Writing Philosophically

THE INTRODUCTIONS, SUMMARIES, AND QUESTIONS for reading and thought found throughout *Traversing Philosophical Boundaries* are intended to help you get more out of your reading and to aid in class discussion. They should also prove useful in studying for the exams that you will probably be required to take. Since most philosophy classes require papers in addition to exams, what follows is an overview of how to write philosophically. It is intended to help you with each of the steps in the writing process.

Choosing a Topic

Just as it was difficult for me to decide how to begin my book, it may be difficult for you to decide how to begin your philosophy paper. Unless your professor assigns a list of paper topics, your first decision will be choosing a topic. If you are not given an assigned topic, it is important that you pick a topic that you can "relate to," that is, a topic that you find interesting and personally significant. If you cannot relate to your topic, then you will most likely find the writing process to be boring, and this will probably be reflected in the quality of your paper.

Another problem in choosing a topic is making sure that the topic is narrow enough to be covered in the assigned length. For example, if you are required to write a short five to ten page paper, you should not choose topics such as "the philosophical foundations of Hinduism" or "the philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir." These topics are much too broad to be covered in a short paper. However, you might decide to choose some aspect of one of these topics. For instance, rather than choosing the philosophical foundations of Hinduism, you might decide to write a paper on the concept of self-identity found in one of the *Upanishads*. Or in the case of Simone de Beauvoir, you might philosophically evaluate her claim that men have traditionally attempted to deny women their transcendence or freedom.

Choosing a Literary Form

Once you have decided on an interesting and manageable topic, the next step is to choose your literary form. While many professors require that you use the essay form, others will allow you to choose other forms. These may include the dialogue form, the parable form, or the journal form. However, even if you employ the essay form, there are still choices to be made about the best way to proceed.

On the one hand, you may decide to use the straightforward essay strategy that you learned in English class. In its simplest formulation, the straightforward essay requires that you write an opening paragraph that introduces your topic and that contains a statement of your thesis or main point. You then write several other paragraphs in which you present evidence for your thesis in a clearly stated and coherent manner. After presenting your evidence, you conclude the paper with a paragraph that restates your thesis and summarizes your principal pieces of evidence.

On the other hand, you may decide to try something a bit less formulaic. One possibility, which is somewhat more difficult but often more interesting, is to begin with a question or a small piece of evidence and then work toward your thesis or main point. In this type of essay, as in a detective story, the revelation comes at the end. Of course, abandoning the straightforward essay strategy involves a certain element of risk. In writing a straightforward essay, the thesis is clearly stated at the beginning, and this shows the reader where you are heading. Since this more complex type does not provide such a road map for the reader, it is crucial that your essay be constructed in a well-conceived, coherent manner. In other words, you must lead your reader from first point to the second point, from the second point to the third point, and so on, until the reader discovers your thesis or main point. If you do not provide clear connections between your principal claims, you may lose your reader along the way.

As mentioned previously, some professors allow students to use literary forms other than the essay form. One form that has been used by several philosophers is the dialogue form. Most of the writings of Plato, the ancient Greek philosopher, were written using this form, as were many of the ancient philosophical writings of India and China. Modern philosophers such as David Hume, George Berkeley, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Robert Solomon have occasionally employed this form as well. The first and third selections in chapter 1 of the text, as well as the selections from Plato found in chapters 1, 2, and 5, represent good examples of the dialogue form.

If you are allowed to use this literary form and choose to do so, the best way to begin is by providing an introductory paragraph that sets the stage. I tell my own students to be as imaginative as possible. For example, after a long night of reading your philosophy text, you decide to go down to the local pub for a brew. When you arrive, you notice two people shooting pool, and you decide to challenge the winner. It turns out that the winner of the game in progress is Emma Goldman. During your own game with her, you discuss some of her philosophical views. (If you wish to discuss the views of more than one philosopher, you can play partners.)

The body of your dialogue should be constructed so that the reader can easily tell who said what. The easiest way of accomplishing this is to use the technique that was used

in "A Dialogue with Death," the first selection in the book. You simply put the person's name in capital letters, followed by a colon, at the beginning of each part of the dialogue spoken by that person. The body of your dialogue should also show clearly the characters' positions on whatever issue they are discussing. By introducing yourself as a character in the dialogue, you can provide the evaluation or critical analysis required in most philosophy papers. Finally, the body of your dialogue should be written in a lively, conversational manner. There should be give and take, agreements and disagreements, questions and answers. By all means, make sure that your dialogue is really a dialogue and not two or three long monologues. For example, if you were writing the dialogue with Emma Goldman, you would not want to have Goldman speak for a couple of pages giving her views and then have yourself speak for a couple of pages giving your evaluation of what she said. Rather, the dialogue should frequently alternate between speakers, and there should be an animated exchange of ideas.

Another literary form that you may be allowed to use is the parable form. A parable is a short fictional story used to illustrate a point. A good example of a philosophical parable, the Buddhist parable of the poisoned arrow, is found in chapter 3 of the book.

In the Buddhist parable of the poisoned arrow, as in most other parables, an imaginative story is used to make a philosophical point. In this particular parable, the writer gives you the story of a man who has been shot with a poisoned arrow. Whereas many people would remove the arrow as quickly as possible, this man (a stereotypical philosopher, no doubt!) asks many questions about the arrow before removing it. While awaiting answers to these numerous questions, the man dies from the poison. The point of this parable is that many people clutter their lives with insignificant problems and questions and thus forget about the really important thing in life—the removal of the poisoned arrow. (In Buddhist philosophy, to remove the poisoned arrow one must eliminate *tanha,* or desire, from one's life.)

If you are allowed to use the parable form and choose to do so, the difficult thing is to come up with an engaging story that is clearly relevant to the point you wish to make. If the story is not engaging, then you will not keep the reader's interest. And even if the story is engaging, the reader may not be able to see how it illustrates the point you are trying to make. However, if you are good at creative writing, the parable form will provide you with an excellent opportunity to display your talents.

The final literary form that you may be allowed to use is the journal form. Indeed, in some philosophy classes, the writing of a philosophical journal is used in lieu of papers. Others require a journal as well as papers, and still others give you the choice of writing papers or keeping a journal. While there are no examples of journal writing contained in the book, several well-known philosophers have written in this form. A good example of the journal form is found in the *Journals* of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard.

