Some tips for writing a Philosophical Paper

When writing a philosophical paper, one thing that you should know is that it is going to be hard and, for most, arduous. Once you are in the mindset that this endeavor is not going to be quick and easy, the better your chances are of writing a good philosophical work. In the following paragraphs, I will give some advice on writing your paper and some explication of what a philosophy paper is.

A philosophical paper is not a research paper in which you will regurgitate some information that you have read about, nor is it a literary work where you merely tell me your thoughts and feelings. Rather you are giving me a thesis: a clear statement or statements of what you are going to argue in the rest of the paper. After your thesis has been clearly stated, you will construct an argument that will rationally persuade me to agree with you, or at least agree that your position on the topic is very strong.

Before forming your thesis, read the material carefully and more than once. Reading it more than once really does help you pick up on many things that you missed the first time that are crucial to the argument. Also, read with a dictionary ready and on hand. This will help you look up words that you may not be familiar with. If you are not getting a clear picture of the subject matter, you may want to use a secondary source to help you. Just remember to cite in your paper whenever the source the ideas being used have come from someone else. Lastly, map out your own ideas before writing your paper. How can you construct an argument with these ideas?

Once you have various ideas of what you want to argue, go into the writing process with the mentality that your reader disagrees with you and that you must not leave anything unexplained. You should always ask yourself, “What could someone say to object to my position”? Talk about some objections to your position and tell us why they fail. You may have a
clear idea of your position, but your reader does not. Often you will feel like you are flogging a dead horse, but this is because you do not want any holes in your argument. Think of your argument as armor that is protecting your position. You don’t want any holes in it or you are susceptible to attack. Clarity in your writing is important as well. In philosophy there is no need to show off your beautiful prose. Get to the point and say what you mean as clearly and as precisely as possible.

You should stay away from long block quotations in an introduction to philosophy paper. Use quotations when needed, but paraphrasing at this stage in the game is sufficient. Also, do not name call or try and put the particular philosopher down. Remember the reader may agree with the philosopher’s point of view, so calling him or her an idiot does nothing to advance your argument. Lastly, do not beg the question in your own argument. Begging the question is circular reasoning. One example would be if someone said, of course this book is true, God wrote it. If God wrote it then, the book must be true. This argument gives no evidence that God wrote the book, or any reason why the book is true. Therefore this is begging the question.

What you do want to do is also give credit to others when your thoughts are not completely original. It was once said to me that footnoting and quoting doesn’t make your paper look weaker, but rather stronger since it shows you have done some work on the topic. Plus, it is plagiarism to use someone else’s ideas for your paper and claim them as your own. If you get caught, you will at least receive an “F” on the paper and possibly expelled.

Finally, revise and edit as much as possible. Have a friend or family member read it. Then have someone from the college that edits papers read it. Also you can hand the paper in early so that I can give comments, as long as it is edited and legible.