

How to Write a Philosophy Paper (for Beginners)

With philosophy papers, simply having an opinion or presenting some information is not enough. Instead you must present an argument. That is, you must have a clear thesis that you support with reason.

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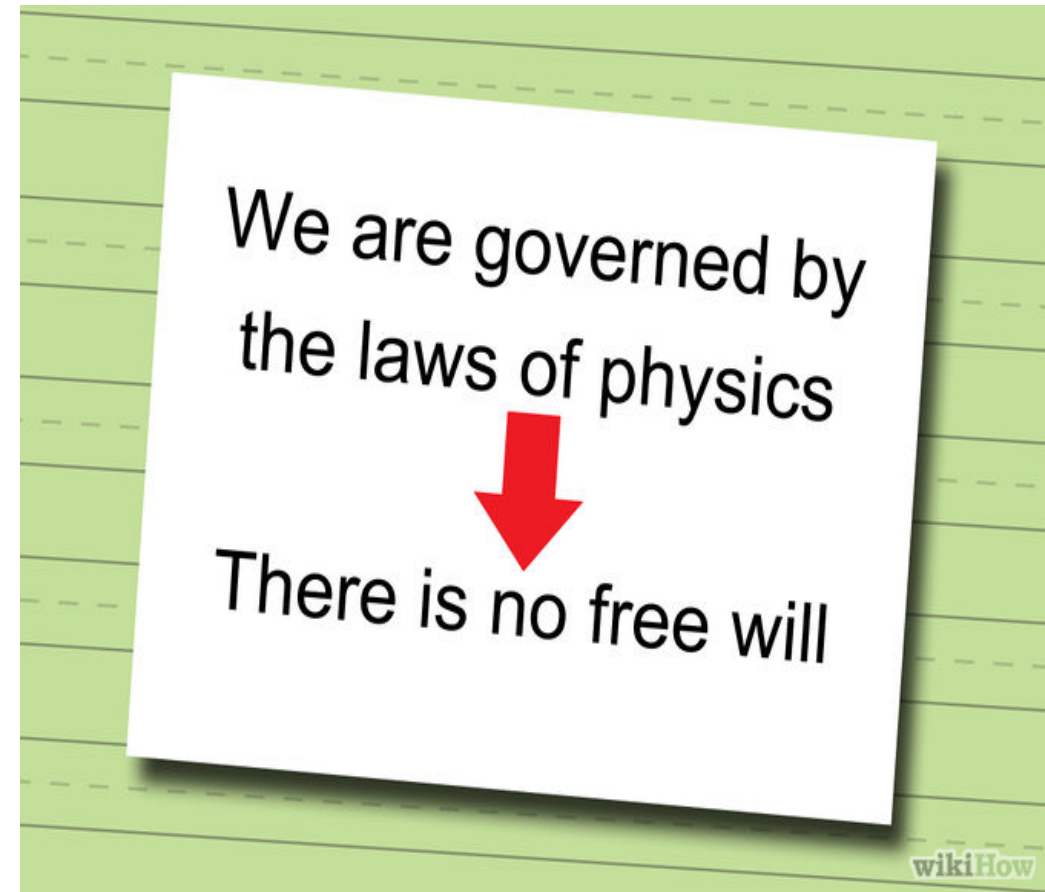
Step 1

Become familiar with the material, as well as somewhat familiar with your own view before writing on it.

Can you state your thesis and can you give reasons in support of it?

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- **Step 2**
- **Diagram your argument by writing out reasons and connecting them to the thesis with arrows which represent the support relation.**
 - Example: Suppose the thesis is that there is no free will and a reason you offer in support of it is that we are governed by the laws of physics. The diagram will have an arrow running from "We are governed by the laws of physics" to the thesis "There is no free will". There, of course, may be other reasons in support of the thesis but let's keep it simple.