A philosophical journal consists of a collection of dated entries in which you discuss your ideas on a variety of topics. If the journal is a class assignment, you will probably be expected to devote at least some of the entries to the discussion of class readings. One of the nice things about philosophical journals is that they usually leave more room for personal expression than do philosophical essays, dialogues, or parables.

The following is an example of how a journal may be used as a class assignment. In my comparative religions class, I require that students keep a philosophical journal throughout the semester and that they write in the journal at least two times per week.

Although there is no set length to entries, I have found that entries of less than one page are usually not well developed. I tell my students that the journal should contain three types of entries and that the ideal journal contains roughly one-third of each type. The first type of entry describes and reacts to class materials (the textbook, films shown in class, and class discussions). The second type of entry describes and reacts to non-class materials related to the class (textbooks from other classes, television programs, newspaper articles, conversations with friends outside of class, and so on). Finally, the third type of entry is what I call personal reflection. In these entries, students are expected to write about their own spiritual beliefs and experiences. Many students are very creative with their journals. They include newspaper articles, poems, and drawings. Most of my students find journal writing to be a refreshing alternative to class essays.

Doing Research

Once you have picked a topic and chosen a literary form, you will probably have to do research. While some writing assignments do not require outside research, longer essays generally do. Since most of you have written a research paper at some point in your educational career, I assume that you know how to begin. I also assume that you know your way around your campus library. (However, if you are a new college student, you may find university libraries large and somewhat frightening. If this is the case, I suggest that you schedule a library tour or at least make friends with the reference librarian.) Given these assumptions, I am limiting my discussion in this section to specific suggestions about how to do research in philosophy.

Because of the wealth of material available in most university and college libraries, you may wonder where to start. One good place to begin is in the reference section of your library. Here you will usually find several sets of encyclopedias, most of which will contain entries on the better-known figures in the history of philosophy. You will also likely find some reference materials devoted more specifically to philosophical topics, such as *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* contains entries on many important philosophers and philosophical concepts. Entries also include brief bibliographies, which can guide you to additional sources of information. However, since the *Encyclopedia* was published in 1967, it does not contain entries on very recent subjects. Also, the *Encyclopedia* is oriented toward traditional philosophers and philosophical concerns, and some of the authors and concepts covered in this text do not receive coverage in the *Encyclopedia*. Fortunately, there are a number of more recent reference works, such as the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, that do contain entries on many of these authors and concepts.

If your library subscribes to it, another place to begin is with the *Philosopher's Index*. The *Philosopher's Index* is the philosophical equivalent of *The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*. It contains listings of the articles published in philosophical journals during a given period of time. The articles are listed according to author and according to subject matter. There are two problems with using the *Philosopher's Index,* however. Libraries, especially small ones, do not carry many of the journals indexed in it, and many of the

articles written in philosophical journals cannot be understood by beginning students in philosophy. (I still have problems understanding some of them myself.)

A third place to begin is with the trusty old card catalog (or the modern electronic version of it). The card catalog, which is arranged by author, title, and subject, will usually provide you with the titles of several books that may be useful sources of information. By scanning the table of contents and index of each book, you should be able to locate this information without having to read large portions of the text. However, I should provide some words of warning about philosophy books. Although some of the primary texts are extremely difficult to understand without using secondary sources, many of the secondary sources are just as difficult to understand as the primary texts. (An example of a primary text is one of the *Upanishads*; an example of a secondary source is a commentary on that *Upanishad*.) Also, secondary sources that discuss the same primary text often disagree on the exact meaning of the text under discussion. So, one of the key skills required in doing philosophical research is being able to discern what to use and what to ignore. If you come across a text that is extremely difficult to understand, try to find another source that is written in a more accessible manner. Or if you must use that text, try to find someone who can help you comprehend the text. It would be a good idea to consult with your professor before relying heavily on any secondary source.

This brings me to the final place to begin—a place that many of you can enter from your dorm room or home—the worldwide web. As you no doubt know, you can find information on just about anything on the web, if you know how to search for it. And to search the web, all that you normally need to do is to type in the name of the philosopher or topic in a good search engine. For instance, when I recently typed in the name "Friedrich Nietzsche" using Google, I received 2,980,000 results; when I typed in "*Upanishads*," I received 1,030,000 results. With such a large number of hits, the problem is deciding which sites to visit in order to find useful information. Fortunately, the brief description of the site that is usually provided can often help you decide whether or not the site is likely to contain information that you can use.

In addition to using the web for general searches like these, you can also find valuable reference works online. When I encounter a word with which I am unfamiliar, I simply type in "English dictionary," and I can quickly access a site such as www.dictionary.com that will provide one or more definitions. You will also be able to find sites containing several general encyclopedias that may contain some information relevant to your topic. Some of these sites include www.encyclopedia.com, and www.wikipedia.org. However the most useful online tools in doing philosophical research are the encyclopedias of philosophy that have been recently developed. The *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (www.iep.utm.edu) and the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (www.plato.stanford.edu) both contain a wealth of information on many different philosophical topics.

Organizing Your Thoughts

Once you have chosen a topic, a literary form, and done any necessary research, the next

step is to organize your notes and thoughts. By this time, you should have some idea of what it is that you want to say about your topic, and the main problem is making sure that you say it in a coherent manner. Most of you will be using a word processor to prepare your writing project, and this wonderful advance in technology allows you easily to rearrange what you have written. Still, it is a good idea to think about the order of your paper before you begin writing. Doing an outline, even if you are not required to turn it in, should make organizing much easier.

The way in which you organize your paper will depend in part on the literary form you have chosen. Of the forms mentioned previously, the journal form is the easiest to organize. In a philosophical journal, entries are arranged according to the dates on which they are written. While a succeeding entry may continue a line of thinking that was begun in the preceding one, often it will be devoted to an entirely different question or issue. For this reason, there is rarely a problem of coherence between entries.

