

# Blueprint for Writing a Paper

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The following is my best attempt to give you a “color-by-numbers” approach to writing an effective analytical paper. Some of it involves deprogramming you of things that your high school English teacher told you were signs of good writing, including the following:

- Instead of writing things that sound beautiful, write plainly;
- Similarly, there should be no mysteries or suspense in a good analytical essay—your thesis should be stated clearly and early;
- Tell your reader exactly what you’re doing;
- Break up your paper into sections.

This is not to say that your high-school English teachers gave you bad advice. This is only to say that they did not prepare you to write every kind of essay. Nor is the following the *only* formula for writing an effective analytical essay, so you should feel free to depart from this “script” if you’re feeling confident about your writing. (This does not indemnify you from criticism if you are unclear, of course.) Nor is it even the only kind of way to write a *philosophical* paper, since some philosophical papers are not analytical in nature.

Having said that, I think the following makes writing analytical papers *easier*, and less daunting. So, without further ado, here is a good formula for writing a good analytical essay. To begin with, try breaking your paper up into five sections:

- I. Introduction
- II. Best Argument(s) for Your Thesis
- III. Best Argument(s) against Your Thesis
- IV. Rebuttal(s) to the Best Argument(s) Against Your Thesis (i.e. Rebuttal to III)
- V. Conclusion

Note that you can have some flexibility with the order of items II-IV, though I find the preceding order to be fairly intuitive and straightforward. Let’s discuss each section in turn.

## I. Introduction

- A. State your thesis as clearly and succinctly as possible. Ex. Objects in the natural sciences are socially constructed.
- B. Spend a brief amount of space (less than three sentences) *motivating* your thesis. Why should your audience care? Note that in some cases, your audience may be other specialists in the field. In this case, you can simply indicate where the current debate stands, and how your thesis impacts the scholarship. In other cases, your audience may be more general. In this case, you have to find some way of motivating your thesis that doesn’t rest on specifics. Seek clarification from your instructor about this. In either case, keep this short, as this is only a prelude to the genuinely substantive part of your paper.
  1. Stylistically, it’s often nicer to motivate your thesis, and then present your thesis. However, if the sole objective is clarity, then it’s actually better to start with your thesis, and then motivate it quickly.

- a. Ex. “In this paper, I shall argue that  $p$ . If  $p$  is true, then it has several far-reaching consequences, such  $q$ ,  $r$ , and  $s$ . Clearly,  $q$ ,  $r$ , and  $s$  are important. Hence, a sound argument for  $p$  is important, which is precisely what I will be offering here.”
- C. In several short sentences, explain what you’ll be doing in each section of your paper.  
 Ex. “In Section I, I provide the best argument for my claim that the natural sciences are socially constructed, arguing that... In Section II, I consider the objection that social constructivism... In Section III, I rebut this objection, arguing that...” I call this a “roadmap.”
1. How do you fill in the ellipsis (the “...”) in a roadmap? Remember that your roadmap is presenting the big picture. Consequently, you want to skip details that would pose obstacles to seeing the big picture. The main culprit for such details are “code-names” for arguments. A “code-name” is a way of describing an idea that one would only understand if one had read the texts that you engage. Instead of giving a code name, try to give a half-sentence summary of the arguments in the introduction, keeping in mind that more details will be forthcoming.
    - i. Ex. ““In Section I, I provide the best argument for my claim that the natural sciences are socially constructed, arguing that **this provides the best explanation of the historical progression of science**. In Section II, I consider the objection that social constructivism **leads to implausible claims about the nature of causation**. In Section III, I rebut this objection, arguing that **the objection underestimates the degree to which causation depends on our minds**.”

