First Paper Topic

1. General

(a) Length: Approximately 5-7 pages.
(b) Due Date: Thursday, October 15, by e-mail
(c) Formatting: 12 pt., normal font, normal margins
(d) Parts:

i. Introduction: The introduction should contain a clear and concise statement of the thesis that you will be defending in the paper. It should also set out your plan of attack (for example, “I will first explain what key terms X, Y, and Z mean. I will then set out the core argument for my thesis, and respond to three major objections that could be brought against it...”). Yes, it’s okay to use personal pronouns (‘I’, ‘me’, etc.).

ii. Body: Here’s where you set out your arguments. The body should be organized and structured in a way that will be easy to follow and readily apparent to the reader. If you have three arguments for a particular claim, don’t mix them all up into one enormous paragraph. Develop each separately in its own space.

iii. Conclusion: Reiterate for the reader how you have argued for your thesis (without actually restating the arguments). The conclusion is also a good opportunity to indicate where you think the debate should go from here. The conclusion is not a good place to introduce new controversial claims. Such claims should be argued for in the body of the paper.

2. Do’s and Don’ts

(a) Do argue for your claims. If you think So-and-So’s argument is unconvincing or naive, don’t just say that it’s unconvincing or naive, give the reader a well-reasoned argument that shows her what’s wrong with it. In your arguments, strive for clarity and logical rigor; don’t take rhetorical cheap-shots.
(b) Do define your terms. When you use any technical philosophical term, tell the reader exactly what you mean by it.
(c) Do take your time with your arguments. It’s better to have three arguments that are well worked out than ten that are merely suggestive.
(d) Do argue against yourself. Imagine how your intellectual opponent would respond to what you have just said. Include a discussion of this imagined response in your paper. (NOTE: be careful to always make it clear in whose voice a given argument is being offered. You can say things like “Someone might object to my argument by saying blah”, or “My response to this objection is blah”.)
(e) Do limit use of quotations. You should use quotations only when there is some thesis or short argument to which you want to draw special attention, perhaps to focus on the way it’s phrased or to highlight the particular words that are used. Whenever possible, put things in your own words. This will demonstrate your understanding of the material better than a string of quotations.
(f) Don’t worry about additional secondary sources. Spend your time re-reading and thinking about the readings that were assigned in class. I want to see evidence that you have thought long and hard about the issues. I’m less concerned to see evidence that you have looked long and hard for a book by someone else who has thought long and hard about the issues. That being said, if you find a secondary source that you find particularly helpful, by all means use it (and cite it!).
(g) Don’t clutter your writing with flowery prose. This isn’t to say that you should make your writing boring and sterile, it just means that you should eliminate anything that’s just filler (for example, any statement
that begins “since the dawn of time”).

(h) **Don’t** be timid. If you have some bold or unpopular claim to defend, go for it! Just make sure that you give arguments.

(i) **Don’t** be afraid to disagree with me. If I said something in lecture that you want to take issue with in your paper, go for it! Just make sure that you give arguments.

3. **Topics**

1. One of the puzzles about language we have considered is the problem of apparent reference to non-existents—expressions (in particular, definite descriptions) and names that do not pick out any objects. Why do these expressions and names present us with a puzzle? Explain and contrast the different ways that Frege and Russell try to deal with this puzzle. What objections do these views face? Which approach do you think does the best job (or faces fewer problems) and why?

2. Russell provides an account of how definite descriptions—expressions of the form ‘the so-and-so’—function in sentences that contain them. His theory posits a difference between the grammatical form of such sentences and their logical form. According to Russell, in what way do they differ? Explain Russell’s theory of definite descriptions, focusing on what he claims is said by a sentence containing one. (You should use your own example here.) In turn, explain how this might be viewed as a merit of the view, that is, what problems it seems to avoid. Is Russell’s view plausible? Why or why not?

3. Both Russell and Wittgenstein advocated a view known as Logical Atomism. What is Logical Atomism? Critically compare and contrast ‘the metaphysical side’ of Russell’s and Wittgenstein’s respective versions of Logical Atomism. What challenges does each face? In the end, which view is preferable and why? *(Things you might want to consider: Which view does the best job of explaining the world—or at least faces fewer problems? Why?)*

4. In “Proof of an External World”, G. E. Moore allegedly proves the existence of things outside of us. How does he prove the existence of things outside of us? Why does he think that this proof is adequate, and how does he respond to objections that it is not adequate? Is Moore’s argument successful? Why or why not? *(Things you might want to consider: Does Moore provide an argument? Does he provide adequate support for his premises?)*