The dialogue form, like the journal form, may also be loosely structured. In writing a dialogue, you must make sure that the conversation covers the philosophical points under consideration and that your reader is able to follow the movement from one speaker to the next. However, a good philosophical dialogue, like a real-life conversation, allows for interesting digressions. The point is to make sure that you do not allow your digressions to go on for so long that the reader loses sight of your main points (as sometimes happens in real-life conversations). Interesting digressions can spice up your dialogue, but they can also make it difficult for your reader to follow your line of thinking.

In contrast to the journal and dialogue forms, the parable form must be tightly structured. However, since the parable form consists of telling a story to illustrate a philosophical point, the structuring will often be sequential in nature. In other words, the story will describe a series of events, and these events will be organized according to the passage of time. For example, in the Buddhist parable of the poisoned arrow, the story begins when the person is shot with the poisoned arrow, progresses through a number of pointless questions, and ends when the person dies from the poison. If you use this typical way of organizing your parable, then the important thing is to make sure that your reader can follow the temporal progression of the events that take place.

Let us now turn to the essay form, the form that is perhaps the most difficult to organize. One of the reasons for this difficulty is that there are several ways to organize material in essay form. As mentioned earlier, you may choose either the straightforward strategy or the strategy where you work toward your thesis or main point. It should be obvious that each of these general strategies will require a different organization of materials. In fact, at least as far as the thesis is concerned, the order of the second type of essay is the reverse of the first. In the straightforward essay, the thesis is stated at the beginning, whereas in the other type, it first appears near the end.

Another reason for the difficulty is that a good essay requires tighter cohesion than does a good journal or dialogue. In a well-written essay, there is little room for digression—your reader must be able to follow your line of thinking easily from one paragraph to the next. While some of this cohesion can be provided by linguistic elements, which will be discussed later, these linguistic elements will not hold the essay together if you have not organized your materials and thoughts carefully.

As a good example of how to organize a straightforward essay, let us look at one of the selections in chapter 3 of the book. In the selection, “Navajo Ways of Knowing,”

Herbert John Benally discusses the four types of knowledge that make up traditional Navajo wisdom. He arranges his essay around the four types, with a separate section for each one. Within each section, he highlights the essential features and applications of the type of knowledge being discussed. If you were writing this essay, you might decide to begin with the type of knowledge that you considered least important and end with the type that you considered most important. Or you might decide to use the opposite strategy, devoting the first part of your essay to the most important type of knowledge and the last part to the least important type. Such hierarchical orderings are common to western European thinking and writing. However, they are not common to Native American thinking and Benally does not organize his essay in this manner. Rather, he notes that each type of knowledge is traditionally associated with a part of the day, and he uses this traditional ordering to organize the parts of his essay. Thus, he begins by discussing the type of knowledge that is associated with the dawn and ends by discussing the type of knowledge that is associated with darkness or night.

Of course, you may not be so lucky as to be writing on a topic that contains such a ready-made principle of organization. However, if you carefully think about your notes and other materials, you will usually find that one particular arrangement of the material makes more sense to you than other arrangements. Perhaps you will discover a temporal order as did Benally. Or you might find that the material can be better organized according to some sort of hierarchical principle, with some points being more or less important than others. Another possibility is that you might discover a logical progression, that is, a series of necessary steps leading to your main point or thesis. For example, you might discover that you must get to point B in order to get to point C. But you realize that you cannot get to point B without first arriving at point A. The obvious place to begin, then, is with point A.

Whatever method or principle of organization you employ, it is crucial that your reader be able to follow your line of thinking. You should continually ask yourself, “How did I get from this idea or paragraph to the next idea or paragraph?” “Have I made this connection clear to my reader?” If you spend some time organizing your material before beginning, the writing process will be much easier. It is also much more likely that your reader will be able to follow your line of thinking.

Making Your Ideas Clear

A good topic, an acceptable literary form, and careful organization—with these accomplished, you are well on the way toward constructing an excellent piece of philosophical writing. However, you still have the difficult task of making your ideas clear—that is, of making sure that your reader can understand what you have to say. Making your ideas clear depends on two very important things: (1) your choice of terms or words and (2) the way in which you structure your sentences. Unfortunately, many philosophers, even some very famous ones, offer less-than-ideal models of clear writing.

As far as the choice of terms is concerned, you should attempt to use everyday words whenever possible. Although many philosophers have adopted a specialized vocabulary (a less flattering term for specialized vocabulary is *jargon*), the use of this

vocabulary often causes problems for readers. The reader may not be familiar with the meaning of some of the terms used, and technical philosophical terms are frequently not found in standard dictionaries. Thus, as the late Professor Robert Whittemore used to tell us in his graduate seminars at Tulane University, the ideal is to use words that your seven-year-old sister can understand.

Of course, this ideal may not always be realizable, and you may be forced to use specialized terminology in some instances. Whenever this is necessary, you need to define these terms clearly, either in the body of your paper or in footnotes. If you find it essential to use a large number of technical or foreign words, a glossary, similar to the one found in the book, will be helpful for your readers.

Another thing to look for in your choice of terms is consistency of meaning. If you use a key term in a certain sense in one part of your paper, it will confuse your reader if you use the same term in a different sense elsewhere. For instance, the term *justice* can be used in a legal sense (as when we talk about the administration of justice in society), in an economic sense (as when we talk about the justice of equal pay for equal work), or in a religious sense (as when we speak of divine justice). It would be extremely confusing to a reader if you alternated between the senses of this term in your paper without making it evident in what sense the term was being used in each case.

Closely connected with consistency of meaning is the ideal of conciseness. What this ideal requires is that you choose words that are best suited to say what you mean and that you avoid wordiness and ambiguity. Wordiness refers to using many more words than are necessary to say something. For example, it is better to use the word *dam* than the phrase "a concrete structure built across a river for the purpose of blocking the passage of water." Ambiguity refers to using a term that has more than one meaning without making clear which of the meanings you intend. If you say that "all men are created equal," do you mean that all males or all humans are created equal? (Note: To avoid sexism in language, modern usage requires avoiding sexually biased terms, such as using the word *man* to represent both males and females.) Or if you say that something is wrong, what exactly do you mean? Do you mean morally wrong? Or legally wrong? Or religiously wrong? Or wrong according to what your parents told you? Since most words in the English language have more than one meaning, it is important that you use your words carefully so that your reader knows which sense is intended in each case.

