

Sample Papers

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All of these papers are based on arguments from Descartes' Second Meditation. (We didn't read or discuss that one - I'm doing this one because it's a text that you have easy access to, but it won't use up arguments from the readings we did do.) You don't need to include an outline with your papers, but I am including them here to help show how you might be able to end up writing a paper as complex as some of these. You'll want to first think of what argument(s) you are writing about, and write up the arguments as clearly as you can. Then you'll need to have a brief idea of what to put at the beginning and the end. Then you'll expand each of these things into a paragraph or two of the paper.

Level 1 Paper

René Descartes, in his Second Meditation, aims to show that although his standards of certainty are very high, there is at least one thing that we can be absolutely certain of. In particular, he claims that I can be certain at least of the fact that I exist, even if nothing else. There may not be a computer in front of me right now; I may not even have a physical body; I might even be a disembodied soul that is hallucinating the entire physical world! But I exist.

The first premise of his argument is that whether or not I am deceived, I at least have some thoughts and perceptions that may or may not be true. His second premise is that in order to *have* thoughts or perceptions, I must exist. Putting these together, I can conclude that whether or not my other thoughts or perceptions are true, I at least must exist.

This argument is just the first step in Decartes' project of building up a solid foundation for all of his knowledge. I must be sure of something in order to develop any knowledge of the world. The one thing he says I can be sure of at first is that I exist.

Outline of the paper:

- Introduction — set up the idea of being certain of my existence.
- Argument
 - Premise 1: I have thoughts.
 - Premise 2: In order to have thoughts I must exist.
 - Conclusion: Therefore I exist.
- Conclusion — say something about why this certainty matters for Descartes.

Level 2 Paper — first example

In his Second Meditation, René Descartes first argues that I can be sure that I exist, and then uses the form of this argument to draw a conclusion about the sort of being that I am. Because the first argument essentially relies on my knowledge being derived from my cognitive features, his conclusion in the second argument is that I must be a being of pure cognition, and that my body is either an illusion, or at best something inessential that is attached to me.

The first argument begins by noticing that I have various ideas and sensations, whether or not they are true or false. He further claims that whatever ideas and sensations are, they are the sort of thing that must be present in a mind of some sort in order to exist. Thus, I can conclude that this mind exists.

The second argument notes that even though my body and its sensations are the things I am usually most aware of, these are exactly the sort of thing about which I am regularly deceived when I dream. Instead, the one thing I can be absolutely sure of (from the first argument) is that I have thoughts and perceptions about these sensations. I can doubt the existence of my body, but I can't doubt the existence of my mind. Thus, the thing that I must be is the mind, and not the body.

His first argument rescues us from the skeptical conclusion that we confront after the First Meditation. Although I could be radically wrong about most of what I think I know about the world, I can at least be sure of my own existence. The second argument then uses his skepticism to draw a conclusion about my nature. I am a thinking thing, whether or not my body really exists or is only an illusion.

Outline of the paper:

- Introduction — mention the two arguments and how they are related.
- Argument 1
 - Premise 1: I have mental states.
 - Premise 2: Mental states need a mind.

- Conclusion: The mind exists.
- Argument 2
 - Premise 1: I can be deceived about the body.
 - Premise 2: I can't be deceived about the mind.
 - Conclusion: The mind and the body must be different things.
- Conclusion — explain how the second argument builds on the first.

Level 2 Paper — second example

René Descartes considers the relation of the mind and the body in his Second Meditation. At first he briefly considers an argument that seems to show that I am my body. Given his earlier argument in the First Meditation that everything physical can be doubted, this would seem to show that I can't be sure that I really exist! However, he thinks this first argument is incorrect. In a later passage, where he considers the nature of some wax, he shows how to reject the first argument, which opens up further possibilities that he later develops.

The first argument is expressed very quickly in the text by the passage, "I am so bound up with a body and with senses that one would think that I can't exist without them." The argument implicit here seems to be the following. My body and its senses are the things that I am most immediately aware of in perceiving myself. Whatever I am most immediately aware of when perceiving a thing must be that thing. Therefore, I must be my body and its senses.

However, in a later passage, he rejects this second premise. Towards the end of the Second Meditation, he considers a piece of wax. He notes that what he is most immediately aware of when he perceives the wax is a collection of properties — its smell and feel and size and shape and so on. But when he melts the wax, all of these things change. His argument then goes as follows. The wax can exist even if its smell and feel and size and shape change. So the wax must not be these physical features. But these physical features are what we are most immediately aware of in perceiving the wax. So in general, it is not always true that a thing is constituted by the things that we are most immediately aware of in perceiving that thing.

Thus, he rejects the second premise in the earlier argument. This allows him to reject the conclusion of that argument. In other passages in this Second Meditation, he then offers arguments for the conclusion that I am my mind, and that my mind is quite distinct from my body. But in order to support these conclusions, he needs to reject the naive argument he considers at the beginning. And this is one thing he does with the passage about the wax.

Outline of the paper:

- Introduction
 - Mention first argument.
 - Mention that the second argument refutes a premise of the first argument, allowing for further ideas.
- First Argument
 - Quotation
 - Premise 1: I am immediately aware of my body in thinking of my self.
 - Premise 2: What I am immediately aware of is what my body is.
 - Conclusion: My self is my body.
- Second Argument
 - Set up the wax discussion.
 - Premise 1: What I am immediately aware of in the wax is its features.
 - Premise 2: Those features can go away while the wax remains.
 - Conclusion: The wax is not its features, so what I am immediately aware of might not be the thing itself.
- Conclusion — restate how the two arguments relate to each other.