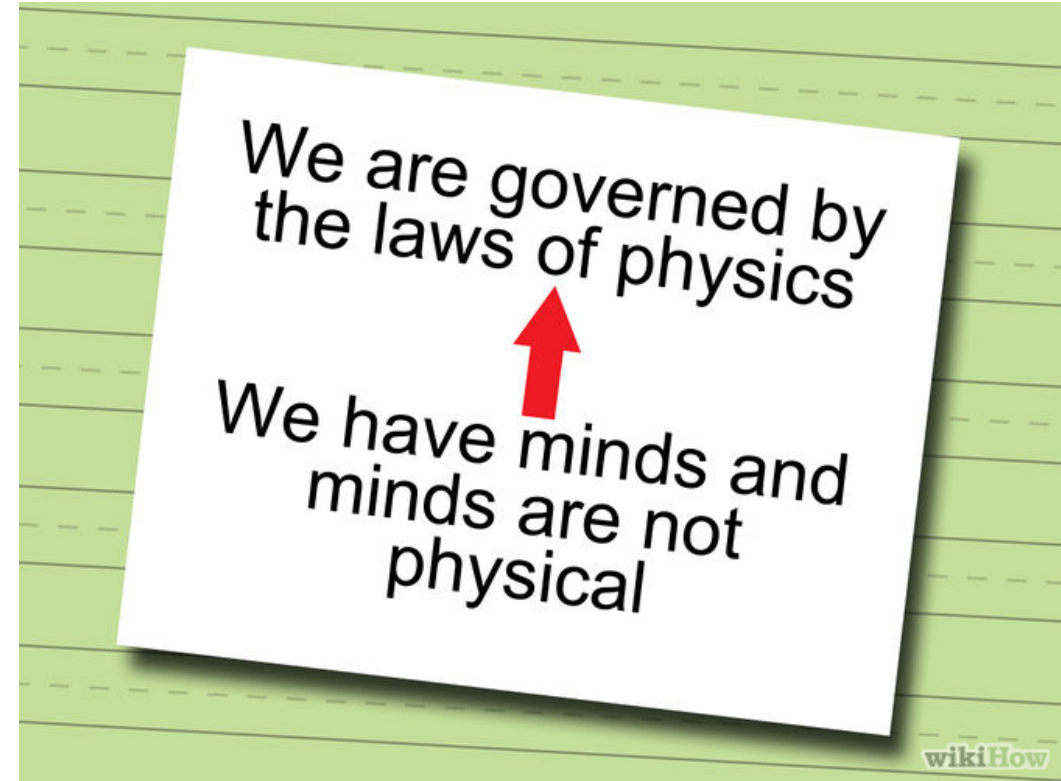
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- **Step 3**
- **Play the role of self-critic.** Is each reason independently plausible or is there room for someone to raise doubts about it? Also (looking at the arrows), would each reason provide strong support for the thesis or is this support not so strong?