Moving to the subject of sentence structure, a good rule of thumb is that the simpler the sentence structure, the better. This does not mean that your entire paper has to be written in simple declarative sentences. It does mean, however, that if you use compound sentence structures, you should provide needed punctuation: commas, semicolons, colons, hyphens, periods, and so on. When I was a teaching assistant at McGill University, I once received a three-page paper that had only one punctuation mark—a period at the end; and this past semester I received another paper with only a period at the end. While these are rare occurrences, I often find that many of my students do not know how to use certain punctuation marks, especially semicolons and colons. If you are not sure how these are used in a compound sentence, a brief review of your English textbook or a quick trip to the writing lab is probably a good idea. Moreover, it is important to recognize that proper punctuation does not always guarantee clarity. Sometimes a sentence that is properly punctuated is just too complex to be easily understood. Consider the following example in which the British philosopher John Locke discusses his idea of substance:

> The mind being, as I have declared, furnished with a great number of the simple ideas conveyed in by the senses, as they are found in exterior things, or by reflection on its own operations, takes notice, also, that a certain number of these simple ideas go constantly together; which being presumed to belong to one thing, and words being suited to common apprehensions, and made use of for quick dispatch, are called, so united in one subject, by one name; which, by inadvertency, we are apt afterward to talk of and consider as one simple idea, which indeed is a complication of many ideas together: because, as I have said, not imagining how these simple ideas can subsist by themselves, we accustom ourselves to suppose some substratum wherein they do subsist, and from which they do result; which therefore we call "substance."—From *Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* edited by A. C. Fraser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894)

After reading this sentence several times, you still may not be sure what Locke means. The reason for this is not that what Locke is saying is extremely difficult to understand. The problem is that Locke says it in such a convoluted manner. Of course, if you spend several minutes on this sentence, you should be able to unravel it. But a reader should not have to unravel a writer's sentences in order to understand what the writer is trying to say. By breaking this complex sentence into several shorter sentences, Locke would have been able to say the same thing in a much more accessible manner.

Making Your Writing Cohesive

By organizing your thoughts and structuring your sentences correctly, you are already well on the way to making your writing cohesive. Cohesiveness requires that your reader be able to follow your thinking from one sentence to the next and from one paragraph to the next. As long as your sentences are clearly written and you remain focused on your subject, cohesion between sentences should pose no problem. By using appropriate transition words and phrases ("in addition," "after all," "moreover," "furthermore," "nevertheless," "on the contrary," "on the one hand," "on the other hand," "however," "yet," and so on), you can strengthen the cohesion between sentences even more.

Cohesion between paragraphs is a bit more difficult to attain. The main thing to remember is that each paragraph should have a topic sentence, that is, a sentence that lets the reader know what is being discussed in the paragraph. Cohesiveness between paragraphs is achieved when the reader is able to see the connection between the topic sentences in successive paragraphs. Your job as a writer is to make sure that this connection is discernible. As in the case with sentences, transition words and phrases are often helpful. For example, if a succeeding paragraph continues the line of thinking of the previous paragraph, you may want to use "in addition," "moreover," or "furthermore" to begin the succeeding paragraph. However, if the succeeding paragraph contains information that denies or qualifies what was contained in the previous paragraph, you could use "on the contrary" or "on the other hand" to link the two together. Whether or not you choose to

use transition words or phrases between paragraphs, it is a good idea to isolate the topic sentences in your paragraphs and to ask yourself whether one topic sentence "flows into" the other. In less metaphorical terms, when the topic sentences are isolated, are you able to easily see how one topic sentence leads to the next? If *you* cannot see the connections between your topic sentences, it is unlikely that your reader will be able to see them.

Using Argumentation

Most philosophy writing assignments require the use of argumentation. Argumentation, in its most general sense, means the attempt to persuade someone of the truth or acceptability of something you believe. If the argumentation is effective, then the person you are addressing will be convinced to accept your views on that particular matter.

Examples of argumentation abound in everyday life. Television commercials attempt to persuade you to buy various products or to vote for certain candidates. Letters on the editorial pages of newspapers try to get you to believe that certain actions or events are good or bad. People come to your door and try to convince you to accept certain religious claims. Your parents try to persuade you to stay in college or to stay off drugs. In all these cases, someone is trying to get you to believe something that you may not now believe. In writing a philosophy paper requiring argumentation, your goal is to do likewise. You should provide the strongest evidence that you can muster in support of your position or thesis.

But how do you go about doing this? In the everyday examples of argumentation that you have encountered, you may have noticed two things: (1) many different strategies are used to try to win your agreement, and (2) you find some of these strategies totally convincing, others only slightly convincing, and some not convincing at all. In order to describe successful argumentation, both of these observations need to be discussed.

Turning first to differences in strategy, it should be obvious that some examples of argumentation rely heavily on powerful images. A television commercial that is trying to get you to purchase a particular model of car may show the car cruising down a scenic highway, perched on top of a mountain, or swerving around the curves of a test course. If you were making a philosophy video instead of writing a philosophy paper, part of your argumentation would likely consist of such powerful images as well. Since you are not making a philosophy video, you may decide that powerful images are not appropriate to your project. But this decision is not necessarily warranted. Words, like televised pictures and sounds, can be used to create powerful images that may convince readers of the point you are trying to make. For example, if you were trying to convince someone of the unacceptability of capital punishment, you might offer a powerful description of the way executions are carried out. Or if you were trying to convince someone not to join the military, you might offer a graphic description of what the person would be subjected to in boot camp.

In addition to powerful images and descriptions, examples can also be used as argumentation. If you are claiming that not all televangelists practice what they preach, you might point to the example of Jim Bakker (a notoriously unethical televangelist) to support

your claim. Or if you claim that it is sometimes acceptable to kill a human being, you might point to killing in wartime and killing in self-defense as examples of justified killing. Of course, not all examples are used as argumentation. Sometimes the purpose of an example is merely to clarify something that has been said. For example, I have used numerous examples in this appendix to clarify statements that I have made about philosophical writing. (Indeed, the preceding sentence is an example of how examples are often used for clarification rather than argumentation.) Whether examples are used to support a position or to clarify a claim, they are extremely useful in philosophical writing.

