

Guide to Essay-Writing (v.4)

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1 General

The general maxim for essay-writing, adapted from Jim Pryor, is the following: *A good philosophy paper is the reasoned, critical defence of a philosophically interesting claim.*¹

This has four implications. First, your paper must make and defend some philosophical claim *which is your own*. It is not enough for your paper to merely summarise or compare points that other people have made, though of course that can be part of a good essay.

Second, a good philosophical essay *makes an argument*: it offers the reader *reasons* to believe what the author proposes. An argument starts from premises, and reaches a conclusion through a number of transparent and logical steps. Thus, a good paper is not merely a retelling of one's opinion. Your paper's central claim cannot be "I believe that *p*". It must be "I believe that *p* because *q* and *r*", where you argue for why *q* and *r* as well.

Third, you must defend your argument *critically*. A philosophy paper is not a policy brief in which you ignore, or try to downplay, contradicting evidence. Be your own worst enemy in coming up with potential objections to your own argument. You must also be charitable: you must present the position and arguments of your opponents in their strongest form.

Fourth, what you're arguing for *must be interesting*. An argument is interesting to the degree that it starts from widely accepted premises and reaches a controversial, non-obvious conclusion. If your paper presumes that libertarianism is true, then concluding that social redistribution is problematic might be correct, but it is not interesting. If you can argue the opposite—that despite their moral foundations, libertarians should favour redistribution—that would be highly interesting; then, however, you must be very careful that your argument is convincing—rather than just confused.

2 Topic

Your essay must have a clearly formulated question, and a clearly formulated answer. The question you are asking must be (i) specific, while the answer you give must be (ii) focussed, and (iii) to some degree original.

¹ Cf. <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

Specificity

Most students choose topics for their essays which are too broad. Assume that you wish to write an essay on egalitarianism. Here are three questions you could ask:

1. Is egalitarianism the correct theory of justice?
2. Should egalitarians seek to equalize resources or welfare?
3. How can a resource-based egalitarianism deal with the needs of disabled people?

The first question is not acceptable for an essay—it would be too broad even for a Ph.D. thesis. The second question is better, but still too broad. It still needs to be narrowed down in some way—e.g., is Dworkin’s criticism of equality of welfare correct? This question, as well as the third question, have the right degree of specificity.

A good sign that your essay question and answer are appropriately specific is if you can (i) formulate your essay question as an actual succinct question (in one sentence), and similarly, (ii) you can write your central answer in a few succinct sentences (in less than fifty words).

Focus

A good essay answers the question it is addressed to, *not more and not less*. Every essay must strike a balance between breadth—the amount of material covered—and depth—the detail at which the material is covered. Most students over-emphasise breadth. Be picky. In your reading, you will come across many different interesting topics and arguments. Do not try to cover all of them in your essay, but focus on those you think philosophically most challenging.

In short, your essay should be a directed argument for a narrow claim without any diversions. Think of your essay as a stringent, progressing argument for a *single* proposition. For every single section and paragraph of your essay, ask yourself: how does it advance my argument towards that central proposition? If it does not, cut it out.

Originality

Many students worry about how original their argument has to be. No one expects from an undergraduate essay that it solves the deep problems of philosophy once and for all. What is required of you is to engage with a philosophical topic independently: you need to show that you can think critically on your own.

Let’s take egalitarianism again. Imagine that you’re writing on whether (resource) egalitarians can adequately account for the severely disabled. There is literature on this topic already, in which arguments and counter-arguments have been offered. So a first task is for you to understand and summarise

these papers critically; describing clearly and in your own words what the philosophical problem is can already be an important contribution.

The main part of your paper could then be several: you could develop replies to the objections in the literature; or you could evaluate which of the two sides have the better argument (in your view); you could try to find shortcomings or gaps in the arguments; and so on. All of this would be enough to count as an original contribution: you do not need to re-invent egalitarianism, or solve the difficult problems surrounding disability in this context.

3 Style

There is a common misunderstanding that complicated intellectual thought must be, or only can be, expressed in complicated language. However, the primary function of an academic essay is to communicate an argument to your reader. Thus, almost the opposite is true: you should follow the maxim *to express your ideas as simple as possible* (though not simpler). You will get no bonuses for style, and being overly ornamental will even count against your essay.

