

HOW TO WRITE A PHILOSOPHY ESSAY

These notes should in no way be taken to suggest that there is some correct or best way to tackle philosophy essays, or even that any single approach can be successfully applied without modification to all philosophy essays. The matter is, in the end, always a very personal one. Still, as you're not likely to have written philosophy essays before, a few notes of advice may be helpful at the very start. But remember; it takes time and practice to learn how to do this well.

1. Have a goal

- The importance of having a goal; if you don't know where you are going, you're unlikely to end up anywhere useful at all. You need to be able to clearly state to yourself, in a sentence or so, what the essay is trying to do.
- But beyond the obvious one of 'answering the question' there is no correct goal that you must have, no one thing you should be trying to do. There are always many different ways to tackle a question. This must be *your* choice.
- Your strategy will not be the same every time. Different essays do different jobs.

2. Analysis and argument, not description or opinion.

A philosophy essay should

- analyse / expound / explain / interpret some concept or theory, and-or
- argue the case for or against some theory or position

It should involve, but cannot consist simply in,

- the mere description of the views of others. The essay should show that you understand the material, but is more than simply a summary of your reading.
- The mere assertion of your own views. Working out what you believe is a vital part of the exercise, but the essay must be more than just personal confession.

3. Originality

Philosophy is not a spectator sport. The whole point of the exercise is for you to think yourself critically about the issues. As part of the process of learning to do this, your essay is expected to show some independent thinking.

- That doesn't mean you have to come up with your own theory about the topic, or that you have to make a completely original contribution to human thought.
- Indeed a modest point, made clearly and properly argued for, is much more likely to succeed than some overly-ambitious attempt to break completely new ground or advance earth-shattering conclusions in the space of a paragraph.
- Learning to make your own contribution takes time and practice. The essay is your opportunity to try. It is much better to test-out arguments and ideas that ultimately fail than to keep silent.
- Deciding which way to fall is undoubtedly difficult, but it is often worth coming off the fence, just to see what happens. As an exercise, it doesn't really matter which side!

(a) Language. A very important aspect of originality concerns *language*. Only when you put an idea or argument in your own language do you really grasp it. Always use your own words.

(b) Argument. I want to know what you think, *but only in so far as you can justify it*. The mere report of your opinions is not enough. What you think is very interesting to you – it is only interesting to me in so far as you can also give reasons why I ought to think it too.

It's very easy to overestimate the strength of your own position. You should assume that your reader does *not* already accept your position. View the essay as an attempt to persuade an unsympathetic audience. Think always: evidence and argument – why should anyone accept what I've just said?

4. Clarity

There's no getting away from it, philosophy is very difficult. It is also a subject in which it is easy to talk utter nonsense. The most important thing is to be clear. This works at three levels.

(i) Essay structure/plan. The overall clarity of your essay will very largely depend on its structure. For this reason it is absolutely essential that you first have an **outline plan**.

More than just some loose headings or a vague mind-map, a suitable outline should at least determine the number of paragraphs and the distinctive purpose of each one. It might well take up a full page of writing. And you may need several drafts at it. Don't worry if it takes time to learn how to do this – learning how to do a good plan is probably 75% of the work of learning how to write a good essay. I won't normally ask to see the plan, unless I suspect there are problems, but do ask me about planning if you are finding it particularly hard.

There are, of course, many different kinds of plan. Much of task of arriving at a good structure is to do with making judgements of relative importance. What is the *main* point here? Is it clearly distinguishable from *supporting* points?

Introductions and conclusion. In a short essay these are of limited value. But a brief opening paragraph explaining how you see the issue and how you intend to tackle it gives valuable orientation, while a sentence or so at the end just re-iterating where you stand on the issue is useful as a reminder.

(ii) Prose style. You need to learn to think critically and self-reflectively about exactly what you're doing. For every sentence you should know what you are trying to do with it. Why am I writing this sentence? Why is it important?

- Use simple, straightforward prose. Use familiar words. Avoid pretentious, complicated or 'scholarly' language. Don't try to sound clever. It's easy to say something that looks clever, much harder to say something sensible that might actually be true! Don't write for me or any other professional philosopher; write for the intelligent but philosophically ignorant person on the street. Keep your sentences and paragraphs short. Be concise, but explain yourself fully. (If these sound contradictory, the point of balance here would be something like: say enough so there can be no doubt as to what you mean, but not so much that the main line of the argument or point can no longer clearly be seen.)

