

## Writing Thesis Defense Papers

The point of these papers is for you to explain and defend a thesis of your own critically analyzing the reasoning offered in support of a claim made by one of the philosophers we have read.

This may sound simple, but it includes a number of separate tasks.

Your first task is to identify a thesis that you will explain and defend. This means you need to find something in the text that interests you and that you have something to say about. You are looking, for example, for a point where you find fault with the reasoning given in support of an argument, or where you can explain how that reasoning could withstand potential criticisms. Perhaps you can explain what the author really means in some confusing passage, or “explain away” some apparent confusion in the text or flaws in the reasoning. This is the “thesis” that you will defend in your paper.

Keep in mind that your thesis should concern the *reasoning* or *arguments* offered in support of some philosophical claim or position, not simply your own personal reaction to the position. You must *engage* with the author. If you don’t like a conclusion, you must show where the argument for it is flawed, and not simply assert that you disagree with the claim.

This also means that your paper must involve more than mere summary or paraphrase. You will probably need to explain certain parts of the text, but only those parts that are directly related to the point you making. Simply summarizing (or, worse, paraphrasing words that you don’t really understand) sections of the text, followed by “in my opinion ...” is a book report, not a defense of your critical analysis of what the author has to say about some philosophical issue. Your task, again, is to defend a thesis of your own about the reasoning the author offers in support of his position regarding some philosophical issue we are discussing.

Of course, before you can defend your thesis, you have to explain it. What, specifically, is the claim you are making? Since your claim is about some argument the author is offering regarding some philosophical issue, part of the explanation of your thesis will include explaining this argument the author is offering. This involves telling the reader *what* the author is saying, and *why* the author thinks this. Explaining *what* the author is saying involves explaining something about the general philosophical issue the author is discussing. Why, for example, is this issue philosophically interesting or important? Is the author’s position regarding this issue particularly controversial or unusual? In general, you must explain to the reader why they should be interested in the issue.

So, you must *explain* the philosophical importance of the claim the author is making, the reasoning offered in support of this claim, and, finally, your own thesis about the author’s discussion of all of this. Only when you have done this can you begin your actual *defense* of the thesis you are making. You must offer the reader reasons to accept your critical analysis of the text. Does your thesis, for example, expose flaws in the reasoning found in the text? Does it help the reader better understand what the author

really meant to say? Whatever your specific thesis, you must do more than simply assert it: you must defend it with reasoning.

Wow. This is beginning to sound a bit more complicated. Well, it is, but this is what gives your paper structure and direction. Your goal is to defend your thesis. That defines the overall structure of your paper. But, in order to defend your thesis, you first have to explain it. This helps provide structure to the actual defense of your thesis. And, again, in order to explain your thesis, you must explain the author's argument. The structure of this explanation must include explaining the author's reasoning as well as the general philosophical issue the author is talking about. But this structure also provides limits for how much you must cover. How much, say, do you have to explain about the general philosophical issue regarding the nature of minds and bodies?—just enough for the reader to be able to understand the portion of the text you are talking about, and your critical analysis of it. In this way, everything that you do in your paper is determined by its role in achieving your ultimate goal of defending your thesis.

Your paper should begin with an introductory paragraph which says just enough (but no more) about the general topic so that the reader can understand your thesis. Your thesis should actually occur in this opening paragraph, typically as the last sentence. (E.g., “Because Descartes confuses blah-blah-blah with yada-yada-yada, his argument for mind/body dualism fails to establish ding-a-ling-a-ling-a-ling.”) This tells the reader exactly where you are “going,” helping them to understand the individual steps in how you “get there.”

The body of your paper should proceed in a clear way that is dictated by the logic of your discussion of the issues. When a paragraph starts with something like, “And then Descartes talks about...,” this is a pretty good sign that you are simply listing things the author says rather than explaining your own thinking about these issues. Likewise, an individual paragraph should develop a single idea. If a paragraph is much longer than half a page, this is a red flag that either you are making a number of separate points, or, worse, that you don't really know what point that paragraph is supposed to be making.

Finally, you want to conclude the paper with a paragraph that briefly summarizes what you have done, ties the various steps together, and perhaps indicates why the whole question is important or what further questions or issues it might raise.

Keep in mind that your goal is not to provide evidence to the instructor that you understood the text, but instead to explain your views to someone who does not already understand the material. In a thesis paper, you're the instructor and the reader is the student. So, the question is not whether or not I, as the instructor of this course, can figure out what you probably mean, but whether or not you've explained the ideas in a way that another student could understand. Don't take anything for granted that someone new to the subject would not understand. It is your job to explain your views, not (like on a test) simply provide evidence that you understood the material.