Powerful images and examples, however, will not suffice to convince most of your readers, and other types of argumentation will probably be necessary. Unfortunately, once we get beyond persuasion by images and examples, then we enter the domain of logical argumentation, a domain that can be adequately covered only in a separate book or course. Still, since logical argumentation is a crucial component of most philosophical writing, in the remainder of this section I will briefly describe some of the basic concepts of logical argumentation.

The first step in discussing logical argumentation is to define exactly what it means for something to be an argument. An argument is a group of two or more statements in which one statement is claimed to be true on the basis of one or more of the others. In other words, in an argument, certain statements that are assumed to be true are used as evidence or support for another statement that is not known to be true. The statements that provide evidence or support are called *premises,* and the statement that is being supported or argued for is called the *conclusion.* In a good argument, the truth of the premises strongly supports the truth of the conclusion.

While some cases of argumentation found in everyday life consist solely of powerful images or examples, many others contain logical arguments. Consider, for example, one of the instances of argumentation mentioned previously. When someone comes to your door and tries to convince you of certain religious claims, you may close the door in her face, or you may politely accept the literature that is offered to you. You may even decide to ask the person to explain exactly what she believes, without questioning or disagreeing with anything she says. On the other hand, you may decide to ask the person why she believes what she does. In doing so, you are now asking the person to provide evidence or support for what she believes. If the person provides this evidence or support, then she has given you premises for her original claims. In other words, the person has provided a logical argument for her religious beliefs.

Other examples of logical arguments can be found on editorial pages of newspapers, in conversations with your parents or friends—even in brief commercials found on television. Indeed, if the previously mentioned car commercial provided claims about how good or how safe the car was, along with the powerful images of the car in action, then the commercial would contain a logical argument.

Now that I have briefly explained the concept of an argument, the next task is to discuss the different types of arguments. For the purposes of this brief introduction, we can limit our discussion to the two principal types: deductive arguments and inductive arguments. A *deductive argument* is an argument that claims to provide conclusive support for a conclusion. In other words, in a deductive argument, the truth of the initial statements or premises is claimed to guarantee or necessitate the truth of the thesis or conclusion. An example of a simple deductive argument would be the following:

All dogs are mammals.
Lassie is a dog.
Therefore, Lassie is a mammal.

As should be obvious, if it is true both that all dogs are mammals and that Lassie is a dog, then it follows necessarily that Lassie is a mammal. The truth of the premises in this argument guarantees the truth of the conclusion.

This guarantee or certainty is an important virtue of good deductive arguments. But what might also be apparent to you is that the conclusion of this argument does not give you any information beyond the information already contained in the premises. This is a principal shortcoming of deductive arguments. A good deductive argument with true premises gives you certainty, but only because the conclusion does not provide you with any new information that is not already contained in the premises. For this reason, unless you are writing a paper on logic or mathematics, it is highly unlikely that you will be able to use deductive argumentation to support your position or thesis. Instead, for the most part, you will probably have to rely on inductive argumentation.

Inductive arguments, unlike deductive ones, do allow you to go beyond the truth contained in your premises. But they do so only by sacrificing the virtue of certainty. Even if you have a very good inductive argument with true premises, you cannot know for certain that the conclusion is true. What you will know, however, is that the truth of the conclusion is highly probable. On most issues, this is all that we can humanly hope to achieve.

While there are many types or categories of inductive argumentation, I will limit my discussion to the four types that you will most likely encounter in your research or use in your own writing. These four types are induction by enumeration, statistical induction, causal argument, and argument by analogy.

One of the most common types of inductive argumentation is argument by enumeration. In an argument by enumeration, the arguer collects bits of related data and uses them to support a general claim. For instance, you might observe that your mother loves you and that your friends' mothers love them. From these observations, you could go on to make the general claim that all mothers love their children. Notice that this last claim, the conclusion of your argument, goes far beyond the premises. The premises are statements about a few mothers that you know, whereas the conclusion is a statement about every mother who has ever existed. For this reason, the truth of your conclusion, unlike the truth of the conclusion about Lassie being a mammal, is not guaranteed by the premises. In fact, the truth of these premises does not even make the truth of your conclusion very probable, since there is clearly not sufficient data to support such a general claim. In terms of logic, we would say that you committed the fallacy of hasty generalization—that you made the mistake of arguing for a general claim with too little relevant data. The falsity of your conclusion could be clearly demonstrated by providing one example (called a *counterexample*) of a mother who did not love her children.

Unfortunately, while it is often easy to show when an induction by enumeration goes wrong, it is much harder to say exactly when it goes right. We can say that an induction by enumeration is good when sufficient data is provided to support the general claim, but the term *sufficient data* cannot be precisely defined. The amount of data that is

needed depends on the nature of the conclusion you wish to support. The point is that when you use this type of inductive argument, you should gather as much relevant data as possible. You should also be on the lookout for potential counterexamples, since one genuine counterexample will undermine your conclusion.

A second type of inductive argumentation that you may find useful in your writing is *statistical induction.* Like induction by enumeration, statistical induction begins with the gathering of relevant data. In gathering your data, however, you might find that the data is not consistent and thus does not support a general claim. For instance, if you were gathering data about mothers loving their children, you might find that in the group of mothers observed or surveyed, 70 percent loved their children, 20 percent seemed indifferent, and 10 percent did not love their children. Given these data, you obviously could not make a statement about all mothers loving or not loving their children. But what you could do, using a statistical induction, is to claim that these same percentages hold for a larger group of mothers that were not observed or surveyed. Since 70 percent of the mothers in your sample group (that is, the group that you observed or surveyed) loved their children, you might claim that 70 percent of mothers in the United States love their children. Of course, your conclusion might be the narrower claim that 70 percent of the mothers in California love their children or the broader claim that 70 percent of the mothers in the world love their children.