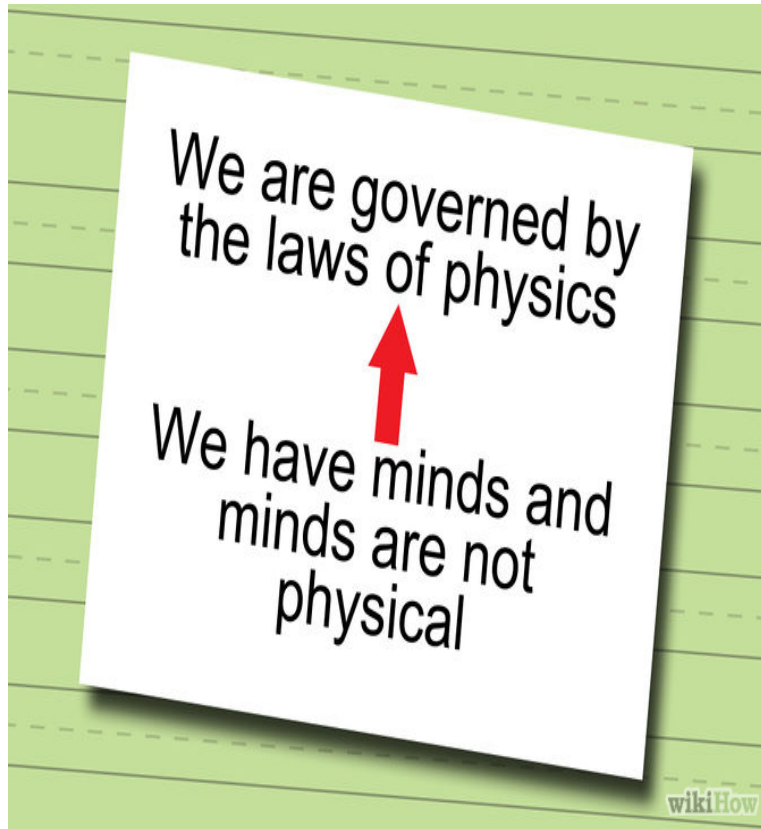
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- **Step 4**
- **Write objections in red ink.** An objection to the plausibility of a reason will have a red arrow going from the objection to the reason. An objection that the reason doesn't offer good support for the thesis will have a red arrow going from the objection to the reason's arrow.



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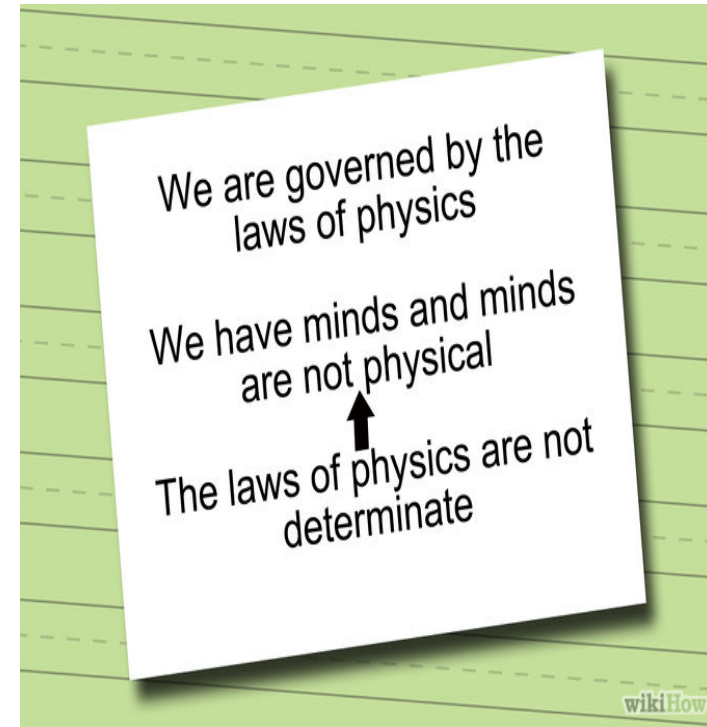
Step 4 continued



- Example of an objection to plausibility: The objection "We have minds and minds are not physical" may be an objection to the claim "We are governed by the laws of physics". It is itself a controversial issue (one that may deserve attention in its own right) but do not let that cloud the fact that anyone that accepts this objection will have less reason to believe that we are governed by the laws of physics. This objection would have a red arrow going from it to the reason "We are governed by the laws of physics".

