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# WRITING ESSAYS IN PHILOSOPHY

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Writing a philosophy essay is probably different from any kind of writing you have done before. What is most distinctive about philosophy is its focus on argument – developing a position, defending it against objections, considering alternatives, and so on. In this guide, we offer some advice about how to construct successful argumentative essays.

Writing a good philosophy essay is challenging but worthwhile. Some of the most important skills the study of philosophy can help you to acquire are skills of analytical thinking and clear expression: writing essays is the main way you will develop those skills. Essays in philosophy have rather different conventions to those in other subjects, and it is important to try and understand what is expected before you plunge in. But don't be daunted! This guide will help get you started on the road to writing the best essays you can.

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## What are we looking for?

Your essay should be an **argument** – not just a collection of thoughts about the topic. Its main emphasis should be on clearly setting out your own answer to the essay question, and providing support for that answer. Almost without exception, the conclusion of your argument should be a direct answer to the essay question you have chosen.

The criteria we'll be applying in marking your work derive from the University grade descriptors. Many instructors will have included them in an

assignment **rubric**. The main emphasis in our assessment is our judgement of how well your work displays the following qualities:

- **Clarity**
  - ...of expression
  - ...of argument
  - ...of organization
- **Understanding and knowledge of topic**
  - We prefer intensive knowledge: a detailed discussion of a few arguments is preferable to a synopsis of a large number of views.
- **Evaluative and analytical skills**
  - Your skill in developing and criticizing arguments. This is not a demand for originality. We want to see how well you handle philosophical arguments. You can show us by presenting positions clearly, in your own words, indicating possible objections and replies.
- **Coverage**
  - ...of relevant literature
  - ...of pertinent objections
- **Originality and independence of thought.**

A good essay in philosophy will be a **sincere** attempt to grapple with the issues raised by the essay questions. The topics discussed in philosophy courses are, as you already know, often quite difficult and of wide ranging significance – and they can be surprisingly difficult to articulate clearly. An essay which shows a meaningful attempt to get

clear on what is going on in a particular debate, which attempts to marshal relevant evidence for one side or another, and which attempts to respond to pertinent objections, will get a good mark. (How good will depend on how well the essay does these things.) It is not a pre-requisite of writing a solid essay that you come up with an original view, or that you give a conclusive defence of some existing view, or that you rebut all arguments to the contrary. Topics and set readings in philosophy are a steep obstacle for beginning philosophers, and markers will typically reward genuine engagement with the ideas, even if their complexity and difficulty means that you don't fully master everything that is going on in a course.

## Structuring your essay

Your essay should contain clear **signposting**. You should make it clear to your reader in your introduction what the overall structure of the essay is going to be, and as the essay proceeds it should be clear where we are in that structure, and where we are going.

In the *introduction*, it is best to get straight to the point. Don't waste words on providing a general background to the question (unless it helps to support your **answer** to the question). One brief paragraph telling the reader what conclusion you will be arguing for and how your discussion will be structured is sufficient.

A good way to organize the main body of your essay is by using *section headings*. Each section should have a clear task to do, and it should be clear what role each section is playing within the overall structure of the essay.

The essay should have a *concluding paragraph* that sums up the conclusion you have reached and the support you have provided for it.

## The Writing Process

In order to produce a well-structured, thoughtful and clearly written essay, two things are essential.

1. **Plan** the structure of your essay before you write it. Include in your plan the sections that the essay will contain and the main points you will make in each section. You can then use the overall word-length that has been set for the

essay to work out how many words you have available for each section. It is OK to revise your plan when you write the essay itself: as you think through the issues in closer detail, you may find that your initial views about the best way to treat the topic change. But you need to write to a plan in order to produce an essay that is clearly structured.

2. **Reread** your essay before you submit it. When you do so, adopt the perspective of a critical reader. Look for typos and fix them; ask yourself whether the writing is fully clear. Be especially critical of whether there is any 'bloat' in your essay that might be trimmed – an essay that is 250 words under the word limit might have a better structure and get a better mark than one which has been padded to reach the word limit.