Even if you do not use a statistical induction of your own in your paper, you may find it useful to use statistical inductions made by others (for instance, you may decide to use data from public opinion polls, which rely on statistical inductions). Whether you do your own statistical induction or rely on statistical inductions done by others, there are a few things of which you should be aware. First, you have to make sure that the statistical induction is not biased. A biased statistical induction results from a lack of correspondence between the group of people surveyed and the larger group of people referred to in the conclusion; in other words, the group of people surveyed differs in some significant respect from many of the members of the larger group. For example, in our imaginary survey of mothers, the sample could be biased if you surveyed only mothers who lived in Oregon or if you surveyed only mothers who belonged to the upper socioeconomic class. For a statistical induction to be good, the group surveyed must be representative of the larger group referred to in the conclusion.

The second thing to be aware of is that statistical inductions can be flawed in several other ways. Often the question or questions asked can be slanted. For instance, if you are interested in genuinely determining how people feel about abortion, you should not ask them whether they believe that a woman has the right to murder her unborn child. Even the person asking the questions and the context in which the questions are asked can flaw statistical inductions. If you are a priest interested in finding out how many people approve of premarital sex, then you need to leave your priestly robes at home.

The final thing to be aware of when using statistical inductions is the danger of relying on numbers alone to support your position. Given that you live in a democracy and that you are frequently presented with polls telling you what the majority of people believe, you may come to think that majority opinion determines truth or acceptability. However, it should not take much reflection to recognize the inadequacy of such thinking. If 75 percent of all people think that abortion is acceptable, does that make it acceptable? Or to take an even clearer example, if 75 percent of people living in the twelfth century thought

the earth was flat, did that make the earth flat?

A third type of inductive argumentation that you may discover in your research or use in your writing is the *causal argument.* A causal argument is any type of induction that is used to support a claim about the existence of a causal connection (or the lack of a causal connection) between two events. Causal thinking is an important component in learning from experience, and children use it at a very early age. For example, when my children were small, I installed those "childproof" gadgets designed to keep children from opening cabinet doors. But around age two, each of my children used causal thinking to defeat the gadget. They probably first observed that their mother and I were able to open the cabinets with ease. Next, they tried various means of opening the cabinet door before finally discovering that by pushing down the top of the gadget while pulling on the door at the same time, they could open the door. After trying this combination a few more times, they knew how to open the door. Put in terms of logic, we would say that they had discovered a causal connection between one event (pushing down the top of the gadget while pulling on the door) and another event (the opening of the door).

More sophisticated causal arguments rely on *statistical analyses* rather than hands-on experimentation. For example, medical researchers may note a statistical correlation between a certain physical state or activity and the occurrence of a certain disease or medical problem. If this statistical correlation constantly recurs in various studies, the researchers will assert that there is a causal connection between the physical state or activity and the occurrence of the disease or medical problem (unless there is some overriding reason for believing that the two things cannot possibly be causally connected). This type of reasoning is the basis of such causal claims as "Cigarette smoking causes lung cancer," "Being overweight increases the risk of having a heart attack," and "Brushing your teeth with fluoride toothpaste reduces cavities."

As with other types of inductive argumentation, you must be careful when using causal thinking. The main problem with causal thinking results from the fact that the word *cause* has more than one meaning. In one sense, to say that event A causes event B means that whenever A occurs, B will follow. In terms of logic, we would say that in this case A is the sufficient cause of B. For example, heating water to a certain temperature is sufficient to cause the water to boil (at least under normal conditions). But not all causal statements assert sufficient causality between events. Another type of causality, what logicians call *necessary causality,* makes the weaker claim that event A is required for the occurrence of event B, but that event A alone is not sufficient to bring about event B. This can be illustrated if you think about your car or any other sophisticated machine. Many things are necessary for your engine to run (such as having gasoline in the tank), but none of these things by themselves suffice to make your engine run. We would thus say that each of these things is a necessary cause of your engine running, but that none of them, taken singly, is a sufficient cause.

A third sense of the word *cause* can be discerned if we look at the statement, "Cigarette smoking causes lung cancer." In making this statement, medical scientists are not saying that everyone who smokes will get lung cancer (sufficient causality), nor are they saying that only people who smoke will get lung cancer (necessary causality). Rather, they are saying that smoking increases the likelihood of getting lung cancer. In logical terms, what this means is that scientists are claiming that smoking cigarettes is a *contributing cause* of lung cancer.

In employing causal argumentation, you must not confuse these senses of causality. When making a causal claim, you must make sure that your reader knows clearly which type of causality you are claiming. Not knowing which type of causality is being claimed can lead people to dismiss your conclusion on irrelevant grounds. For instance, you are probably familiar with some of the rationalizations about smoking that rely on misinterpretations of the meaning of the statement, "Cigarette smoking causes lung cancer." Someone might point to their Uncle Ned, who was a chain smoker all his life, lived to the ripe old age of eighty, and never developed lung cancer. But this example would be relevant only if scientists were claiming that smoking was a *sufficient* cause of lung cancer. Someone else might point to their Aunt Sally, who died of lung cancer at age thirty-five and who never smoked a cigarette in her life. But this other example would be relevant only if scientists were claiming that smoking was a *necessary* cause of lung cancer. Once it is made clear that scientists are claiming only that cigarette smoking is a contributing cause of lung cancer, it should be evident that such examples are not adequate grounds for rejecting the claim that cigarette smoking causes lung cancer.

The final type of inductive argumentation that I will discuss is *argument by analogy*. In an argument by analogy, you use known similarities between two things, plus some additional fact about one of the two, to draw some conclusion about the other one. This rather abstract definition will become more concrete if I provide an example. Suppose you share many common characteristics with your best friend. You are both the same age, and you both went to the same high school and synagogue when you were growing up. In addition, you both like the Grateful Dead and Japanese food. Suppose also that you just read the *Upanishads* and loved them, but you know that your friend has never even heard of the *Upanishads*. Nevertheless, you might buy your friend a copy of the *Upanishads* for his birthday, reasoning as follows: "Since my friend and I have so much in common and since I loved reading the *Upanishads*, it is probable that my friend will love reading them too." If you reasoned in this manner, you would have used an argument by analogy to justify your choice of gift.

As its name indicates, the crucial thing in formulating an argument by analogy is coming up with a good analogy or comparison. If the things compared have just as many differences as similarities, then there is no good reason to think that, because one of them has a particular characteristic, the other one will have it as well. However, if the two things compared have many more similarities than differences, then it is often reasonable to use an argument by analogy to conclude that something you know to be true about one of them is also true about the other.