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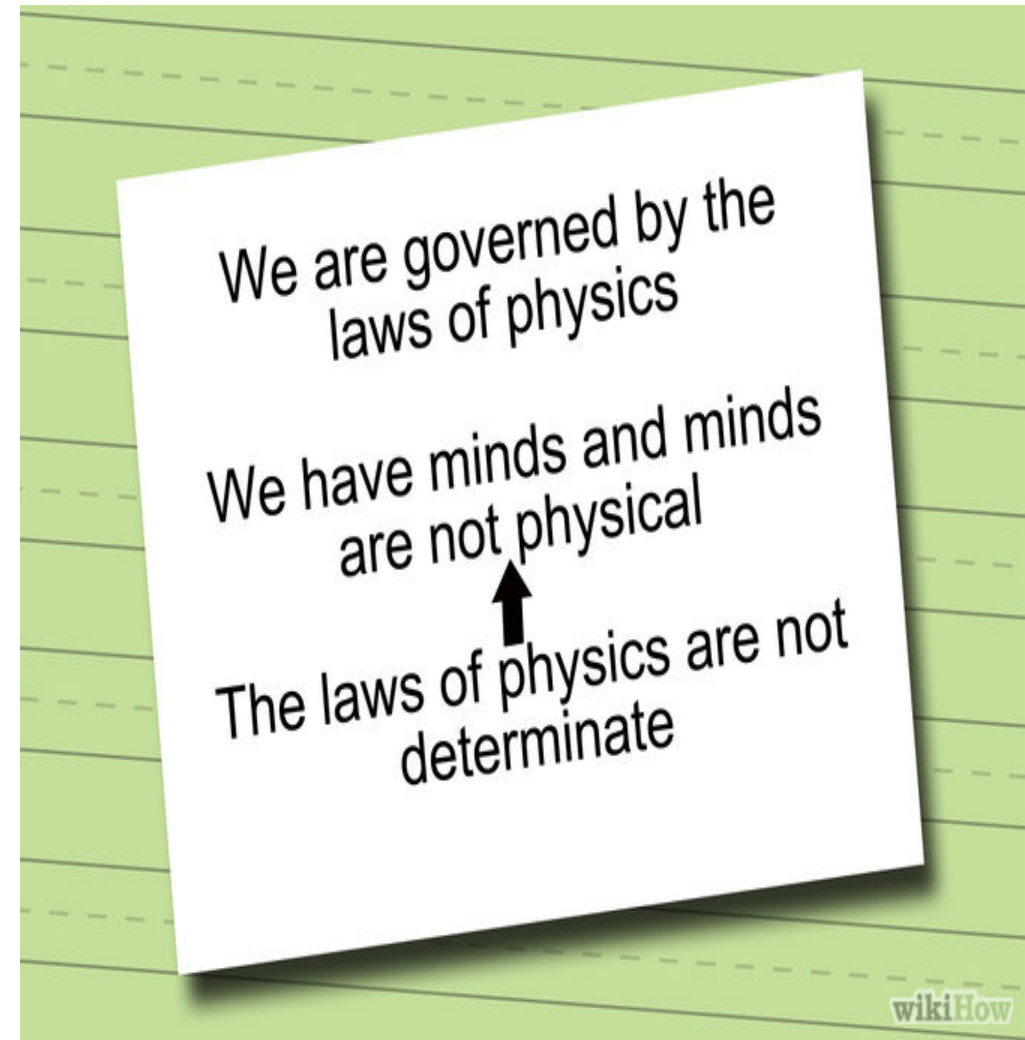
- **Step 5**
- Example of an objection to the support a claim offers: The objection "The laws of physics are not determinate" is meant to undermine the support that "We are governed by the laws of physics" is supposed to give to the main thesis that there is no free will. The idea is supposed to be that you can accept that we are governed by the laws of physics and still believe in free will since you believe that the laws are not determinate. This objection's arrow would hit the arrow that ran from "We are governed by the laws of physics" to "There is no free will".



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Step 5

Defend your argument from criticism by presenting objections to these objections. These are called 'counter-objections' or simply 'counters' and they work the same way as reasons and objections do; each statement has an arrow running from it to some other statement or arrow. However, since you are now playing for your own team again, do not use the red ink.



