

Philosophy Writing Guide

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Compiled by Emily Brady-Haapala with Vernon Pratt and Jane Howarth, Institute for Environment, Philosophy and Public Policy, October 2002. Sources: David Sztybel, 'Sztybel's Guide to Philosophy Essay Writing', www.chass.utoronto.ca/philosophy/phlwrite/sztybel.html; Isis Brook, 'Notes on Essay Writing', www.lancs.ac.uk/users/philosophy/dlessayguide.htm; Philosophy Part I and Part II Handbooks. (Updated 2004-5)

Philosophy Writing Guide Part I Philosophy

Those who mark your essays are chiefly looking for two things:

- (a) your understanding of material covered in or relevant to the course, reflected in your ability to analyse arguments concisely;
- (b) your ability to develop your own criticisms of arguments and to develop arguments to support your own conclusions.

Hints on achieving these two:

Philosophy is not painting by numbers, and these guidelines are not the numbers! Use them with intelligence. In philosophy, as in painting, one learns how to do it by close inspection of the work of philosophers (or painters). If in doubt about how to write, write as if to explain things to people who know less philosophy than you do – try it out on your friends.

Also, keep in mind that these are general guidelines for writing philosophy essays in Part I. You may find that specific essay assignments ask specific tasks of you, so that not all of what is offered below will apply in every case.

Essay Preparation

Reading

For Part I essays we do not normally expect you to read beyond the required, basic readings. We design our essay questions assuming that you will be focusing on the basic readings relevant to the essay question. You are welcome to pursue further reading, but make sure that you keep focused. A focused essay is usually better than one that tries to incorporate lots of material, because when trying to cover lots of material, the main arguments are often not given enough detailed discussion.

To get to grips with the ideas and arguments in what you read, you will need to read the basic readings more than once, perhaps even several times.

Be sure that you prepare for your essay well ahead of time. Careful philosophy reading and note-taking takes time, and you also need time to think about what you have read. Planning ahead also means that you can digest the material you are reading and reflect critically on it in order to develop your own arguments. In this respect, it helps to discuss your ideas with a friend, as expressing your ideas may help you to work through them before putting them on paper.

Notes and outlines

It's a good idea to take notes while you are reading, but keep in mind that you should only note down what is relevant to your arguments in the essay. It is easy to get overburdened by the reading, and then to run out of time! Keep focused.

It is not essential to write out an outline of the essay, but it is usually a very helpful way to get a preliminary idea of how you will structure the essay, and what particular topics and sub-topics need to be addressed. Keen users of outlines find that they start with a very general one and then work stage by stage to more refined versions as they work through their reading. Writing the essay from a very detailed outline is a piece of cake!

The Essay

Structure

- Introduction

The aim of the introduction is to tell the reader exactly what you will be arguing and how your discussion and argument will unfold in the essay. The art of a good introduction is to do this clearly and concisely, so that you give just the right amount of information (and don't repeat yourself later on). If you can combine this with sparking interest you bring the art to perfection. For a 1500 word essay the introduction shouldn't be more than one paragraph long.

You may also use the introduction to explain briefly the context of the topic/question and why it is important or interesting (be careful though not to go into irrelevant background material).

Some people find it easier to write the introduction after they have a good idea about what will happen in the whole essay. But if you have written an outline and a synopsis/abstract (see below), you can write the introduction quite easily.

- Body

The body of the essay is where you develop your line of argument and provide discussion of points in support of it. Most essays have two parts within the body: (1) Exposition and Analysis and (2) Argument.

(1) Exposition and Analysis: This is where you explain the ideas or argument you will be critically engaged with in the essay. For example, if you are arguing against Plato's theory of forms, you will need to give a good explanation of what that theory involves and how Plato defends it. At the very least, you should demonstrate a good understanding of the ideas with which you are grappling. The exposition may be more or less detailed, depending upon what is relevant to your argument and to the length of the essay. Some students choose to set out the exposition before they launch into their critical discussion and argument; others choose to weave the two together. Do what works best for you.

Your exposition will normally involve an analysis of an argument. All disciplines involve reasoning but there is a special focus on it in philosophy. (In Section 3 of the course, you will be introduced to different kinds of reasoning and a vocabulary designed for talking about reasoning and argument. As you progress in the course, it is important that you master this vocabulary and get into the habit of using it when thinking about your own and other people's arguments.)

The aim of an analysis of an argument is to show what the bare bones of the argument are. Ask:

1. What question is this piece asking?
2. What answer is given to that question?
3. What reasons are given in support of that answer?
4. What reasons are given in support of those reasons - and so on until you reach 5.
5. What are the 'premises' (i.e. assumptions or reasons for which no reasons are given)?
6. What sort of support are the reasons supposed to be providing for the conclusions?
7. Bear in mind throughout that you want to sift out everything which is not absolutely vital to the case being made - you want to reveal what is essential.
8. It is a fairly natural human failing to misinterpret (more or less wilfully) arguments for conclusions you disagree with, thereby making them seem weaker than they are - be wary.

