# Writing in Philosophy

This guide provides a brief introduction to writing in the field of **philosophy** through the lens of threshold concepts. It includes:

- A statement of threshold concepts in philosophy
- "So you're taking a philosophy course": A description of writing characteristics valued in philosophy
- Examples of and expectations for how writing happens in philosophy

## A Statement of Threshold Concepts in Philosophy

"Philosophy is an activity of conceptual clarification the purpose of which is to resolve philosophical problems."

*—Ludwig Wittgenstein*

Philosophy is a task and not only a body of knowledge.

### Threshold Concept 1: Conceptual/Empirical Distinction

**The statement:** Philosophy operates at a conceptual—not only at an empirical—level, pursuing conceptual clarity, evaluating the adequacy of concepts, modifying concepts, and creating concepts.

**What this means for students:** Students should be able to distinguish between conceptual and empirical investigation. They should be able to recognize, distinguish between, and analyze concepts.

**Where/how we teach this Threshold Concept:** 100-level courses begin with this threshold concept.

### Threshold Concept 2: Transformative/Conceptual Reading

**The statement:** The goal of reading philosophical texts is to enter into different conceptual frameworks, by following lines of reasoning and allowing them to speak to us.

**What this means for students:** When reading a philosophical text, it is important to first try to understand the ideas and concepts being presented and how they make sense, instead of immediately reacting to them with criticism or judgment. Students should be open to the possibility that reading philosophical texts may activate new ways of thinking.

**Where/how we teach this Threshold Concept:** 100-level courses begin with this threshold concept.

### Threshold Concept 3: Critical/interpretive reading

**The statement:** Philosophy practices hermeneutical reading skills, including reading a text for purpose, significance, structure, interconnection of ideas, presuppositions and implications, and non-argumentative as well as argumentative elements.

**What this means for students:** Students will learn the difference between explanation, analysis, and exegesis. This is introduced at the 100-level but it is more fully developed at the 200-level. Students cannot learn to write well without being able to read well. It is important to be able to recognize different positions within the same text.

**Where/how we teach this Threshold Concept:** PHL 245: Philosophical Writing especially emphasizes this threshold concept.

## "So you're taking a philosophy course": A Description of Writing Characteristics Valued in Philosophy

Philosophy studies a wide array of questions and aims to articulate **the nature of being, what it means to know**, and **how to live well individually, with others, and with nature**. We have some essential methods and tools for doing work in this field, including:

- Distinguishing between the conceptual and the empirical (/hcwe/hwac/teaching-support/disciplinary-writing-hwac/philosophy/conceptual-vs-empirical/index.html)
- Distinguishing between descriptive and normative statements (/hcwe/hwac/teaching-support/disciplinary-writing-hwac/philosophy/descriptive-vs-normative/index.html)
- Assuming something for the sake of argument
- Logical validity
- Thought experiments (/hcwe/hwac/teaching-support/disciplinary-writing-hwac/philosophy/thought-experiments/index.html)
- Making conceptual distinctions and connections
- Tracing the genealogy of ideas

Our field tends to value **precise thinking that considers potential objections and counter positions**. Our relationship to empirical facts is complicated, as almost all philosophers agree that there are no facts without an interpretive framework, and many philosophers are deeply interested in how these frameworks operate.

We tend to write argumentative essays and books. We rarely write reports or surveys.

We find writers to be credible when they **situate themselves within a scholarly debate** and when they **use conceptual analysis**, **present a logically valid argument**, and **charitably consider opposing positions**. Effective writing in our field tends to **walk you through a sequence of thoughts about a question or problem**, and may **consider multiple sides**, **even those that the author disagrees with**. Ultimately the goal is to **draw you in and transform your thinking**.

Our citation practices embody and help enact our values and goals. You can see this in how we commonly make reference to other philosophers with whom we are in dialogue, including dead ones. Our citations typically **foreground the names of authors**, but are **rarely used simply to establish authority**. While we expect clarity and proper citation practices, **we don't care much about which style you use, e.g., MLA, Chicago, etc**.

## Examples of and Expectations for How Writing Happens in Philosophy

Students in philosophy are most often asked to write **short argumentative essays** that utilize some of the methods mentioned above. Thus, our advice to you when you write in our classes is to **imagine yourself in dialogue with the texts you are discussing**, rather than simply reporting on them (the authors of the texts are also not simply reporting facts to you). When writing papers:

- **Undergraduates** taking our courses are expected to take a position with reference to the assigned reading and to support it. This annotated sample paper (/hcwe/hwac/teaching-support/disciplinary-writing-hwac/philosophy/sample-annotated-paper/index.html) includes examples of:

  - How to write an introduction
  - How to set up a philosophical argument
  - Elucidating a key claim
  - Defining a key concept
  - Using textual evidence
  - How to write a conclusion
  - How to cite references

- And more
- **Undergraduates who are in our major** are expected to do the above but also provide a more complex interpretive analysis of a text.
- **Graduate students** in our field are expected to do the above and **contribute to ongoing conversations in philosophy**, not necessarily by adding to a body of knowledge, but by **establishing through argument where they stand vis-a-vis a particular text or question**.