- One way you can help make your writing clearer is by giving plenty of clear *signposts* to your reader as to what you've done so far, where you currently are, and what you're going to do next. Although I'm not sure that all tutors think this, I would say don't worry about not using the first-person pronoun here. You can happily say things like:

I will begin by...

Before I say what is wrong with this argument, I want to...

These passages suggest that...

I will now defend this claim...

Further support for this claim comes from...

For example...

- *Literary Models*. As you read the work of other philosophers, note whose style you like or dislike, and try to work out why that is. Follow the good examples! During your course you will encounter many great philosophers whose writing is ugly, obscure and complicated. Remember: these authors are philosophically important *despite* their poor writing, not because of it. Do not try to emulate their writing styles.

- Read it back to yourself – aloud if that helps. How would it seem to listen to? The golden rule here is: *put yourself in the position of your reader*. Remember: *you* know what you’re trying to say – put yourself in the position of someone who *doesn’t*!

(iii) verbal Precision. Every word counts. Make sure that you know *exactly* what each sentence means, and that you intend to say precisely that. You may be asked to defend *each word*! A good trick here is : Be perverse – try to think how someone might possibly misunderstand what you have just written, and then reformulate it less ambiguously. But a certain level of judgment is called for too; there is often a tradeoff between precision and ease-of-reading – lawyer’s language is precise but for the most part completely unreadable. Beware of the sub-clause!

- *Technical terms*. Think very carefully about using these. Employ technical philosophical terms only where you really need them.

- *Definitions*. Terms need precise definitions. But remember: definitions can’t themselves settle philosophical arguments. Many essays call for definitions *at the end*, not *at the beginning*!

- *Abstraction*. Precision often leads to abstraction. But this can make reading hard. Use as many concrete examples as you can to illustrate what you mean. Philosophy needs imagination.

5. Considering the views of others

Much of the time you will find yourself discussing the views of other philosophers.

- Make sure you understand exactly the position you are discussing. Your criticisms will be worthless if you just get it wrong.
- Always explain as fully and as fairly as possible what a position says before you criticize it.
- Don't treat the philosopher or the views you're discussing as *stupid*. If something seems just obviously wrong, the chances are that you haven’t properly understood it or the motivation for putting it forward.
- Always make it explicit when you're reporting your own view and when you're reporting the views of some philosopher you're discussing. The reader should never be in doubt about whose claims you're presenting in a given paragraph.

6. Handling Argument

Philosophy is all about argument. Argument must be presented as clearly and fully as possible. It is not usually necessary appropriate to set it all out in numbered propositions, let alone in symbolic notation, but some thought in this direction is always good. What is the argument structure? What are the premises? Are any of them suppressed? etc.

- *Fake arguments*. The signposts for arguments are, of course, familiar enough:
because, since, given this argument,
thus, therefore, hence, it follows that, consequently ,
nevertheless, however, but,
in the first case, on the other hand

But don't be tempted to use these just to make your train of thought sound better-argued than it really is. Nothing alerts a suspicious philosopher's mind more than phrases like: 'clearly...', 'we see that...' or 'it follows that...'

There are two sides to every argument worth having. This shows itself in a pair of strategies.

- *Become your own best critic.* Try to anticipate objections to your view and respond to them. 'My opponent will probably say....', 'At this point it might be objected that....'
- *Help people out (even your opponents).* No one ever became a good philosopher by knocking over easy targets. Even if you think some position is wrong, try to imagine how they might defend it or respond to your objections. You need to get right to the heart of any view you oppose; you must show not just that it is wrong, but why (to some people) it looks right.

7. Answer the question.

When it comes to the exam, there is nothing more important than this. It should be absolutely clear why what you have just written is an answer to the question at the start. In the exams, material that does not answer the questions scores **zero**.

- *Answer the question, but don't end the discussion.* This last piece of advice has an important caveat. Argument is good. If you don't like argument and discussion, then philosophy is probably a bad subject for you to be doing. But all too often students write as if they wanted to bring the argument to an end. *There is always more to say*; problems to consider, possible response to rebut, extra arguments to add. Keep the argument going.