(2) Argument: Once you have a clear exposition and analysis of the ideas or arguments, you can turn to your critical discussion, which will involve developing your own arguments. If, for example, you are arguing against Plato's theory of forms, then set out each point against his position and support it. This will often involve (but not always - it depends on how the essay assignment is set) relating what you say to other authors' discussions of the arguments in question. Do other commentators support your criticisms or not? Do they have additional criticisms which you support? If you do cite other authors' criticisms, be sure to say *why* you think they are good or bad ones. Always anticipate objections to your own claims. How would your criticisms be counter-attacked, e.g., how would Plato reply to your objections? Is Plato's argument still defensible? Evidence in support of your argument should involve use of examples, whenever sensible. Examples clarify and often 'ground' the particular claims you make.

Here are some pointers for thinking critically about the argument you have analysed and for developing your own argument/s:

Internal criticisms:

- How well do the reasons support the conclusion?
- Are there stronger reasons than the author gives for the same conclusion?
- Do the reasons equally support an alternative conclusion?
- Are there reasons for not accepting the conclusion, or any of the assumptions?

Does anything follow from the conclusion, which might appear to be grounds for rejecting it?
Are there ambiguities in any of the terms or claims made?
Are there alternative interpretations of what is being argued?

External criticisms:

Are there alternative answers to the question, which the author has not considered?
What reasons could be given to support these answers?

Next:

1. How might the author respond to your criticisms – it is unlikely that any of the authors you read would just say “Oh, silly me, back to the drawing board” – philosophers are not like that!
2. How would you respond to the author’s supposed response?
3. Set up a dialogue (as Plato did!).

Finally, in putting forward your argument, don’t be afraid of sitting on the fence. Sometimes a position can have both good points and bad points; you may feel that it is difficult to come down clearly on one side or the other. If you do choose this approach in an essay, be sure to be *clear* about what you support and what you don’t. Avoid being wishy-washy.

- **Conclusion**

Use your conclusion (about one paragraph in a 1500 word essay) to draw to a close the main points of your argument and discussion in the essay. State your conclusion clearly and summarise the main points in support of it. Be careful not to state a conclusion that you haven’t actually proved or shown in the essay!

Conclusions are also used to point to further research which could be made or further interesting directions to be taken, but which are not within the scope of the essay.

Who are you writing for?

The safest assumption to make is that you are writing for another member of the course, but one who has not studied your topic. So explain everything you would need explaining if someone was writing for you on a topic you had not studied.

Originality

You are encouraged to be creative and use your imagination and certainly to put forward your own views on questions asked, but you need to do so within the discipline of philosophy. When it comes to presenting an argument in an essay, you may find that your own position is similar to another philosopher’s. That’s fine. We don’t expect you to come up with new answers altogether to the ‘big questions’. What we do demand is that the thinking is *your own*. The evaluations and comments you offer need to be yours, not simply taken on trust from someone else.

Synopsis

To go on the title page of your essay, you are advised to construct a ‘synopsis’. This is a paragraph-length summary of the essay, reflecting its structure as well as its content. You should construct it by going through your draft a paragraph at a time and writing a single-sentence summary of each paragraph in turn. Preparing a synopsis helps you refine your sense of structure, and gives you practice in helping your reader follow your presentation.

Style

- **Clarity**

One of the most important aims in a good essay is clarity. Clearly state your position and points of argument in the essay. Demarcate your various points clearly, otherwise it may be uncertain whether a given passage is meant to say one long point, two separate points, or one point expressed in two different ways. It is often sensible to begin a new paragraph for a new point. Use concise style and avoid overly complex or overly long sentence structure. Be sure to explain any technical words or words that may be unfamiliar to your reader.

Never forget that you are supposed to be communicating to a reader. You cannot be too clear in a difficult subject like philosophy. Remember that you have to be clear first in your mind what you

want to say, or it won't come out clearly in the essay. It helps a lot to try your plan or ideas out on a friend. You may find that simply expressing the ideas in your head through discussion helps to make them more coherent.

While writing and revising your essay, ask yourself these questions: do points follow from each other?; are difficult terms defined and explained?; are the main points summarised?; are the main points of discussion organised coherently?

- Signposting

'Signposts' are linking words and phrases which tell the reader what is going on structurally in your essay. Good signposting is like a gift from the gods to the reader; it enables her or him to follow your discussion effortlessly. It is simple, yet it can have a real impact on how effectively you set up arguments and discussion. Examples include:

'To summarise'; 'To conclude'

'There are three main points...firstly..., secondly..., thirdly...'

'The reasons that support my claim are...'

'Possible objections to my claim are...'

'This point relates to...'

'This point is taken up later in the essay'

'This section of the essay has shown,...and I will go on to show...'

- Inclusive language

Please use inclusive language when writing essays. The Centre for Philosophy and the Institute for Environment, Philosophy and Public Policy are committed to the University's advisory guidelines on Inclusive Language and Social Diversity, which are intended to raise awareness and assist staff and students in avoiding language which excludes, degrades or gives unintentional offence. *For example*, 'learning difficulties' is preferred to 'mentally handicapped'; 'black' is preferred to 'coloured'; 'her/his' or 'she/he' is preferred to 'he'; and 'humankind' or 'human' is preferred to 'mankind' or 'man'. For University guidelines see <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/users/equalopp/> or see guidance in the pamphlet posted on the Part I notice board in the reception area on C Floor Furness.

