

Guidelines on Writing an Outline

Background

During my first year as a graduate student, a young philosopher of mind, Declan Smithies,¹ visited UT to present his research. I was deeply impressed by his presentation—before his talk, I never fully appreciated the value of *presenting* philosophy. Plus, I found his ideas to be very interesting and thought provoking. So, after the talk, I approached him to request a draft of the paper so that I could read it more closely later. He informed me that, strictly speaking, the paper did not yet exist. That, he said, is precisely why he chose to present the material: to get preliminary feedback before writing everything out in prose.

In this course, you don't have to present your work.² But you do have to write an outline, and that process serves a very similar purpose. It forces you to get clear on an issue and your ideas about that issue before you start the writing process. In the long run, that saves you time. We all like to believe that, with the right soundtrack and enough caffeine, we can write an academic masterpiece in a few hours. We're almost always mistaken about that. Without getting clear on our ideas *before* we begin to write, we force ourselves to work through our ideas *as* we write. The end result is almost always a mess. We think we know exactly what we're trying to say as we're saying it, but we really don't—and that undiagnosed confusion echoes through the final product to the reader. It's always better to diagnose and treat that confusion early so that it won't infect your writing later.

The task of writing a philosophy paper may seem intimidating. However, if you approach the task with a methodical procedure, *writing the paper* is probably the easiest part of the process! The hard parts come much earlier, during *preparation*. These steps include (not necessarily in this order):

1. **Take notes.** In your paper, you will engage with an article we have read and discussed in class. This means that you will need to exposit the position or issue presented in that article. To make this process easier, you should study the article closely and take notes. This is an opportunity to not only achieve a deeper understanding of the article but also pinpoint aspects of the article that you find to be unclear or problematic; plus, you can save important quotations for later.
2. **Brainstorm.** Before and after taking notes, think and/or talk through the issue. You should ask yourself questions like the following: What *is* the issue? What are some live positions on that issue? What are the arguments for those positions? Do you find those arguments persuasive? Why or why not? Next, start to develop your own ideas. What is your thesis, and how will you argue for it? What terms will you need to define? What are the best objections to your thesis? How should you respond to those objections?
3. **Outline.** Strip your ideas down to their very essence, write them out into short sentences, and then organize and refine those sentences into a coherent structure. Your thesis should come first; exposition should typically come next. The rest varies from paper to paper. Will you briefly motivate a position before critiquing it? If you will give multiple arguments or discuss more than one example, which one should come first? Will you consider and respond to objections as you work through your own arguments, or save them for the end? You will make these decisions when writing your outline.

¹ <https://sites.google.com/site/declansmithies>

² I would love to assign presentations in this course, but given a sizeable enrollment and limited class time, there is simply no feasible way to do this.

4. **Free write.** Make yourself write for about an hour: summarize the issue; put an argument into prose; describe an example in detail; or whatever. Just write. Maybe you'll draw on this material later, or maybe it'll never see the light of day. The point is to get started so that you can isolate those aspects of the project that you're still struggling to fully work out. Repeat as needed.

If you take those previous steps seriously, your paper should pretty much write itself in these additional three steps:

5. **Write a rough draft.** Follow the structure of your outline and draw on your notes and free writes to complete a rough draft. You may decide to depart from the structure of your outline during the writing process—for example, in order to preempt a skeptical reader, it may make more sense to consider a specific objection sooner rather than later. The good news is that you should have all the main puzzle pieces to your paper by now; in writing a rough draft, your task is to assemble those puzzle pieces into a detailed picture. Once you have everything on the page, set it aside. Come back to it after a day or two, print it, read it, and mark it up; correct any issues you find along the way.
6. **Revise.** Even though you've revised your paper once already, it will still have a number of issues. Your exposition may be unclear. You may need to be more precise with your terminology. You may need to say more about an example and why that example supports one of your conclusions. You may need to rearrange some of your paragraphs in order to make the connections between them clearer. Some of your sentences may be awkward, some of your paragraphs too long or lacking in flow. Perhaps you can be more charitable to an objection. Maybe one of your arguments doesn't work at all and needs to be replaced. It depends.
7. **Finalize.** Revise, revise, and revise. Then forget about the paper for as long as you can. Come back to it later and mark it up again. Revise some more. Sooner or later, you'll have to stop in order to meet a deadline. While there's always room for improvement, you should be proud of all that you've accomplished!

A crucial step in this process is writing an outline. After all, taking notes and brainstorming are useful to developing a thesis, but once you have a thesis, your outline lays the foundation for everything else. But what, specifically, should go into an outline?

Essentials

An outline is meant to provide a skeletal structure that you will later flesh out in detail when writing a rough draft. As a result, in short sentences, it should do all of the following:

- Present your thesis statement and indicate how you will argue for it.
- Provide an overview of the key elements of the issue or position you will posit; signal interpretive problems that you will address and how you will address them; cite any quotations you will use as evidence to resolve interpretive issues; and/or indicate minor objections you will raise before charitably reconstructing the issue or position.
- Very briefly summarize your main arguments and/or examples and signal how they support your thesis.
- Indicate the main objections you will consider and how you will respond to those objections.
- Link everything back to your thesis.