8. Referencing and quotation

It is important to get into the habit of giving full and accurate references

- For points: 'Strawson's (1956:78) argument that...', 'as Bradley (1926:67) claims...'
- For references: '...commit it to the flames' (Hume 1952, p.9)
- And a list of sources consulted at the end of the essay

Not only is this good practice, but it can save you hours later on when you come to revise! There are, of course, many different systems of referencing. It doesn't matter which you use. There's no need to do this in exams, though.

Sometimes it is useful to quote (e.g. a precise form of words by an historical philosopher to prove a point), but not as an alternative to expressing things in your own words. Generally keep quotations short. Rule of thumb: the permissible length of quotation is in proportion to the detailed use that you make of it.

9. Length

How much do I have to write? Enough to answer the question adequately. And (while we're at it) how long *is* a piece of string?

- Aim for short but dense. There's a world of difference between pages and pages of dull summary and a single paragraph that condenses the result of hours of careful thinking, and itself generates a whole hour's tutorial debate. With the clear understanding that it involves much more work than the first, head towards the second.
- If you want something more specific, aim for around 2000 words.

10. Assessment

Finally a word about assessing these things! You get written comments on all essays (don't be shy to ask me about these if you don't understand my points), but I give a numerical grade only for collections essays and exam revision essays, and not for weekly tutorial essays. This is because (1) exam essays and tutorial essays are rather different creatures, (2) formative assessment is different from summative assessment (i.e. the person who tries out different ideas and essay styles, several of which fail badly, may well learn more than some who hands in solidly dull 2.1 work all year) and (3) because there's more to your education than exams!

Still, what are the criteria for a successful essay? It's very important to realise that there just is no A-level style checklist of points you have to cover in order to get a good grade. There are many ways to be brilliant, and nothing you *have* to do. Surprise us!

(1) It's not really about what *we* want. The aim is not really to please *us* and, anyway, different tutors like different things.

(2) Still, it should be reasonably obvious by now in general terms what's needed: analysis, argument, relevance, clarity, independence of thought.

(3) Note too the official faculty grade descriptors:

100-70: work displaying analytical and argumentational power, with good command of the facts and/or arguments relevant to the questions and evidence of ability to organise them with clarity, insight and efficiency.

69-60: work displaying analytical power and argumentational power, but with less comprehensive and thorough command of evidence; or work showing considerable thoroughness but less analytical skill or less clarity in organisation.

59-50: competent work with no major defects, but giving an incomplete account of the question, or marred by inaccuracies; or work which demonstrates lapses in (but does not lack) analytical and argumentational skills.

49-40: work that is generally weak with muddled argumentation, but containing some evidence of knowledge of facts and analytical skill. This class does qualify for a Honours degree.
; or work that, while competent and knowledgeable in itself, does not address the question asked by the examiners.

39 and below: very poor quality work, showing little if any evidence of having studied.

29 to 0: Fail script. Work of such low standard that it cannot be given a pass mark

Relevance. In assessing answers markers are reminded of the high value to be placed on relevance. Work that entirely fails to address the question asked by the examiners, *however competent and knowledgeable in itself*, can gain **no marks**

In summary

A good essay...

1. Answers the question exactly as it has been asked. At any point in the essay it should be clear why what is being said is an answer to the question, and by the end it should be completely clear what the writer thinks is the answer to that question. (If necessary, reiterate this in your concluding paragraph.)
2. Has a clear and discernible purpose. As a whole, and in each part, it is clear what the writer is trying to do and why.
3. Is logically structured into paragraphs, each with its own clear subject and purpose.
4. Has a point of view, but is explicitly aware of the case for the opposing point of view and of how it might be responded to.
5. Uses plenty of examples, either to support its claims or to illustrate its abstractions.
6. Shows specific knowledge of the details of the relevant literature, both primary and secondary.
7. Is written in clear and simple English, but at the same time uses words in a careful and unambiguous fashion. Rather than general or rambling, its points are always specific and precise.
8. Offers observations, analyses, suggestions or criticisms of its own, rather than simply reporting the work of others. It thinks for itself, rather than simply following the thoughts of others. But modest efforts of one's own are better than an exaggerated, absurd and unsuccessful show of originality.
9. Shows an appreciation of the depth and complexity of the issues, and remains open to further discussion, rather than being determined to close it down and bring the debate to an end.
10. Is legible!

If you still unsure how you're doing, come and ask me — that's what I'm here for!

WJM

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