *your* interpretive argument.

3. STRUCTURE—Most arguments are easiest to follow if they are subdivided into topics. Each topic will quite naturally form the subject of *a paragraph*. In this way you and your reader will know when a new step has been reached in the development of your argument; the paragraph will be the clue. This elementary rule of composition will also facilitate your use of an outline, or various trial outlines, to sort out your ideas before you sit down to write the paper itself; for a short paper each main topic of your outline will suggest the beginning and the end of a paragraph. You may also find that writing from an outline will eliminate much of the horror of facing a blank piece of paper. (Of course, some forms of writing, such as love letters, profit from spontaneous twists and turns; an outline would probably destroy your style. But various kinds of writing require different styles; an essay in philosophy is not a love letter.)

4. AN IMPOSSIBLE IDEAL—Bertrand Russell, a celebrated twentieth century philosopher and a Nobel laureate in literature, claimed that, after a period of serious attention to a subject, followed by another period of "subconscious incubation," he could sit down and write a first and final draft as

if it had appeared "in a revelation." For almost every other writer, including the best, this would be a formula for disaster. Acknowledge that you, too, are probably unlike Russell. *Revise and rewrite*; *rewrite and revise*.

5. DOCUMENTATION—Most college essays in philosophy involve the interpretation of texts, primary and secondary. *All explicit or implicit uses of texts in your essay must be documented*. Failure to document explicit uses—when you put text within quotation marks—makes your paper unsatisfactory. Failure to document implicit uses—when you copy, paraphrase, or otherwise present the work of another as if it were your own—makes you a plagiarist. When time is short, as it always is, the temptation to plagiarize is great. Resist it. Like other forms of lying, it is habit-forming; it undermines your character and subjects you to harsh discipline. So make it part of your education to avoid even the appearance of impropriety. The first step is to master a simple system for documenting all the sources used in your papers.

There are many elaborate documentation schemes available; some use footnotes or endnotes, some incorporate a scholastic Latin terminology—*ibid*., *op. cit*., etc. You may wish to learn these for other purposes but in papers for this course aim at maximum simplicity and convenience. Here is a convention you may find useful:

* **Primary Texts:** If you key references to a standard bibliography (see item 7 in these "Clues"), simply make a short reference to your source in parentheses, (…). When citing classic texts use the standard paginations if they are available (e.g., from the editions of Stephanus for Plato and Bekker for Aristotle, both given on the margins of all good translations; be sure to *indicate the specific edition or translation in your bibliography*). For example:

> " … is the holy loved by the gods because it is holy? Or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?" (Plato, Euthyphro, 10a).

Or:

> " … the poet himself ought to speak the least of all, since he is not a poet by virtue of this" (Aristotle, Poetics, 1460a7–8).

* **Secondary Texts:** Since complete information on the texts you use will be in your bibliography, simply list the author's name and the page cited, for example, (Snell, p. 182). If you refer to more than one item by the same author, use an abbreviated title, for example, (Snell, Discovery, p. 182). Underline the titles of books or periodicals; use quotation marks for articles and other items.

6. QUOTATION—Excessive quotation is a common weakness in student essays. Unacknowledged quotation is plagiarism. Judicious quotation—*brief* passages that are really *used* in *your argument* (never rely on a quotation to carry your argument)—can be helpful.

If the quoted matter occupies two lines or less on your page, incorporate it into your text between quotation marks (" . . . . . "). If you must quote more, set the quotation off by indenting and single-spacing the entire passage. This treatment fills the same function as quotation marks since it will contrast with the bulk of your double-spaced text; thus quotation marks for such single-spaced

passages would be redundant. If you delete a phrase from a quoted passage, use three leaders (…); if you delete a sentence, use four leaders (… .); if you want to omit a substantial portion of a text, use a whole line of such dots.

7. BIBLIOGRAPHY—Attach at the end of your paper a list of published materials you have cited or found helpful in the preparation of your argument. Bibliographic entries are listed in alphabetical order by author (that is why the last name of the author or editor is given first and also why such inversion would be pointless in documentary entries such as footnotes). The standard form for such entries is:

> Author, John Q., Title of Book, translated by John Q. Translator [if applicable], City: Publisher, Date.