## Tips on constructing an essay

- Be **selective**. Aim for depth rather than breadth. An essay has breadth when it mentions a lot of different views, without examining them carefully. An essay has depth when it describes a view accurately, explains it fully, examines the case for and against it carefully, and then explains clearly why it should be accepted or rejected.
- You can't fully defend every single claim you will be making in your essay. So it is reasonable to set out the **assumptions** you will be using as starting-points for your argument. Setting these out clearly is something you will be given credit for. At the planning stage, you should ask: 'What am I trying to establish? And what am I assuming in order to establish it?'
- Wherever you can, **give reasons**. Don't just say: 'Smith argues that *p*. Jones argues that not-*p*. I think Smith's argument is better.' You need to **explain why** Smith's argument is better. Perhaps Jones' argument relies on a premise you think is false, while Smith's does not. Or maybe Smith's argument is logically valid, while Jones' argument is suggestive without being watertight. Whatever it is, there should be some reason why you prefer one argument to the other, and you should give that reason. **Note:** that Smith's argument has a conclusion you wish were true (or that you agree with

already), while Jones' does not, is *not* a good reason to think that Smith's argument is better.

## Background Reading

You are offering an argument in your essay for a specific answer to the question set. While this argument will provide some support for the conclusion you draw, you cannot provide support for every claim you make within your essay. Sometimes you are going to have to rely on external sources to support the claims you make. And you might find external sources useful in thinking about how to structure the case you are making, and which lines of argument are promising approaches to the question you are addressing.

Finding appropriate sources to consult can be difficult. The best approach is to follow the experts. Your lecturers might provide recommended readings alongside the set texts, and if so you should definitely consult these first. Sometimes the lecture may include a bibliography in their lecture notes or in the course guide. In some introductory courses, these may suffice to lead you to all the further reading you need to do. But in more advanced courses, particularly at level III, you will be expected to do some independent research as part of the course. A useful resource is PhilPapers, which you can browse by topic to find sources:

➤ <https://philpapers.org/>

These topics are often very narrowly delimited, so you may be able to find a list of sources which is precisely on the topic you are writing about. Many topics in the PhilPapers database begin with annotated bibliographies prepared by subject-matter experts, and these can provide excellent ways to approach the literature if you are lucky enough in your choice of topic. Another useful resource of the same sort is Oxford Bibliographies:

➤ <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/>

They provide in depth annotated bibliographies for a wide range of philosophical topics, at a more advanced level than PhilPapers. Their coverage is at present more limited.

You should also make use of the bibliographies in any textbook or set readings for your course – they may point you towards the most significant items in

the literature. Another reading tip: in handbooks, companions and encyclopaedias, you will find survey articles that give you an overview of a topic, setting out the main views, controversies, arguments and objections. It's a good idea to make use of these in order to get an idea of the main opposition that your own view needs to be defended against. But you should resist the temptation to pad your essay out with this sort of survey material. What we're interested in is your defence of your own answer to the specific essay question.

Please **don't** just plug your essay topic into Google or library search and hope for the best. The literature is vast and of variable quality. A poor choice of external sources – especially over-reliance on non-peer-reviewed materials – can lead your thinking and writing seriously astray from standard approaches.

## How many sources to cite?

Any work you submit must acknowledge dependence, either direct or indirect, on source material. You must cite the source of an idea or a quotation.

Course coordinators may provide guidelines about how many references your assignments should contain. These may differ from course to course, and also depend on the nature of the assignment. You should check with the course coordinator if you are looking for guidance about how many references an essay should include. As a preliminary guide, which should not be taken as definitive, you might expect to cite 3–5 sources per 1000 words, including set and core readings (but excluding lecture notes, which you may cite if needed but which are not peer reviewed). For a research essay, you might need to cite even more.

In all courses, you can expect to read more than you cite. The more you read, the better informed you will be. But as you read more, you will find the approaches taken by some of the things you have consulted to be more fruitful than others in guiding your own thinking. You do not need to cite everything you have consulted, and indeed trying to fit references to a lot of sources into a short essay will usually result in a shallow and unfocused discussion.

## Plagiarism

You should definitely cite any source which has made a distinctive contribution to your line of argument – any source which supports some claim or approach you make use of in your essay and which is not completely and entirely due to you. You must make sure that ideas and phrasing which come from other sources is properly attributed. Please be sure to include page numbers in your citations, especially if you are including a direct quotation, so that assessors can look up the sources you have provided to check whether the source really does support the claim you are making.

