Guidelines on Writing Philosophy

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1 General

In the words of Jim Pryor, "a philosophy paper consists of the reasoned defence of some claim" (see link below). This excludes two kinds of papers from being acceptable: first, papers which do not defend any substantive claim, but are primarily summaries of the literature, or a collection of observations and unconnected musings. It is not enough for your paper to merely summarise or endorse the secondary literature. You must make your own argument.

Second, a good philosophical essay tries to make a reasoned *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 clear and logical steps. Thus, a good paper is not merely a retelling of one's opinion, or a rhetorical appeal to some authority or authoritative principle.

2 Focus

A good essay answers the question it is addressed to, *not more and not less*. It is a constant complaint of examiners that students fail to pay attention to the precise direction of an exam question, so I will insist on this point as well. At the same time, of course, you should read and think widely about the topics on the reading list.

Every finitely long essay, and every exam answer in particular, must strike a balance between breadth—the amount of material covered—and depth—the detail at which the material is covered. In my experience, most students tend to overemphasise breadth. Be picky. In your reading, you will come across many different interesting points and arguments. Do no try to cover all of them in your essay, but rather bring them for discussion to the tutorials. Your essay should be a directed argument for a narrow claim without many (or any) diversions.

Lastly, do not try to reach for the stars. It is tempting to try in a philosophical essay to solve the underlying philosophical issue once and for all. This will overwhelm you, as it would most professional philosophers. Try to find a manageable, "bite-sized" aspect of the overall question, and aim to make some progress there.

3 Style

There is a common misunderstanding that complicated intellectual thought is (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 make things as simple as possible* (but not simpler). Aim for clear and direct language. You will get no bonuses for style, and being overly ornamental might even count against your essay.

You will come across many specialist terms during your 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 claim without them, see whether you can avoid them. Do not presume that your reader knows your understanding of a specific term, or shares your interpretation of a particular position.

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" if you mean "I".

4 Structure

Similarly, 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 …

One standard essay structure is the following:

1. Introductory paragraph—summarising in a few sentences the main claims and argumentative structure of the essay;
2. Clarifications and definitions—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. Possible objections and replies—objections which could be made against the central argument, and rebuttals of those arguments;
5. Summary—brief, usually paragraph-long summary of the main argument, and noting any open questions.

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

5 Referencing

Each essay needs to be properly academically referenced. Any direct quote from the literature must be highlighted as such. Longer quotations should usually be avoided, but if you use them,

> please put them as blockquote, 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.

If you paraphrase the literature—that is, if you take another author's argument and follow it closely, without directly quoting it—that also needs to be referenced. The boundaries between paraphrase and interpretation can sometimes be difficult to discern, and I'm happy to discuss this in concrete examples.

6 Layout

Layout is up to you as long as it's readable, though I should say that I prefer serif typefaces (as opposed to a sans-serif typeface). Please put your name on the front page of your essay, and page numbers on every page.

7 Further Reading

The majority of the preceding advice and much more is also contained in Jim Pryor's excellent guide on how to write a philosophy paper. Please read it before our first tutorial. You can find it at

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

For all other questions you have about writing a philosophical essay, talk to me directly.