From working thesis to working draft

1. **Formulate a working thesis.**

What makes for a good philosophical thesis? As I see it, the general form of a philosophical thesis is the following:

A {philosophical framework} [does/does not] solve a {philosophical problem}.

Frameworks often take the form of "-isms," e.g., materialism, dualism, coherentism, foundationalism, determinism, existentialism, postmodernism, … Alternatively, canonical figures (Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Nietzsche, Quine, …) usually have distinctive frameworks. Often less celebrated philosophers have frameworks for specific problems.

Problems often arise when intuitive assumptions yield unintuitive results. Frameworks then seek to reinterpret either the assumptions or the results so that the tension between the two is eliminated.

So the chief task in formulating a philosophical thesis is deciding upon a *framework* and a *problem*. How do you do this?

(a) *Start with your interests.* Often your interests will provide you with *the beginnings* of a framework or a problem. Typical starting points for students are one of the following
    a. Figures (ex. Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, Kant, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Quine)
    b. Isms (ex. Existentialism, Rationalism, Empiricism, Skepticism, Relativism)
    c. Topics in philosophy (ex. justification, explanation, the ethics of abortion, social justice)

(b) *Consider your knowledge-base/strengths.* There are many things we're interested in that we're ill-equipped to answer (for example, I think 19th century German philosophy is really interesting, but if I had a deadline, I would not choose this as a research topic, since I'm hard pressed to navigate the thinkers involved in that topic).

(c) *Research.* Once you've chosen a broad framework or problem, start to sharpen your thesis by considering certain details about that framework or problem that emerge in the existing discussions about it. Here are some things to consider:
    a. A given problem usually has a handful of frameworks that offer solutions to it.
        i. Thus, if you've chosen a problem, then find the framework that you find most interesting.
        ii. Alternatively, you can compare two/more frameworks' solutions to a common problem.
    b. A given framework usually has a handful of problems (objections) associated with it.
        i. Thus, if you've chosen a framework, then find the problem that you find most interesting.

2. **Formulate your arguments for your thesis.**

Essentially at this point, you've developed a working thesis. Now ask yourself, what are the best reasons to believe your thesis? This requires several different procedures:

(a) *Research the best arguments for and against your thesis that have been offered thus far*. You want to find why other people both accept and reject your preferred thesis. How do you find these arguments in an effective manner?
   a. *Review articles*. The best place for this is the Stanford Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (http://plato.stanford.edu).
   b. *Recent articles*. Recent articles, particularly ones published in good journals, are generally only accepted if they are cognizant of the literature. As a result, they often review much of the extant literature, and typically bring the details of the problems and frameworks they're dealing with into further relief.
      i. Often, it's a good idea to skim these articles looking at the things they say when they refer to other texts.

(b) *Analyze those arguments*. As you discover more arguments, try to make sure that you understand some of their key details. What are their core assumptions/premises?

(c) *Evaluate those arguments*. While you're getting a lay of the land, take stock of the arguments that are being offered for and against. Which ones resonate with you? Which ones don't? In my estimate, this *starts* at the level of your own intuitions and gut feelings. These intuitions can be refined and completely reversed as you start analyzing the arguments, and thinking about what would be the cost of rejecting certain premises.

(d) (**For scholarship and really, really, really good undergraduate papers**) *Develop new arguments*. If you see something lacking in the discussions you've researched, start trying to fill in that gap. Many students underestimate the challenges of philosophical creativity. Here are some things to consider:
   a. *Be modest.* Generally, academic philosophers are a pretty bright and well-trained bunch, and have combed over all of the alternatives that most their bright and well-trained peers have considered, never mind the considerations that relatively untrained undergraduates (however bright) have considered.
   b. *Do more research*. If you've come up with what you think is a new idea, chances are that it's already been conjectured before. Start poking around to make sure. Try different terminology too.
   c. *Avoid 'magic concepts.'* A very common "new" idea that students offer is appeal to some single concept that solves every problem under consideration. More often than not, these 'solutions' are illusory: the concept is so vague that the solutions don't really say anything. If you can stringently define a new concept and show how by following that definition, you can really solve the problem being considered, then you've really done something. But this is really, really hard.

3. Outline your paper.
   a. If you've gotten this far, then you're in a really good position to outline a paper. For you'll have the following:
      i. A thesis in which you're either claiming that a philosophical framework solves a problem or you're claiming that it doesn't.
         1. The framework and problem should both be well-defined.
      ii. The best arguments on tap regarding the framework's solution to the problem.

                1. Generally, a good paper will emphasize quality over quantity with respect to arguments.
                    a. This involves providing as precise and tight of an argument for thesis being offered.
                    b. It also involves examining the strongest objections to the argument and thesis being offered, and replying to those objections.
    b. Refer to philosophy guides for further tips on outlining.

4. **Draft your paper.**
    a. If you've got a well-done outline, it's generally pretty easy to draft a paper; just follow your outline.
    b. However, certain things come out in drafting. The biggest are *page limits*. This yields a handful of guidelines:
        i. Look at my "Repulsions and Strategies" handout.
        ii. In particular, keep in mind that you should always use the fewest words possible.
        iii. More globally, keep the preceding thought that quality over quantity of arguments is preferable. To that end:
            1. Start with your best argument/reason for your thesis. Develop this as fully as possible, including anticipating potential objections to it.
            2. If you have available space, consider your 2nd best argument.
                a. If you have space to give it the same level of attention as your best argument, definitely include it.
                b. If you can give it decent but not as much attention as your best argument, be explicit that more can be said about it, but include a summarized version of it.
                c. If you reach a point where you only have enough space to sketch the argument such that it raises as many objections as it "scores points" for your thesis, don't include it.
            3. Repeat step (2) for your next best argument until you run out of space.