Along these lines, here are some general maxims to improve your philosophical writing: Aim for clear and direct language. Keep your sentences short and grammatically simple. Avoid pretentious language. Reduce overly long paragraphs. Cut repetitive or unnecessary words.

English as a Non-Native Speaker

You will be required to write your essay in English, which might not be your native language. This shouldn't worry you. What matters is whether you can make yourself understood and argue your central point convincingly; not whether your English is elegantly written. Mistakes in diction or grammar will not influence my grading *unless* they are so grave and common that they negatively affect my ability to understand your paper.²

Style Guides

Various style guides are available, the *Chicago Manual of Style*. These guides *can* be helpful, but they also tend to foster a misguided obsession over the supposed "rules" of style.³ Style, however, is merely a tool to make yourself understood to your readers, and not a question of unyielding rules set in stone. Much of the style advice you have been given so far (e.g., "never split an infinitive") is either harmful to natural, informative writing, or just pointlessly pedantic. If you consult style guides, keep this in mind.

² For more advice on writing English essays as a non-native speaker, see <http://www.matthiasbrinkmann.de/wordpress/2016/11/working-in-the-humanities-if-english-isnt-your-first-language/>.

³ See, for example, Geoffrey Pullum, "[50 Years of Stupid Grammar Advice](#)".

Some Specific Advice

Pronouns. The pronoun “I” can, and should, be used freely in philosophy essays. Avoid awkward passive phrases such as “It can be argued that ...”. Instead write, “I will argue that ...” or “Williams argues that ...” or “Williams argues that ... and I disagree because ...”. Never use “we” where you mean “I”.

Present Tense. When talking about the position of a philosopher, or a disagreement between different philosophers, it is common to describe these in present tense—i.e., to pretend as if they were sitting in the same room, even if they lived in different time periods, or are long dead. For example:

Kant argues that we should never use others merely as a means.
[...] Bentham disagrees, claiming that [...].

The exception to this rule is when the order of time is particularly important, e.g., in writing intellectual history.

Special Terms. You will come across many specialist terms during your philosophical reading (“deontology”, “contractualism”, etc.), or common words which philosophers use in uncommon ways. Be cautious with using such concepts: only use them if you are certain you know their precise meaning. If you can express your ideas without them, see whether you can avoid them entirely.

Definitions. When and how to provide definitions in a philosophy essay is a complex and contextual question. In general, many terms have a decently clear meaning and do not need to be explicitly defined. Definitions become important only where (i) a clear understanding of the concept is crucial to the argument, and (ii) where the concept is vague and ambiguous.

Dictionaries. Never rely on general-purpose dictionaries, as their definitions tend to be unhelpfully vague, and sometimes even misleading.

Examples and Empirical Research. If you include examples or thought experiments, describe them clearly, and highlight what their philosophical relevance is. However, do not get lost in detail: focus on what’s essential to the example. If you discuss empirical research, be cautious to separate the descriptive content of the research and the normative conclusions you draw from it.

Paragraphs. The paragraph should be your basic unit of thought. A paragraph should make one point, and be connected to the paragraphs before and after. Make paragraph breaks often.

More Advice. For more advice on specific aspects of philosophical essay-writing, please consult my follow-up guide to this one, “Details of Good Writing”.

4 Structure

An important element in writing is structuring. The importance of a point should roughly track how much space you give to it: your main argument should also take up the most space in your paper.

Normally, your essay should be divided into sections with headers (“2. The Definition of Utilitarianism” etc.). However, don’t overdo sub-dividing your paper. More than two levels of division are ever needed in short papers (so no 1.2.4, 2.3.5 etc.).

Signposting

Make the structure of your essay as transparent as you can. Tell your reader explicitly how your argument works, and how its parts hang together. This is usually highlighted by connective phrases such as

I will first argue that ... and then argue that ...

I will outline Kant’s position ... and then criticise it by arguing

...

On the basis of these points, I conclude that ...

We now have to consider the objection that ...