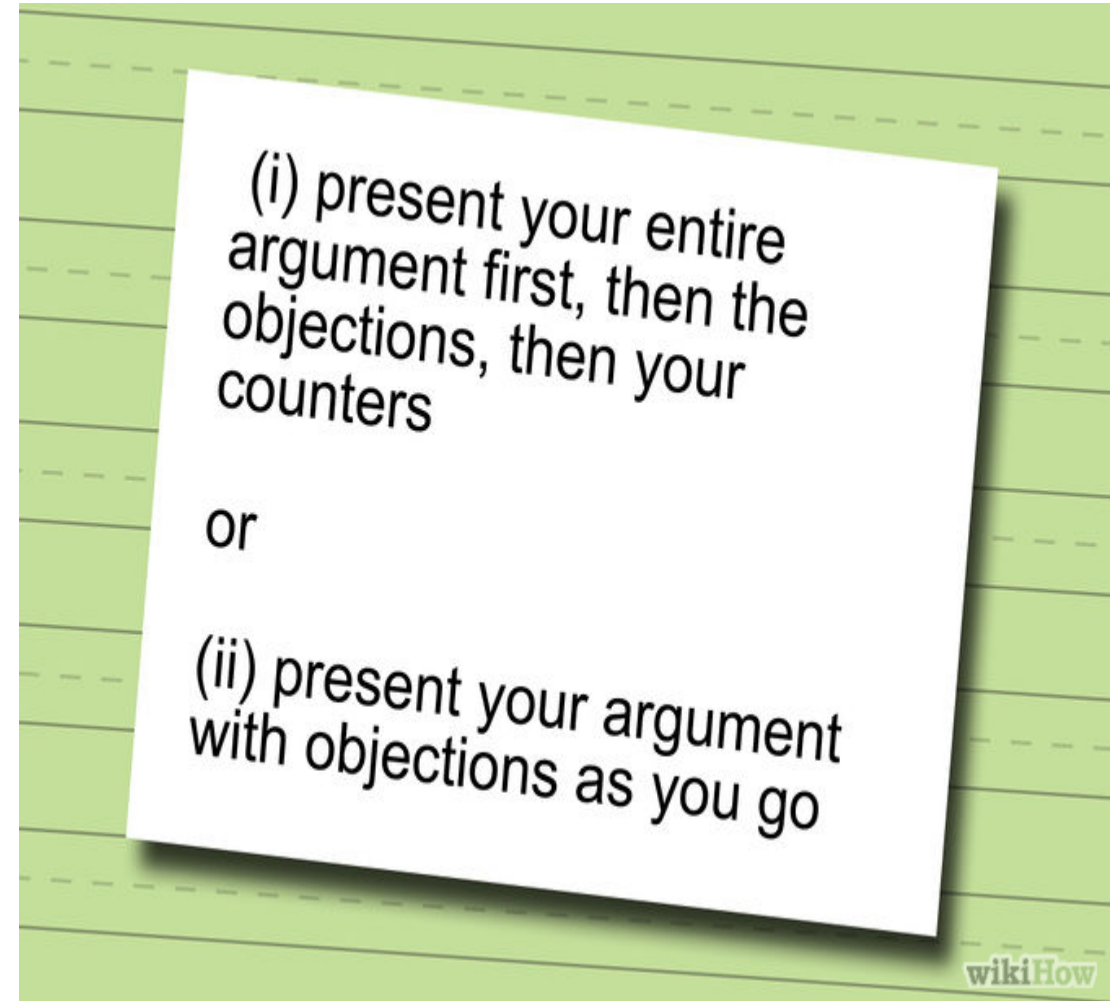
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- **Step 6**
- **Do not try to carry out this process too far.** Life and college is too short. One set of objections with one set of counters in your defense *may* be enough. However, if there are any obvious replies you should note them. Do *not* ignore any strong points in the criticism against your argument. (The grader will easily spot them and see the fact that you ignored them as a fault in your paper.)



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- **Step 7**
- **Outline your paper based on this diagram.** Decide whether you will (i) present your entire argument first, then the objections, then your counters or (ii) present your argument with objections as you go. If there are many objections to deal with, go with (i).