The University's policy on plagiarism contains more information about what constitutes plagiarism, the University rules against it, and the disciplinary process for students who submit work which shows evidence of having been plagiarised:

➤ <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/policies/230>

## Citation Styles

When you make use of published material in your essay, you need to cite that material appropriately. Any style of referencing you might use would be acceptable (e.g., Harvard, APA, or footnote style), as long as (i) you are consistent and (ii) you provide full bibliographic details for all cited work – this includes page numbers for quotations. The University provides guides to correct referencing:

➤ <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/writingcentre/resources/referencing-guides>

For indirect dependence (where there is reliance on an idea or argument in a source text) you can use the following form of acknowledgment:

*The naive inductivist makes three assertions: science begins with observation; observation is a secure foundation for scientific knowledge; and scientific knowledge is derived from observation statements by inductive inference. (Chalmers 1982, pp.1-12)*

For direct dependence (quotation of source material) you can adopt the following conventions. If the quotation is relatively short, surround the material in quotation marks and acknowledge:

*At one point Kuhn points out that there are certain similarities between his position and the view defended by Karl Popper. Kuhn claims that they both 'reject the view that science progresses by accretion' (Kuhn 1970, pp.1-2).*

If the quotation is longer than three lines, indent the quoted material without using quotation marks and acknowledge:

*Aristotle identifies the conditions for pity in both the object of pity and the perceiver:*

*Let us now consider Pity, asking ourselves what things excite pity, and for what persons, and in what states of our mind pity is felt. Pity may be defined as a feeling of pain caused by the sight of some evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friends of ours, and moreover to befall us soon. (2004, p.77)*

*Aristotle thus thinks we cannot feel pity for those in very alien circumstances to our own.*

Please make sure you include a bibliography or list of references at the end of your essay, which will include bibliographic details for every source you have cited in your essay. There is no need to include everything you have read, but it would be plagiarism to omit anything on which you have relied when constructing your argument. The style for this list of references is up to you, but you should make use of one of the standard styles covered in the Writing Centre's guide linked above.

## Reading philosophy

Philosophy reading can be hard work! It's often better to read one article twice rather than two superficially. Something you will find is that if you already have some provisional opinions on a topic, it is much easier to read and digest other discussions of the topic – you'll be tuned in to the points on which you agree or disagree with the author.

Here's an approach to reading for a philosophy essay that works well for many students (and academics): we recommend you give it a try. It requires some time management (you can't do it in

a rush at the last minute), but it is an efficient way of getting value out of your reading time.

1. Before doing any background reading, write down your initial answer to the essay question, and some reasons why.
2. Read one or two items on the topic, by authors who argue for a different answer. Note where and why you disagree with them.
3. Now write your initial essay plan. It will include sections in which you set out your argument in support of your conclusion, and sections in which you discuss objections to your view and provide replies.
4. Then read the rest of your sources.
5. Look over your initial plan and revise it.
6. Write the essay, following your revised plan.
7. Don't forget to reread your essay before submitting it.

## What to avoid

Top things to avoid in your essays, if you can:

- essays that have no argument, but just consist of a list of observations drawn from the literature, or that end 'in conclusion, both sides seem to have points in their favour';
- essays that show no reading outside of the set readings;
- essays that merely repeat the lecture notes back in a slightly garbled form.
  - On the other hand, failing to discuss pertinent arguments just because they were discussed in lecture would be an even worse flaw: their importance is the reason they were included. So it's a matter of finding a balance between your own research and covering the basics.
- essays that show a lack of serious engagement with the lecture materials – and in particular, essays which exhibit confusions or misapprehensions that were the focus of some specific part of some lecture;

- essays that do not answer the question asked, but instead use the question simply as a platform for the writer's own pet issue; and
- essays that show obvious signs that their author has not read them over before submission.

On the other hand, you may wish to consider:

- [How to Write a Crap Philosophy Essay](#)

## Further Resources

Some further resources that may be useful to you as you write your essays.

The Australasian Association of Philosophy (AAP) provides a database of model essays from departments across Australasia. Items selected for inclusion will have been nominated by their departments, and often will have won prizes at their institution. You should not copy these essays, which have all been submitted to Turnitin in any case, but you may consult them to see the range of successful ways to approach writing philosophy:

- <https://aap.org.au/Undergraduates/Papers>

Jim Pryor at NYU provides a good general guide to writing a philosophy essay:

- [www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html](http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html)

This might be especially useful for students who haven't written a philosophical essay before, but advanced students will also learn something from it. Also highly recommended are his other guides to reading philosophical prose:

- [www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html](http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html)

and to specialised philosophical vocabulary:

- <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/vocab/>

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