Writing a Philosophy Paper
(This handout draws on notes by Professor Daniel Warren.)

(1) Define a specific claim or thesis that you will be defending—or ask a specific question you will be concerned with. Example: “Odysseus’s life is held together by X. This is shown by the fact that Y.”

(2) Make sure to explain and defend your claim—or to address your question—early on in your paper. Do not go into long summaries without making clear how they relate to your claim or question.

(3) Explain your terms!
   (a) Define the most important terms you use to state your main claim.
   (b) Define all technical terms you use. Technical terms are all terms that do not have their ordinary meaning within your philosophical discussion. Examples: ‘uncommitted relativism’, ‘ontology’, ‘psychology’.
   (c) If you employ technical terms used by other philosophers, e.g. Prof. Dreyfus, define the terms as those philosophers do.
   (d) Once you have given a definition of a technical term, you are free to use that term in the rest of the paper without restating the definition.
   (e) Do not employ several expressions for the same purpose. (Don’t vary for the sake of variation.)

(4) Explain your claims.
   (a) Specify what views your claim is opposed to. E.g. “Odysseus’s life is comparable to serial monotheism.”
   (b) Specify if there are wrong ways to interpret your claim. E.g. “By ‘uncommitted relativism’ I do not mean the view that X.”

(5) Offer arguments. Here are possible ways to do that:
   (a) Show that your claim coheres better with the data than other views. The ‘data’ here is the text. – Pick the relevant passages, quote them, and explain clearly what you take them to show. This is very important!
   (b) Reveal weaknesses in your opponent’s views, either by showing them to be implausible interpretations of the text, or implausible things to say.
   (c) Anticipate objections and defend your claim against them. Objections can be based on counterarguments or counterexamples or textual passages that speak against your view.
      (This will make your view stronger, and it will make it easier for the reader to understand what your view is.)

(6) Examine your assumptions.
   (a) What assumptions are you making? (You are definitely making some. Think about it!) E.g. are you presupposing an enlightenment view of autonomous agency?
   (b) Are your assumptions reasonable and true? How could you explain why they are reasonable and true?

Also look at James Pryor’s “Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper”:
http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html