Here are some tips that you should keep in mind when writing papers for this class. They aren't hard and fast rules, and they don't all apply in every case, but they might prove useful.

1. **State and explain the key argument(s) that you will focus on in your essay.**

Arguments are the coin of the realm in philosophy papers, and they are the primary focus of each of the essays that you’ll prepare for this class. When describing an argument, make sure you clearly identify the premises and the conclusion, as well as the reasoning that is supposed to take you from the former to the latter. (In the short essay the identification of premises and conclusion will be the focus of your reconstruction, and the reasoning the focus of the analysis.) Use your own words and try to be as brief as the argument lets you.

2. **Fill in all the "why's" and explain all the connections.**

Often, the philosophers you read will fail to explicitly identify all the premises on which their arguments lie. When this is the case, you should help them out by bringing those premises out in the open. Make sure the steps in the argument and the reasoning that connects them are plainly in view. You don't have to use the language of the logician here, of course, but you do need to establish for me that you know what is supposed to follow from what.

3. **Write plainly and stick to the issue.**

Beware of getting sucked in to the writing style of the philosophers you read. It takes a lot of practice to write in a flowery style and remain precise and clear.

4. **Use examples.**

Philosophical arguments are often abstract and are almost always difficult. In my opinion, the best way of driving home the point of an argument is by working through a concrete example that illustrates it. But remember, examples are supplements and not substitutes for arguments. In the short essays, examples can be especially helpful in the analysis and the comment.
5. **Present the opposing view fairly.**

If you are fair in your characterization of the opposing view, this will only strengthen your criticisms of that view.

6. **Aim criticisms at specific steps in the arguments you focus on: either particular premises or logical transitions.**

There are two basic ways to criticize a philosophical argument: challenge the truth of a premise (i.e., challenge the soundness of the argument, if it is deductive), or challenge the claim that the conclusion follows from the premises (i.e., challenge the validity of the argument, if it is deductive). Make sure you are clear about which of these ways you use, and make the target of your criticism equally clear.

7. **Back up your opinions with reasons and argument.**

Unsupported opinions, dogmatic pronouncements, and bald-faced assertions are not welcome here. If your personal opinions are relevant to the paper, support them with reasons. *Remember: a single claim is a conclusion, not an argument.*

8. **Avoid excessive unsupervised research.**

For the short papers in this class, you should not have to use the library for secondary source material. If you do decide to explore the library in search of supplementary discussions of the issues you'll focus on, exercise caution. Virtually all of the issues we address here have a huge amount of literature associated with them, and it can be difficult to figure out what is worth looking at and what is garbage. The long essay will require research, but even there it is best not to do too much – the quality of the long essay will turn primarily on the quality of the argument(s) you make in it.

9. **Quote rarely, and if you do, always acknowledge the source.**

Quotes are not usually very helpful in short papers, since I already know what the text says. It is better for you to internalize the argument or claim and then restate it in your own words: this gives me insight into how you are interpreting the relevant piece of text. Use quotes only if the author's phrasing is critical to your interpretation or criticism; for example, you would quote if you want to expose a textual ambiguity. You should also cite the source if you quote or if you paraphrase the text.

10. **Proofread the final draft.**

Worry about the content, not the form. But keep in mind that typos and misspellings can be distracting.