Your paper shouldn’t be a murder mystery where the reader has to assemble the clues, or where there’s a sudden twist in the end. Tell your reader from the beginning what you’re going to argue for, and which side you’re on. Also, never promise what your essay doesn’t deliver. Be clear about the limitations of your argument.

Standard Structure

One standard essay structure is the following:

1. *Introduction*—summarising the main claims and argumentative structure of the essay, as well as explaining why the topic is interesting;
2. *Clarifying the Question*—clarifying any ambiguities and defining central terms, insofar as necessary, and narrowing down the question of the essay;
3. *Central Argument(s)*—the major body of the text, giving the central argument, describing both the premises of the argument, and discussing its conclusion;
4. *Objections and Rebuttals*—objections which have been made (or could be made) against the central argument, and your rebuttals of those arguments;
5. *Summary*—a brief summary of your argument, possibly noting any open questions or limitations of the paper.

This is not a structure you have to stick to, but it can be helpful for guidance.

5 Literature

Philosophy is a social discipline: you're normally expected to engage with the arguments of other thinkers. So using philosophical literature is a crucial element in a good essay. Without it, you're likely to re-invent the wheel, or worse, to invent it badly.

Finding Literature

There are different ways to find literature for your essay.

- The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (plato.stanford.edu) is an excellent resource, and will often be your starting place. It gives both an overview over various topics, and provides links to further literature.
- You might also have access to the Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy (rep.routledge.com) which is another respectable source.
- The *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (iep.utm.edu) is less extensive, and slightly less reliable.
- The journal *Philosophy Compass* publishes overview articles on philosophical subjects, though its coverage is far from comprehensive.
- *PhilPapers* (philpapers.org) is a large literature database for papers in philosophy. You can search by keyword, or browse through categories.
- *Google Scholar* (scholar.google.com) allows you to search for academic papers, though its results bring up lots of irrelevant papers. The most important function it offers is to check how many and which authors cite a given paper, which can allow you to find new sources.
- *Academia.edu* (academia.edu) is a networking portal for academics. Many scholars upload their published papers here, as well as working papers, which you otherwise might not have access to.
- *SSRN* (ssrn.com) is similar, with a focus on law and the social sciences.
- The *Wikipedia* should *not* be trusted in philosophy, and you should never rely on it in your academic work.
- Simple *googling* on an academic topic is also possible, but you should be very careful with the results. As a rule of thumb, only trust a source if it has a named author affiliated with a respectable academic institution. Be cautious with academic-looking sources from policy-oriented think tanks, as these tend to have a political agenda.

For some topics, you will find that there is much more literature than you can read. In this case, you need to prioritize what's important to your essay and what isn't. As a *very* rough rule of thumb, put more emphasis on (a) papers which are more relevant to your topic over those which are less relevant; (b) papers by well-known philosophers, or papers which are quoted more often, or published in more prestigious journals, over papers which aren't; and (c) papers which are more recent over papers which are older. Also, learn how to skim; you do not have the time to read everything.

Referencing

Each essay needs to be properly academically referenced. That is, the source of any direct quote and anything you paraphrase must appear in a footnote. It is up to you which referencing style to use, but it should be consistent and transparent. Some other advice:

- For quotations, specific page references must be given—it's not enough to refer to the entire article or book.
- Classic authors like Kant or Plato often have special ways to reference their work; check whether there are any special referencing conventions if you work on such authors.
- At the end of your paper, there should be a section entitled "Works Cited" which lists all papers you have cited.
- Citations should be given in footnotes or in parentheses within the text, *never* as endnotes.
- It can be useful to learn how to use a reference manager program such as Zotero, Citavi or EndNote. In the long run, these save you a great amount of time otherwise wasted on manually dealing with references, especially if you are aiming for grad school.

Block Quotes

Any direct quote from the literature must be highlighted as such. Longer quotations should usually be avoided, but if you use them,

put them as block quote, as displayed here, with extra margins to the left and right. This visually sets them apart from the text and makes them easier to read.