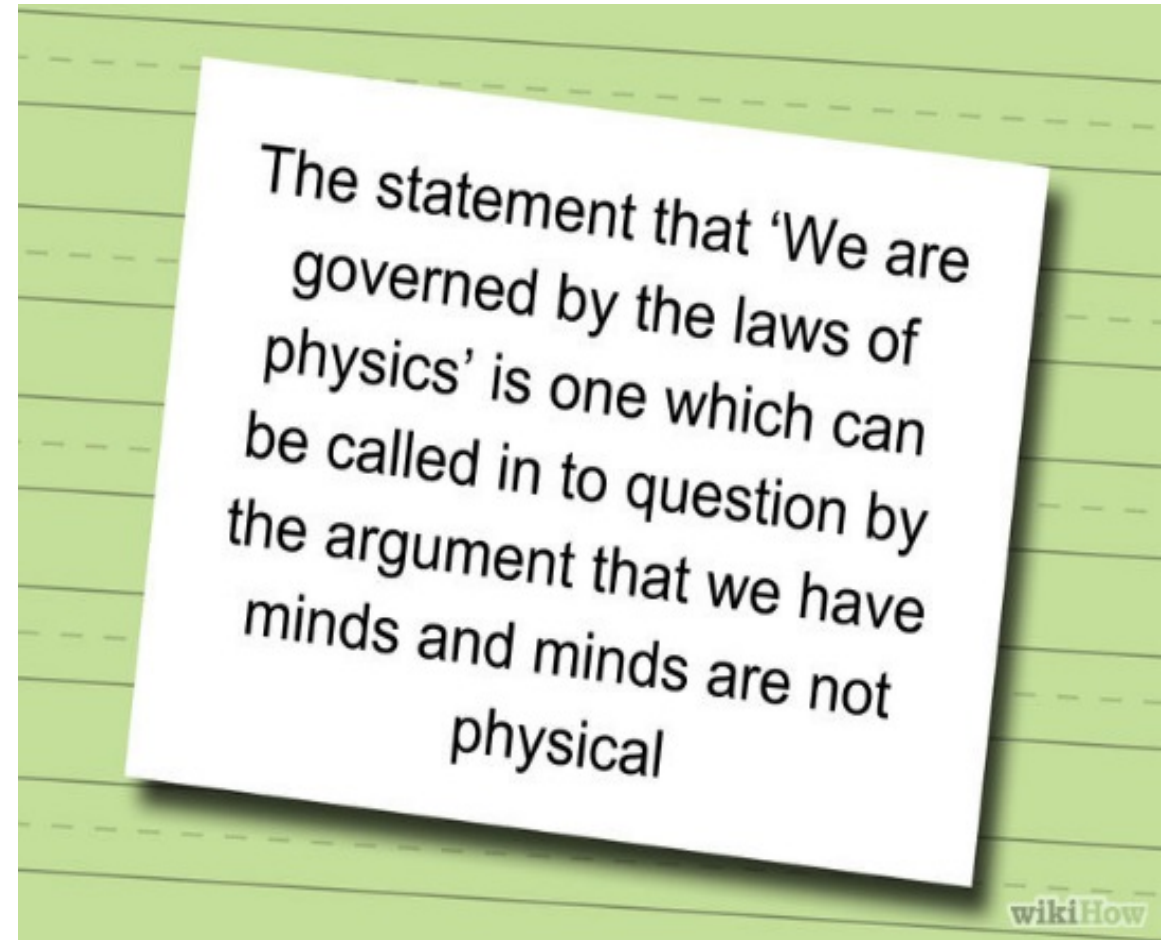
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- **Step 8**
- **Write your paper according to this outline.**