Avoiding Fallacies

Now that I have briefly discussed some of the types of argumentation that you may find useful in your philosophical writing, I will describe a few of the *fallacies* (that is, mistakes in reasoning) that are often found in student papers. Committing several fallacies in your paper will almost always result in an unsatisfactory grade.

In most cases, it is considered fallacious to base your position solely on an *appeal to*

authority. An appeal to authority is using what some person or some text says as the sole reason for accepting a claim. For example, you might claim that you know ghosts exist because Plato (a famous Greek philosopher) said they did. Or you might claim that God exists because the Qur'an or the Bible or the Bhagavad Gita says so. While it is acceptable to discuss the views of other people or texts that agree with your position, you should not rely on these views alone. One of the goals of doing philosophy is to develop the ability to do your own thinking, and you cannot do your own thinking if you allow others to think for you. By basing your conclusion solely on the beliefs of others, you will also probably be accused of committing the fallacy of appeal to authority.

Another logical mistake or fallacy often found in student writing is *inconsistency.* Inconsistency occurs when two of the statements that you make in your paper contradict each other—that is, when the truth of one of the statements implies the falsity of the other. The simplest case of inconsistency is saying something and then immediately denying it. For instance, you might say "The earth is round" and then immediately say "The earth is not round." Since one of these statements contradicts or says the opposite of the other, one of them must be false. Of course, it is unlikely that you would commit this simplest sort of inconsistency in your paper, but you must be careful to avoid more sophisticated types as well. If, for example, you claim that no human being has the right to take the life of another human being, then you should not claim that capital punishment is an acceptable form of punishment (since capital punishment is clearly a case of humans taking the life of other humans). When writing and editing your paper, be on the lookout for inconsistencies.

A third fallacy that often occurs in philosophical writing is the fallacy of *begging the question.* While this fallacy takes several different forms, the form most frequently found in student writing results from assuming the truth of a more general claim in order to prove a less general claim. If you know that a general claim is true, you can use deductive argumentation to show that particular instances of that general claim are true as well. For example, if you know that stealing is always wrong, you can conclude that shoplifting (which is one type of stealing) is also wrong. Begging the question occurs when you simply assume the truth of the more general claim in order to deduce the truth of a particular instance of it. Continuing the example, if you wanted to prove that shoplifting is wrong, you might begin by assuming that stealing is always wrong. Once you have made this assumption, of course, your conclusion follows deductively from it. The reason that this move commits the fallacy of begging the question is that the general claim you assumed is just as uncertain as what you are trying to prove (if not more so). Is stealing always wrong? Perhaps it is, but it is begging the question to accept this more general claim without some support.

A fourth fallacy sometimes found in student writing, the fallacy of *vicious circle,* is often classified as a version of begging the question. As the name indicates, the fallacy of vicious circle consists of arguing in a circle—that is, it consists of using your conclusion to argue for one or more of your premises. A short and rather clear-cut example of vicious circle is illustrated in the following conversation: Person A: "God exists, because the Bible says that He does." Person B: "But how do you know that what the Bible says is true?" Person A: "Because it is the eternal word of God." Notice that in this short conversation, Person A uses the Bible to prove the existence of God but then uses the fact that the Bible is the eternal word of God to prove its validity. This way of arguing is obviously circular.

Still another fallacy for which you should be on the outlook is the fallacy of *bifurcation* (also known as the *either-or fallacy*). Bifurcation results from the human tendency to oversimplify the world by dividing it into pairs of opposites. People often see things as good or evil, desirable or undesirable, correct or incorrect. Or, when applied to problem solving, bifurcation refers to the tendency to oversimplify an issue by limiting the possible solutions to two. Once this is done, it is often easy to use a type of deductive argument to eliminate one of the positions and to choose the other: "There are only two solutions, and solution 1 is obviously not the answer. So the answer must be solution 2." Unfortunately, the world cannot usually be neatly divided into pairs of opposites, and most problems admit of more than two solutions. Put into testing terms, the world and most problems must be formulated as multiple-choice questions rather than true/false questions; and the fallacy of bifurcation is committed when a person sees the world and problem solving in terms of true/false questions rather than multiple-choice questions.

Whereas bifurcation results from the tendency to oversimplify the world, another fallacy, the fallacy of *appeal to ignorance,* results from the human tendency to draw conclusions even when there is no evidence for doing so. If you have no good reasons for believing one way or another on some issue, then the wise thing is to admit that you do not know. Or if you are really interested in the issue, then you should do research before stating your opinion. Sometimes, however, you may be tempted to use a lack of information to draw a definite conclusion. For example, you read about someone who claims to have had an out-of-body experience. If you merely accept the person's claim as proof that such experiences are possible, then you would be committing the fallacy of *appeal to authority.* You might argue, however, that since no one has been able to prove that such experiences do not exist, then it is obvious that they do. In this case, you would be guilty of committing the fallacy of appeal to ignorance. Rather than coming to a quick conclusion by either of these means, the way to proceed would be to do more research on out-of-body experiences.

Speaking of research, the final fallacy that will be discussed, the fallacy of *straw man,* often results from inadequately researching your topic. To say that a person commits the straw man fallacy means that he or she has, either intentionally or unintentionally, distorted the position being argued against. Straw man fallacies are common during election times. In trying to look better than their opponents, candidates often distort the records of their opponents. They then argue against the straw man candidate rather than the real candidate. The same thing is true when there is debate over controversial, highly emotional issues, such as abortion. For example, a person opposed to abortion might criticize the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision because it allows abortion on demand. However, since *Roe v. Wade* puts several restrictions on abortion in the third trimester of pregnancy—and thus does not allow abortion on demand—the person making this criticism would be committing the straw man fallacy. When writing philosophically, it is very important that you take the time to carefully read and to fully comprehend the positions you are discussing in your paper. And, when you describe a position, especially a position to which you are opposed, it is crucial that you portray the position fairly and accurately. If you misrepresent the position, whether or not such misrepresentation is intentional, the fallacy of straw man will result.