8. MOST ELEMENTARY—Many a good argument has been marred because students who have worked long hours on a paper neglect to take out a few minutes to *proof-read* it before submission. Eliminate all typographical errors. Use a good dictionary to check your spelling and usage and keep a list of the errors you detect. (A periodic, e.g., nightly and weekly, review of such a list will provide you a tailor-made guide to improving *your* literacy.) If you are at all serious about mastering the English language, making it more of a pleasure for you to write and for your friends and professors to read, do not hesitate to acquire and use the indispensable *little* (ca., 70 pp.) *book*:

> William Strunk Jr. & E.B. White, The Elements of Style, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959 [paperback editions from Macmillan since 1962].

9. USE THE TOOLS OF MODERN TECHNOLOGY—Purchase has personal computers available for your use. Especially if you find typing a burden and redrafting a chore, the time you invest learning a good word processing program will be well spent. But be sure that you always use a back-up disk for your documents. The Purchase Library also has access to a large number of electronic data bases; they are available to you for your larger research projects.

Given the low cost of dry ("Xerox") copying, always *duplicate the final draft of your paper* before you submit it. That way you will not be at a loss if your original should be misplaced.

10. PHILOSOPHY, TIME, AND LEISURE—Purchase students are lucky to have available a large range of courses that require one or more papers. Nothing you do at Purchase will contribute more directly to your liberal education than the work you do on these papers. *All* students will experience conflicting demands upon their time and *all* papers will be written under the pressure of time. *Learning to write papers on time is an essential aspect of your education*. Nothing is more destructive of this than the expectation that you can "get an extension," especially with the threadbare excuse that more time would make for a better paper. Find out, early in the semester, when the papers for your various courses are due and plan your time accordingly. **Don't even think about asking for an extension**. If, for whatever reason, you cannot submit your work on time, don't talk about it. **Late papers submitted within a week of the due date will be evaluated without penalty, but they will receive no comments. Papers submitted more than a week after the due date are inferior papers. Papers submitted after the last class will not be read.**

It is necessary to have very clear expectations about timeliness. Of course extensions, when given, are unfair to your classmates and a waste of your professors' time. But, most importantly, they undermine your chance to get a solid education. Philosophy, as Aristotle observed, began when a small number of human beings had leisure. The number of us who today have the gift of leisure to study philosophy is much larger, though still small. You have received this gift, if only for a brief moment. Use it to develop the most liberating of the liberal arts: the art of disciplined leisure.

SOME ELEMENTS OF STYLE

- Just as we all speak in a style that seems naturally suited to particular topics and listeners, so let your writing be guided by your developing sense of what is appropriate to a philosophical subject matter. If you keep at it, your style will develop as a matter of course.
- Learn why certain strings of words are "sentence fragments." Avoid them.
- Use the active rather than the passive voice. If you should discover in your first draft: "It was said by Aristotle that … .", replace it with: "Aristotle said … . "
- Use normal rather than inverted word order in sentences: subject-verb-object. Not: "To the Piraeus I went down … ." Rather: "I went down to the Piraeus … ."
- Use words economically. Not: "In the dialogue entitled <u>The Republic</u> by the Greek philosopher Plato … ." Rather: "In <u>The Republic</u> … ."
- Learn why non-restrictive clauses, unlike restrictive ones, are parenthetic. Set off all parenthetic expressions by commas. (See Strunk & White, I., 3., pp. 2–5.)
- How to avoid *the most common error*: There is a certain convention in English which, because it's not logical, gives many of its users difficulty. It's the difference between "*its*" and "*it's*." The former is the possessive form and the latter is the contractive form. You'll just have to memorize the distinction and stick with it.
- Think about the subtle differences between "catch phrases" and "clichés"; both are ready-made but the one wears its familiarity lightly while the other portends originality.
- Again, let the nature of your subject matter, and your relationship to it, guide the tone of your writing. There are proper occasions to be witty, ironical, serious, etc. But they don't all come up at once. *Develop your own voice* by writing from a definite sense of place. In papers written for this course, the most immediate context is, naturally, this course. Take account of our common readings and our class discussions when you write. You need not agree with either, but your explicit reasons for disagreement will be prized. Since you are a very definite individual in a very definite place and time, write from where you are. If you give the impression of writing from nowhere in particular (a utopian dream), you might get taken for being no one in particular. It is an impression well worth avoiding. Be yourself. And be the best self *you* can be. Not tomorrow but today. That is the essence of style.

This principal clue to *style* implies a simple test of the adequacy of your papers for this course: Are they clearly, line by line, *your* papers, developing *your* arguments, at *your* stage of development, in response to the specific content and arguments developed in *this* course? If you find that a paper could have been written by anybody else or for any other course, you'd better try again. When you can give positive answers to this question you will have your best clue to a better paper in philosophy—and a benchmark on your pathway toward a liberating education.