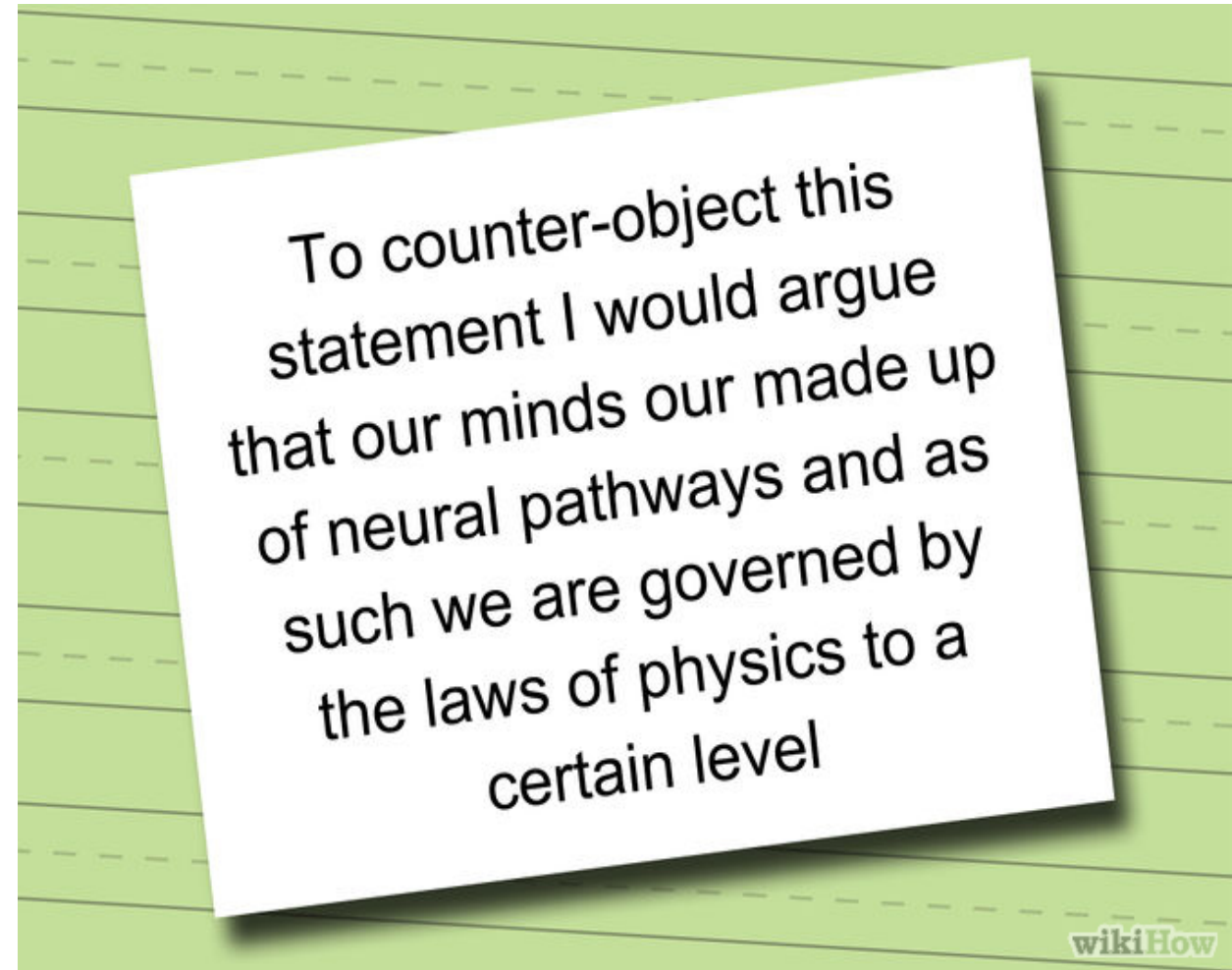
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- **Step 9**
- **Clearly state your thesis in the first paragraph or on the first page.** (A dramatic alternative is to reveal your thesis at the end, but this is generally not advisable in a college paper.)