Paraphrasing

If you paraphrase the literature—that is, if you take another author's argument and summarise it, or follow it closely, without directly quoting it—that also needs to be referenced. At every point in your essay, you need to be clear whether you're repeating someone else's claims, or whether you're providing your own. The boundaries between paraphrase and interpretation can sometimes be difficult to discern, and I'm happy to discuss this in concrete examples.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism will never be accepted, and may lead to disciplinary actions with severe consequences for you. Note that plagiarism involves copying your *own* work if you have submitted it for other courses already.

Footnotes

Never use endnotes; they are a pointless nuisance. Whether you want to use footnotes for citations or quote works within the text is up to you. In general, footnotes should be held to a minimum, and not be used for excessive

deliverance of irrelevant material. Ideally, everything that is important should be found in the main text; everything that is unimportant should not be in your essay at all.

6 Formal Elements

Proof-reading is a basic courtesy to your reader. I recommend that you *read out* your essay when you proof-read. You are much more likely to catch awkward words, phrases and sentences this way. However, formal polish cannot turn an average paper into a great one; it can, however, prevent a great paper from having points deducted for avoidable shortcomings.

Requirements

Your paper doesn't require a title page, but your name and email address should be on the front page. Page numbers should be found on every page. (It is amazing how many students do not manage to include them!) In addition, there should be a short abstract (100–200 words) at the beginning of your paper which summarises the main claims of your paper. You *must* send me your paper in a Word-compatible format (.DOC, .DOCX, .RTF, .TXT).

Layout

Aside from truth, beauty is another virtue. Your paper's layout should be simple and visually pleasing. (However, good or bad layout won't affect your grade.) Features of adequate layout include:⁴

- a professional looking serif font for the main body of text (non-serif typefaces are hard on the eyes if used for large amounts of text);
- margins between paragraphs, allowing the text to “breathe”;
- section and subsection headers which are typographically set apart from the main body of text—e.g., by using a non-serif typeface that contrast with the one used for the main text;
- wide page margins (left and right margins of at least 1in/2.5cm, and preferably even wider);
- italics used for emphasis, rather than underlined or bold text;
- footnotes instead of endnotes, with footnotes never taking up more than a third of the page;
- single-spaced text, fully justified;
- page numbers at the bottom of each page;
- longer citations set as block quotes.

You can detect all these layout features in this document.

⁴ I have written a brief overview of the features of good layout elsewhere—please see <http://matthiasbrinkmann.de/docs/layout.pdf>.

7 Grading

I will assess your work along the following dimensions.

1. *Structure/Organisation*: Is the essay structured in a useful and logical way? Does it avoid repetition and digression? Is it clear how different parts of the essay connect?
2. *Focus*: Does the essay have a clear focus, and a well-defined question? Are issues treated at the appropriate level of detail?
3. *Clarity*: Is the writing clear and understandable? Are key claims and principles formulated well? Are important concepts clarified appropriately?
4. *Research/Literature*: Is influential literature taken into account? Does the author show an understanding of important points in the literature?
5. *Quality of Argument*: Are the arguments offered in the paper plausible and based on convincing premises?
6. *Critical Thinking*: Does the author provide their own, independent line of argument? Are possible objections anticipated, and described fairly? Does the author note the limitations of their own argument clearly?
7. *Originality*: Is the argument provided original, or is the paper primarily a summary of arguments from the literature? Is the argument interesting—that is, does it show something (comparatively) new or unexpected?
8. *Difficulty*: How philosophically demanding is the topic? Does it require a lot of background knowledge? Does the essay stick closely to existing positions and literature, or does it try to break new ground on which little literature exists? Does it involve using formal methods?

Note that grading always includes a holistic, “I know it when I see it” dimension. This is, unfortunately, unavoidable. Talk to me if you want to get a sense for the difference between good and great papers.

8 Further Reading

More useful advice is contained in Jim Pryor’s excellent guide on how to write a philosophy paper. You can find it at

<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

Another resource on how to write a philosophy essay is Douglas Portmore’s guide, which is online at

<http://www.public.asu.edu/~dportmor/tips.pdf>

I also have a follow-up guide to this one, “Details of Good Writing”, which goes over some more specific advice, though I would advise that you get the fundamentals right first. For all other questions you have about writing a philosophical essay, talk to me directly.