Avoiding Plagiarism

While not technically a fallacy, *plagiarism* is considered to be a serious mistake in writing. Plagiarism refers to the unacknowledged borrowing of material from an outside source. Of course, the worst case of plagiarism is copying your entire paper from an outside source or having someone else do the paper for you. If such plagiarism is discovered, then you will no doubt receive a failing grade, and many colleges and universities have academic honesty policies that could result in your suspension or expulsion.

Assuming that you avoid this worst-case type of plagiarism, you still must be careful about unacknowledged borrowing. Direct quotations should be placed within quotation marks, and the source should be acknowledged in parentheses or in a footnote. (Check with your professor to see whether he or she has a preferred format for acknowledging quoted material.) The use of another person's ideas, even if not directly quoted, should also be acknowledged. One way of doing this is to provide a footnote stating your indebtedness to the person or text from which the ideas are taken. For example, you might state that you are "indebted to Professor D. T. Suzuki for the ideas contained in the following three paragraphs." Or you might acknowledge that "a similar position is found in the Bhagavad Gita."

While plagiarism is never acceptable, most professors will allow you to paraphrase. Paraphrasing refers to the practice of rewording or restating someone else's position. In most cases, paraphrasing is used to summarize and/or to clarify the original wording. For this reason, successful paraphrasing requires that you fully understand the original position and that you choose words that are indeed clearer than the words originally used.

However, students sometimes use close paraphrasing as a way to avoid effort. By simply changing a few words here and there in the original, a student avoids the necessity of fully comprehending and clearly restating the position. This sort of paraphrasing is problematic for two reasons. First, it borders on plagiarism and may be construed as plagiarism by your professor. Second, even if not construed as plagiarism, it does not show whether you genuinely understand the position about which you are writing. Because of these problems, you should avoid close paraphrasing.

Some Additional Remarks on Style

While much of what I have written deals mainly with the content of your paper, some of my remarks have touched on the style of your paper as well. In contrast to the subject matter of your writing, style refers to the way in which you express what you have to say. In reading your paper for content, your professor checks the accuracy of your claims, whether these claims are organized in a coherent manner, and whether you have provided the needed argumentation for your claims. In reading your paper for style, your professor looks at whether what you have said is written in an engaging or eloquent fashion. You might say that the content of your paper is like a mannequin and the style is like the garments in which the mannequin is clothed. Just as a well-dressed mannequin is pleasant to view, a well-written paper is pleasant to read.

But what exactly is required for a paper to be well written? Two of the essential requirements for a well-written paper, organization and clarity, have already been discussed. However, in addition to being well organized and clearly expressed, a well-written paper must be rhetorically appealing to your readers. Of course, different readers find different styles appealing, and it is sometimes difficult to know exactly what rhetorical techniques to employ. This problem is especially acute if you are writing for a general audience with which you are unfamiliar. But there are stylistic features that most audiences will find unattractive and others that will appeal to most audiences.

One stylistic feature that will turn off most readers is making your style too *academic*. A few people may find professional journals and encyclopedias to be interesting reading, but most people will not. On the other hand, most audiences appreciate personal anecdotes and experiences. By personalizing the paper, such anecdotes and experiences allow the reader to identify with you as a human being. And getting the audience to identify with you as a human being is one of the most effective rhetorical strategies you can employ.

Another way of personalizing your paper is to write in the first person (that is, to begin sentences stating your own position with the word *I*). Some years ago it was considered improper to use the first person in essay writing. When stating their own position, writers were taught to use the third-person form (that is, *one* instead of *I*) or the plural *we*. Today, however, it is not generally considered improper usage to write in the first-person singular.

While it is usually acceptable to write in the first person if you are comfortable doing so, you should avoid phrasings that make your paper seem mechanical or contrived. For example, if you are writing a straightforward essay, you should let your reader know early on what your thesis is. But you should probably not preface your statement of thesis with the words “My thesis is” (or “In this paper I will”). These two expressions, and others like them, are purely mechanical ways of introducing your thesis. Likewise, near the end of a straightforward essay, it is a good idea to restate your thesis and to summarize your main reasons. However, using the words “In this paper I have” (or any similar phrase) to begin your summary will seem contrived to most readers.

Another stylistic feature that most readers appreciate is *fluidity*. In one sense, fluidity is closely connected with organization, coherence, and clarity. Papers that are poorly organized will not flow. Neither will papers that are incoherent or papers that use unclear language. However, in addition to the requirements of good organization, coherence and clarity, fluidity also depends on varied sentence structure and the avoidance of unnecessary repetition. One good way of testing for fluidity is to read your paper out loud to yourself. Do you get tongue-tied trying to read what you have written? Do you run out of breath before you finish reading one of your sentences? If you do get tongue-tied or run out of breath, then chances are you need to work to make your paper more fluid.

Revising and Proofreading

Unless you are an extremely gifted and experienced writer, successful writing will require

more than one draft of your paper. Revising will allow you to work out the kinks that will almost certainly exist in your first draft. It will give you a chance to make sure that your thoughts are organized and that your paper is written in a coherent manner. It will also provide you with the opportunity to fine-tune your style. If time permits, it is a good idea to complete the first draft and let it sit for a day or two before attempting revisions. This will allow you to distance yourself from your first draft. Such distancing will usually make it more likely that you will be able to spot any problems with organization or coherence. Also, if you are not an experienced writer, it might be a good idea to have someone else read your paper before revising it. An outside reader will often discover problems that you have overlooked.

Proofreading should also occur at the revision stage. The main purpose of proofreading is to detect grammatical and spelling mistakes. While grammatical errors are usually considered more serious than spelling errors, numerous spelling mistakes are often irritating to your reader. It is especially irritating if you repeatedly misspell a key word, such as the name of one of the philosophers about whom you are writing. Given that most of my students compose their papers using software that has spell check and grammar check features, it is dismaying that many of them still submit papers that contain numerous spelling and grammatical errors.

Once you have completed your revised paper, the final step is to proofread it quickly one last time before handing it in. The main purpose of this final proofreading is to make sure that you are indeed handing in a completed paper. Although it is not likely, the possibility exists that you may have lost part of your paper during the revision process. You would be surprised how many students hand in papers with paragraphs or entire pages missing. This last quick proofreading will also serve as a closure to the writing process—at least until your next paper assignment.