Presentation

Essays and dissertations should be word-processed. Be sure you have proof read the essay carefully and that you have not gone seriously over the page limit. The essay should have page numbers and include a Philosophy essay cover sheet (available by the essay box), a title, and bibliography. Use double-spacing and 12 point type; both are easier on our eyes! Don't forget to sign the submission statement on the essay cover sheet.

All essays should be submitted via the Philosophy essay box in the reception area on C Floor Furness, so that they can be recorded in by the secretary.

Use of Sources

Some guidance may be necessary on the use of sources such as books and articles in the writing of essays that are to be submitted for assessment. It is, of course, expected that students will make use of sources in their essays, and it is often desirable that a particular viewpoint found in a printed source should be expounded and discussed. But it is important that your reader be left in no doubt about what you are doing when you use sources, and this can be ensured by following some elementary conventions.

1. Verbatim quotations, long or short, should be enclosed in inverted commas or indented (i.e.; like this paragraph). References should be given in sufficient details to allow the reader to look up the passage, e.g. "Plato, Republic, 476a".
2. Passages of close paraphrase or summaries of an author's views should also be acknowledged in the same way as quotations.
3. If an argument or view, though expressed without close verbal parallel to the source, is derived from a particular author, it is appropriate to acknowledge the debt.

Observance of these conventions is good scholarly practice. It gives to the authors whose work has been used what is due to them. It enables a tutor to know whose work he is commenting on and assessing. It ensures that the writer does not fall under suspicion of dishonest work - passing off as his own the mental work of others.

But it is perfectly possible to observe these conventions and yet to fall short, in the use of sources, of the kind of independence that is necessary if one's work is to be of real value. The proper use of sources can only be learnt by experience and through the comments of tutors, who are always willing to give advice on particular cases. Some general remarks may, however, be useful.

Generally speaking verbatim quotations should be confined to short passages, and should have a specific purpose: e.g. you may wish to discuss the meaning of a particular word or sentence. *Quoted passages should never be strung together in place of extended exposition.* Intelligent selection of such passages may deserve some credit, but very little since it gives little evidence that the material is understood.

'Paraphrase' can include a variety of things. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines it as 'free rendering or amplification of a passage, expression of its sense in other words'. The latter can cover the humble activity of rewriting the passage with systematic minor changes; certain words replaced by synonymous words or phrases, with changes in grammatical construction, and so on - a rather mechanical process. But paraphrase can be the activity of re-expressing the content of a passage in a way that frees it from obscurity, presents its points in a more perspicuous order, and brings out the structure of its argument by identifying the conclusion and distinguishing the various premises and revealing their relationships. The important distinction to grasp is between slavish paraphrase and critical paraphrase. The slavish variety is in general to be avoided (whether acknowledged or not) because it can be done even with the most superficial understanding of the passage that is being re-expressed. An essay which consists largely, or even wholly, of critical paraphrase can on the other hand be of great value to the student. To be able to articulate an argument independently, as distinct from parroting it, is an achievement in itself, and is also the best way into the more ambitious task of criticism.

It is a good idea to practise the art of critical paraphrase not only when writing an essay but also when making preparatory notes on your reading. It is also a good idea in note-taking to observe the conventions of using quotation marks and noting sources. The former is a good training, and the latter is a way of making sure that you do not inadvertently incorporate quoted material into an essay, having forgotten that you had copied it verbatim into your notes.

- References

It is very important that you provide a complete bibliography of sources you have used for writing your essay. In citing your sources, be sure to include author, title, publisher and date. You can use any standard style for this, but *please be consistent*. Here are some examples:

book:

Ayer, A.J., 'Freedom and Necessity' in *Reason and Responsibility*, 11th edition, Joel Feinberg and Russ Shafer-Landau, eds. (Wadsworth, 2002).

Heil, J. *Philosophy of Mind: A Contemporary Introduction* (Routledge, 1998).

journal article:

Jamieson, D. 'Animal Liberation is an Environmental Ethic', *Environmental Values*, 7:1, 1998, pp. 41-57.

- Use of Other Students' Work

Copying another student's essay, in whole or in part, or copying answers to questions set as exercises, is clearly indefensible, and such work will not be accepted. At the same time there is a place for collaboration and mutual assistance. In cases where a student wishes to submit work which is indebted to discussion with other students, an appropriate acknowledgement can be made. If you are in doubt about whether what you are doing is legitimate, or might be misunderstood, consult the tutor for whom the work is to be submitted.

You can check whether any passages of your draft essay have already been published on the web by invoking Findsame: <http://www.findsame.com>.

- Penalties for Plagiarism

In the foregoing an attempt has been made to give guidance on how to avoid inadvertent misappropriation of work of others. Deliberate misappropriation is plagiarism, which is an academic offence under Rule 6 of the University. Serious plagiarism in a particular piece may be penalised by the award of a zero mark. Persistent plagiarism is subject to more severe penalties, including, in extreme cases, exclusion from the University.