Format

There is no right or wrong way to format an outline. However, there is a convention for writing outlines that is commonly prescribed in college classes, and since it is worth understanding this convention before breaking with it, we will follow it in this course. The convention is to use a combination of Roman and Arabic numerals together with lowercase letters to create sections and subsections.³ It should look something like this:

- I. INTRODUCTION
 - a. Thesis statement
 - b. Indication of approach

- II. SECTION 1
 - a. Subsection 1
 - i. Sub-subsection 1a
 - 1. Sub-sub-subsection 1a
 - ii. Sub-subsection 1b
 - b. Subsection 2
 - i. Sub-subsection 2a

- III. CONCLUSION

For the purposes of this class, you should also follow these additional formatting requirements:

- Your outline should be **2–3 pages** in length (excluding bibliography); typed, double-spaced, in 12-point Times New Roman; with 1 inch margins all around; with page numbers in the header aligned to the right; with the title of the paper at the start of the document, centered, followed by your UT EID in parentheses. Save it and upload it to Canvas as a PDF.
- If you consulted any sources in writing your outline, cite them using either Chicago Author–Date or MLA style and include bibliographic information on the final page.

See the final pages of this document for a sample outline.⁴ Use this sample as a rough standard for writing your own outline, but keep in mind that every outline will be unique. Different topics (or different approaches to the same topic) may call for different structures.

³ Generally, each new heading will contain content more specific than the previous. For example, SECTION 1 might include everything related to exposition, whereas sub-subsection 1a might describe a very specific example within that discussion. Don't assume that each new section in your outline (e.g., SECTION 1) will correspond to a single paragraph in your paper; it may turn out to correspond to several!

⁴ I originally came up with this sample outline for a philosophy of art course, so the content is unrelated to any of the material we will read in this course. But the general idea is the same.

Formulating Formalism (zab356)

I. INTRODUCTION

- a. Thesis statement: In this paper, I will argue that the considerations that motivate the function argument undermine the common denominator argument and eliminate an important source of support for formalism. I will then show how this tension can be resolved by revising formalism in a way that Carroll overlooks.
- b. Approach:
 - i. Point to an important constraint on a successful case for formalism.
 - ii. Show how the considerations that motivate the function argument undermine the common denominator argument and why that removes an important strategy for satisfying the aforementioned constraint.
 - iii. Propose the revised formalist definition and show how the common denominator argument and function argument can be combined into a cumulative case for that definition.

II. THE CASE CONSTRAINT

- a. Briefly introduce the notion of a real definition.
 - i. The *real definition* of some phenomenon indicates *what it is* to be that phenomenon.
 - ii. The real definition of some phenomenon entails a set of *jointly necessary and sufficient conditions* for that phenomenon.
- b. *Case constraint*: a successful case for a real definition of some phenomenon should provide reasons to think that a set of conditions is both necessary and sufficient for that phenomenon.

III. FORMALISM AND THE COMMON DENOMINATOR ARGUMENT

- a. Formalism:
 - i. Formalism is meant to provide us with a real definition of art.
 - ii. Roughly, it is the idea that what makes something a work of art is (in some sense) a matter of its form.
- b. The common denominator argument:
 - i. Briefly discuss the historical shift from representational and expression theories of art to formalism.
 - ii. Introduce the common denominator argument in standard form.
- c. The common denominator argument goes most naturally with *Bellian formalism*:

x is a work of art if and only if x possesses significant form.

IV. THE SHIFT TO FUNCTION

- a. Bellian formalism appears to count logical theorems and political speeches as works of art when intuitively they are not.
- b. The function argument:
 - i. We can rule these cases out by adverting to the *function* of art.
 - ii. Introduce the function argument in standard form.
- c. The function argument goes most naturally with what we might call *intention-based formalism*: x is a work of art if and only if x is primarily designed in order to possess and to exhibit significant form.

V. THE TENSION

- a. If we accept intention-based formalism on the basis of the function argument, then we must give up the claim that *possession* of significant form is a necessary condition on art. That means *abandoning* the common denominator argument.
- b. The function argument only gives us a reason to posit a *sufficient* condition on art.
- c. Upshot: if we accept intention-based formalism on the basis of the function argument, we fail to satisfy the case constraint.

VI. THE RESOLUTION

- a. *Hybrid account*: *x* is a work of art if and only if (i) *x* is primarily designed in order to possess and to exhibit significant form and (ii) *x* possesses significant form.
- b. Show how the common denominator argument and function argument combine to build a cumulative case for the hybrid account.
- c. Upshot: unlike with intention-based formalism, there is a case for the hybrid account that meets the case constraint; that makes it a superior position.

VII. OBJECTION AND REPLY

- i. Like the Bellian account, the hybrid account cannot accommodate bad art.
- ii. Provide reasons to think that formalism should be limited to an *evaluative* sense of “art.”

1. Analogy:

- a. “It’s raining, but I don’t believe that it’s raining.”
- b. “That’s a work of art, but it’s *terrible*.”
- c. The fact that the latter sentence, like the former, strikes us as paradoxical is evidence for thinking that the operative

sense of “art” does not apply to things that are artistically *bad*.

2. Use examples to show that there is a sense of “art” that we shouldn’t expect formalism to capture.
 - a. “Art” school
 - b. Low quality museums as containers of “art”
- iii. This issue may deserve a closer look. But if the aforementioned objection succeeds, then the formalist will be forced to violate the case constraint once again. It remains to be seen which cost is greater.

VIII. CONCLUSION

- a. I have argued that the considerations that motivate the function argument undermine the common denominator argument. Moreover, since the function argument only gives us a reason to posit a sufficient condition on art, these considerations also violate the case constraint. This tension can be resolved by endorsing the hybrid account, for which the common denominator argument and function argument build a cumulative case. It has not been my aim to conclusively establish the hybrid account, however, and as the objection from bad art shows, it ultimately merits a closer look. That is a task for future work.

References

- Carroll, Noël. 1999. *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction*. New York: Routledge.
- . 2001. “Formalism.” In Berys Nigel Gaut & Dominic Lopes (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, 109–119. New York: Routledge.