## II. Best Argument(s) for Your Thesis

- A. *First paragraph*: Indicate what you’ll be doing in this section—e.g. “I will present the best argument for my thesis, that the natural sciences are socially constructed.” Also indicate which issues will be unresolved by the end of this section. For example, will certain premises raise certain challenges? I call this a “signpost.”
- B. *Second paragraph*: Present the best argument for your thesis. You may do this in one of two ways:
1. Presenting the argument in standard form. An argument is in standard form if and only if it’s presented as follows:
 

P1.	First premise
P2.	Second premise
...	
Pn.	<i>nth</i> premise
C.	$\therefore$ Your thesis (from P1-Pn)

Additionally, the argument should be valid, noncircular, and use the most plausible premises available. Many of my handouts present the arguments in this way; feel free to use them, but make sure you identify and cite the *exact* page numbers in the original text (not my handouts) from which I reconstructed the argument. This also applies to any argument you reconstruct in standard form.
  2. Some people (both students and philosophers) find standard form to be a bit too “robotic,” and so prefer a more fluid, conversational presentation of arguments. This

- is also okay; just make sure that your argument structure is sufficiently clear, e.g. by using reason/premise- and conclusion-indicators to indicate different parts of your argument.
- C. *Third paragraph*:<sup>1</sup> “Walk through” the first premise of your argument. A walkthrough of a premise consists of the following:
1. Defining key terms in the premise.
  2. Indicating whether the premise is especially contentious to an opponent.
  3. Then doing one of the following:
    - a. Indicating that you will be assuming that the premise is true, so that you can focus on defending other premises;
    - b. Providing a quick defense of the premise, perhaps citing material where a more detailed version of your defense is provided; or
    - c. Indicating that you will defend this premise in detail later in the paper.
  4. In performing the previous step, use an example or an analogy (preferably of your own design) to make abstract ideas more concrete. A few pointers:
    - a. Make sure that the examples you use replicate the structure of your premise in clear ways.
    - b. Make sure you’re not “cherry-picking” examples that make your view look favorable while overlooking the examples that would cause a lot more trouble.
    - c. If you use an analogy, try to find “nearby” analogies, i.e. that differ in very slight ways from the chief philosophical point you’re trying to make.
    - d. Use the same example/analogy for as much of the paper as you can, i.e. for the other premises in this argument.
- D. *Fourth paragraph*: Walk through the second premise of your argument. And continue until you get to your...
- E. *2<sup>nd</sup> to last paragraph*, where you walk through your last premise.
- F. *Last paragraph*: summarize what you’ve done in this section. Essentially, this should be a restatement of the 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph.

### III. Best Argument Against Your Thesis

For ease of reference, let’s call an argument against your thesis an “objection.”

- A. *First paragraph*: Briefly summarize what you’ve just done, briefly indicate what you’ll be doing in this section, and make sure it’s clear how this section relates to the rest of the paper—specifically how it bears on your *thesis*. This is also a “signpost.”
- B. *Second paragraph*: Present the objection either in standard form or in a more fluid way. See Section II.B for further pointers. However, let’s be clear about what counts as a proper objection to your thesis. There are only two flavors:
- a. The first kind of objection has as the *denial of your thesis* as its conclusion:
 

O1.	First premise of objection
O2.	Second premise of objection
...	
Om.	<u>The last premise of your objection.</u>
Not-C.	∴ Your thesis is false (from O1-Om)

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<sup>1</sup> This may require several paragraphs, depending on the complexity of the premise, and the amount of discussion it requires.

- b. The second kind of objection has the *denial of one of your premises* in Section II as its conclusion:

O1. First premise of objection  
O2. Second premise of objection

...

Om. The last premise of your objection.

Not-Pi. ∴ Premise *i* from Section II is false (from O1-Om)

Let's call the first a *direct objection* and the second an *indirect objection*. Direct objections indicate that your thesis is *false*; indirect objections indicate that your thesis is *unsupported*, thereby suggesting that, even if your thesis is true, the argument in Section II is not the *best argument* for that thesis. Indicating whether the objection serves to undercut the *truth* or the *support* of your thesis is worth stating in your signpost for this section.