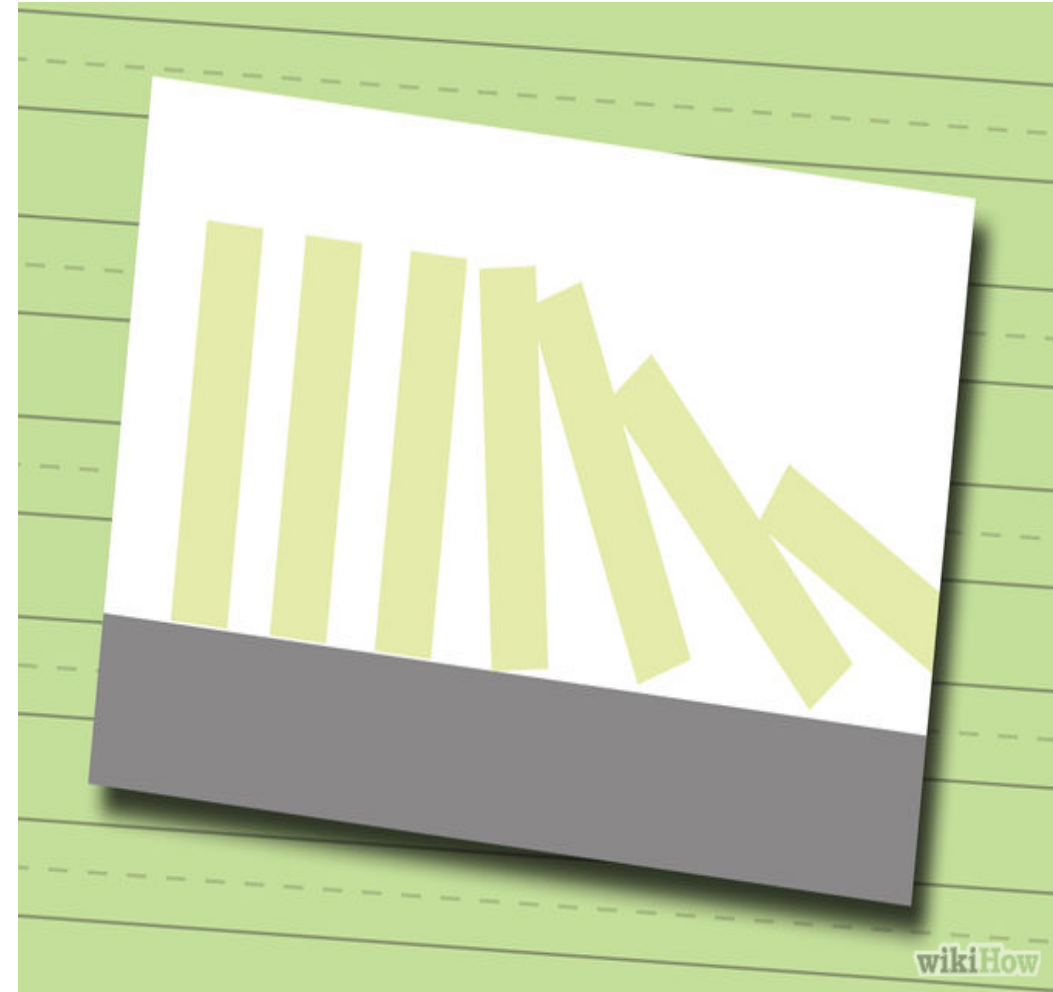
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- **Step 10**
- **Clearly indicate whether you are offering a reason, an objection, or a counter-objection.** And clearly indicate whether that claim (whatever it is) attacks the plausibility or support of another claim.



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- **Step 11**
- **Use examples and analogies to illustrate where needed.** For example, a line of dominoes falling over is a pretty clear example of what is supposed to be a determinate process. Likening human behavior to your car's engine is a powerful analogy regarding the issue of free will.



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- This week, I want you to write a blog post which makes use of this style of argument. Have fun with it!