

## 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 meant, 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.

What follows is more or less the same ideas as I expressed them in a previous semester. It contains the same basic claims about what a thesis defense paper consists in, but breaks it down into 5 separate tasks. I hope you find it helpful.

## Writing a Thesis Defense Paper

After years of “on the job training” teaching others (and myself) how to write better, here is single sentence that captures your objective in a thesis defense paper. It is a single sentence, but I have broken it up into parts to emphasize that each part tells you something specific you need to pay attention to in writing your paper. In other words, it may be a long sentence, but all of it is important. Your goal is to:

- 1) *Explain and defend*
- 2) *a thesis of your own about*
- 3) *(what the text reveals about)*
- 4) *the reasoning used to defend*
- 5) *a philosophically interesting or controversial claim or position held by someone we have read.*

Let's start with the end--with **5**). (You need to know where you are going if you are going to figure out how to get there.)

Your first task is to find something we have read that interests you. If you don't find it interesting, neither will your reader. It might be a broad position advocated (like Mind/Body Dualism), or a more specific claim (for example, that we can never be certain we're not dreaming).

Moving up the list, to **4**): If you find the question interesting, you will probably have some thoughts of your about the truth or falsity of the claim being made. But your task is not merely to say that you agree or disagree with some conclusion the author has reached, but to critically analyze the argument (the reasoning) offered in support of it. Philosophers say all sorts of strange things, but (at least usually) they offer arguments in defense of these claims. So, your goal is not simply to accept or reject their claim, but to explain why you think their reasoning in support of this claim does or does not succeed.

Here is a hint as to how to get going: choose a narrower, more specific issue rather than a broader, more general one. This can sometimes be the most challenging part of the whole process. Most likely, the issues that most interest you will be the broader questions, but these are the most difficult to organize. Where do you start?

How do you know when you are finished? Can you really, for example, criticize or defend mind/body dualism in a 3 to 5 page paper? (There are entire shelves in the library devoted to this topic!). The broader your topic, the more likely you are to speak in vague generalities that can't easily be defended. On the other hand, the narrower and more specific your topic, the easier it will be to know what is relevant to explaining it and defending your thesis about it. It may seem counter-intuitive, but you will find that you have more to say (and can more easily fill those blank pages) the less you have to talk about.

But as I said, this can sometimes be the most challenging part of the whole process--identifying a thesis you can adequately explain and defend in 3 to 5 pages. A hint on how to do this comes in the next time going up the list--**3**): look closely at the text.

This may sound obvious ("look closely at the text"), but it is all too easy to get caught up in large questions that you don't know how to tackle. Looking closely at the text helps you focus on the actual arguments the author offers instead of simply trying, on your own, to tackle a large and complicated philosophical issue. The text is your evidence not only for what the author believes, but for why he or she believes it. (There are no "she"s in the material we are reading, but my comments here apply to writing papers well beyond the scope of this particular set of people.) So stay focused on the words on the page. If you can write your entire paper without ever needing to cite the text, chances are good you are writing about ideas of your own (perhaps) "inspired" by the text, but not about your critical analysis of the reasoning the author offers in support of some claim. (On the other hand, if a large part of your paper consists in nothing but direct quotes from the text, chances are you are not offering your own explanation of the claims made, but trying to let the author do your work for you.)

**2)**--A thesis of your own. Let me start with the obvious: this needs to be your own work. You'd be surprised at how easy it is to spot something that has been cut and pasted, or even simply paraphrased, from some online (or other) source. It is great to consult outside material. But any ideas you get from this, whether or not you use their exact words in your paper, needs to be attributed to the source. A word to the wise: *plagiarism will not be tolerated.*

Next, a thesis is a *statement*, i.e., something you can articulate in a single sentence. If you can't put the claim you are defending into a single sentence, you don't yet know what it is. Your "thesis statement" should be succinctly but clearly stated in your opening paragraph, so your reader knows "where you are going." If they don't know where you are going (which sometimes is because you're not so sure yourself), how are they supposed to "follow" you?

And finally,

1) Explain and defend this thesis.

Defending your thesis is simply offering reasons for thinking that what you say is correct. This is what we see the philosophers we are reading doing, and this should be the model for what your own defense should look like. In a way, you are engaging in a dialogue with the author, and it is the author (or someone who accepts at least some of what the author says) that you are trying to convince.

But it is explaining your thesis that will likely make up the bulk of your paper. Your thesis, again, is about the reasoning used in the text to defend some philosophical issue. So you will likely need to explain something of the general philosophical issue, helping the reader understand why it is interesting or important. Then you will have to explain the author's position on this issue, as well as the details of reasoning they offer in support of it. So, and this is important enough to emphasize,

*You must explain all, but only those parts of the text that are necessary for understanding your thesis.*

This is what gives your paper structure. The order in which you explain various things is a matter of the organization of your thinking, not a matter of the order in which the author talks about things in the text. If you find your paper moving from one paragraph in the text to the next, simply summarizing what you find there, you are most likely writing a book report and not a paper defending *your* ideas *about* the text.

So, one more time, all in one breath:

*Explain and defend a thesis of your own about (what the text reveals about) the reasoning used to defend a philosophically interesting or controversial claim or position held by someone we read.*

I know this is a lot to take in. But one last point: It may help to think about who your intended “audience” is. Who are you “speaking” to when you write this paper? Are you speaking to me? Not really. As the instructor of this class, you can safely assume I already understand (at least some of!) what we are talking about. But your job in a paper (unlike in an answer to a test question) is not to give the instructor evidence that you understood something, but rather to *explain* the issues to someone not already familiar with the subject matter. When you write a paper, *you* are the “teacher,” and the reader is your student. Your job is to *explain* something, not to demonstrate that you understood someone *else’s* explanation.

Finally (and I mean it this time!): have fun! You may find that the person you’re really explaining things to is *you*.