- C. *All but the last paragraph*: walk through the premises of the objection, exactly as you did with Section II. Indicate which of the premises you plan to critique at length in Section IV. As before, dedicate at least one paragraph to each premise answering the questions above.

1. For your walkthroughs, it's often simpler to use the same example from Section II. However, other times it's better to use an example that works very nicely for your argument in Section II, and then to present a very different example in Section III that works badly for Section II's argument, but nicely for Section III's argument. If you do this, you should identify the deeper principles that are making the two examples yield conflicting verdicts in Section IV.

- D. *Last paragraph*: summarize what you've done in this section. This should indicate the conflict between your thesis and the objection just canvassed, and should clearly pinpoint the premise in the objection that will be the target of the next section.

## IV. Rebuttal(s) to the Best Argument(s) Against Your Thesis (i.e. Rebuttal to III)

A rebuttal is essentially an objection to an objection. However, whereas you had some choice as to whether you pursued a direct or an indirect objection above, rebuttals can only be *indirect* objections to objections. In other words, your rebuttal needs to have the following structure:

R1. Your rebuttal's first premise  
R2. Your rebuttal's second premise

...

Rx Your rebuttal's last premise.

Not-Oj. ∴ Premise *j* from Section III is false. (from R1-Rx)

Other than this, you will need to present this section as you did the previous one—with a signpost, a statement of the argument, a walkthrough of each premise, and a summary of the section's results.

## V. Conclusion

- A. In several short sentences, explain what you have done in each section of your paper (i.e. repeat your roadmap.) Ex. "In Section I, I have provided the best argument for my claim that the natural sciences are socially constructed. In Section II, I have presented

Boghossian’s argument that social constructivism leads to wildly implausible claims about causation [for example.] In Section III, I have rebutted Boghossian’s objection.”

- B. State your thesis as clearly and succinctly as possible. Ex. Objects in the natural sciences are socially constructed.

### Some **VERY IMPORTANT** strategies.

- Actually number the sections with headings (we’ve seen this in many of our readings) and give them clear and succinct titles. This breaks up a larger argument into several smaller, more manageable arguments.
- For introductions, transitions, and conclusions—especially signposts and roadmaps—don’t be afraid to be very pedantic and transparent about what you’re doing. Ex. At the beginning of Section III, you might write, “I have just presented an argument for social constructivism about the natural sciences. Yet many disagree with this thesis. Paul Boghossian offers one of the more compelling critiques of social constructivism in *Fear of Knowledge*. I will now present Boghossian’s arguments; in the next, I criticize these arguments.” This would be a signpost.
- At least for my classes, it’s always better to address fewer arguments in greater depth than more arguments with less depth. However, if space permits, dedicate a new section to each objection and each rebuttal thereof.
- Also, in my classes, the chief objective of paper writing is to answer a philosophical question. Consequently, you have to put textual paraphrase/exegesis into the service of answering this question; not the other way around.
- In Sections III and IV, the more clearly that you can identify how the conclusion of one argument negates the premise/conclusion of the argument considered in the previous section, the tighter your reasoning will be.
- Give each argument equal consideration. This will make your paper more convincing, and will make you a more careful evaluator of arguments.
- I have no problem with the use of the first person, but make sure that it’s done in the “roadmaps” and “signposts” of your paper, and not elsewhere. Otherwise, it sounds as if you’re simply making claims about how yourself, and not claims that should be compelling to others.
- Keep paragraphs around four sentences. This will make your paper easier to read, and may help you to organize your thoughts.
- Read/edit your paper once with the sole purpose of lowering the word-count as much as possible. This guarantees that you write shorter (and hence clearer) sentences, paragraphs, etc.
- Other strategies can be found here:  
[http://community.middlebury.edu/~7Ekkhalifa/teaching/guides/Repulsions\\_Strategies.pdf](http://community.middlebury.edu/~7Ekkhalifa/teaching/guides/Repulsions_Strategies.pdf)