

What is it like to write philosophy?



(<http://www.lse.ac.uk/philosophy/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/writing-philosophy.jpg>)

With essay deadlines looming for many of our students, Matt Parker (<https://scholar.google.co.uk/citations?user=5AnCU0AAAAAJ>) relives some of the angst involved in writing philosophy. You're not alone.

What is it like to write philosophy? Well, it's probably different for different people, but I think for a lot of people it's often like this:

You know what you're going to say. You've solved a small problem with a simple answer undergirded by a nice technical point. You just need to write it up very briefly. This is going to be a one-pager for *Analysis* (<http://analysis.oxfordjournals.org/>).

Then, in the middle of the second paragraph of page 17, you stop cold. Oh wait. Oh crap. This is a big problem. This could undermine the whole thing. Wait, this means my thesis is actually false! At least, assuming X and Y, about which I'm not a hundred percent sure. Ok, so I need to find out if X and Y are true. How do I find out? B wrote the seminal paper on X. What's it called? Hm... C cited it, let's see... oh yes, that. Ok, here it is. Wait, my library doesn't have online access. Dammit. Let's see if there's another copy out there somewhere. Ok, here's a scan that some teacher carelessly posted online for a class. Oh, wait, C is actually just citing another paper by D. Ok, here's D's paper, but it's not really about X at all. Still, there's something relevant here... ok, this is pretty technical. I'm going to have to take some time with this.

A week later, you're reading D for the third time and you suddenly realise: This means that Y doesn't even matter. It's just X, and X is false because of Z and W. Duh! So you write seven paragraphs explaining the worry, and why Y doesn't matter, and why X is false because of Z and W, and why Z and W are true, or at least who says so, because, seriously, enough. And re-reading this the next day you cut it down quite a bit, and then think, well, the experts on X already know this, and others won't see the worry, so you relegate it to a footnote and just change one word in the original sentence you were writing when you first saw this big problem in your argument. And the next day you delete the footnote.

After two weeks of worrying, reading, thinking, and writing, you have changed one word in one sentence. If this paper is ever published, no one will ever know, or even wonder, why it is that, on the third paragraph of page 10 (because by then you've managed to cut a lot of other stuff too) you decided to use "and" instead of "but". You learned a lot in the process of making that choice, but you'll probably forget most of it because it turned out not to have much bearing on what you really cared about in the first place. The principal gain in all this bother is just the very fact that, unbeknownst to anyone else in the whole world, that one word, "and" rather than "but", is the right word.

By Matt Parker (<https://scholar.google.co.uk/citations?user=5AnCU0AAAAAJ>)

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