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How to Write a Philosophical Essay

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If you want to convince someone of a philosophical thesis, such as that *God exists*, that *abortion is morally acceptable*, or that *we have free will*, you can write a philosophy essay.[2]

Philosophy essays are different from essays in many other fields, but with planning and practice, anyone can write a good one. This essay provides some basic instructions.[3]

1. Planning

Typically, your purpose in writing an essay will be to argue for a certain thesis, i.e., to support a conclusion about a philosophical claim, argument, or theory.[4] You may also be asked to carefully explain someone else's essay or argument.[5]

To begin, select a topic. Most instructors will be happy to discuss your topic with you before you start writing. Sometimes instructors give specific prompts with topics to choose from.

It's generally best to select a topic that you're interested in; you'll put more energy into writing it. Your topic will determine what kind of research or preparation you need to do before writing, although in undergraduate philosophy courses, you usually don't need to do outside research.[6]

Essays that defend or attack entire theories tend to be longer, and are more difficult to write convincingly, than essays that defend or attack particular arguments or objections: narrower is usually better than broader.

After selecting a topic, complete these steps:

- Ensure that you understand the relevant issues and arguments. Usually, it's enough to carefully read and take notes on the assigned readings on your essay's topic.

- Choose an *initial* thesis. Generally, you should choose a thesis that's interesting, but not extremely controversial.[7] You don't have to choose a thesis that you agree with, but it can help. (As you plan and write, you may decide to revise your thesis. This may require revising the rest of your essay, but sometimes that's necessary, if you realize you want to defend a different thesis than the one you initially chose.)

- Ensure that your thesis is a *philosophical* thesis. Natural-scientific or social-scientific claims, such as that *global warming is occurring* or that *people like to hang out with their friends*, are not philosophical theses.[8] Philosophical theses are typically defended using careful reasoning, and not primarily by citing scientific observations.

Instructors will usually not ask you to come up with some argument that no philosopher has discovered before. But if your essay ignores what the assigned readings say, that suggests that you haven't learned from those readings.

2. Structure

Develop an outline, rather than immediately launching into writing the whole essay; this helps with organizing the sections of your essay.

Your structure will probably look something like the following, but follow your assignment's directions carefully.[9]

2.1. Introduction and Thesis

Write a short introductory paragraph that includes your thesis statement (e.g., "I will argue that eating meat is morally wrong"). The thesis statement is not a preview nor a plan; it's not "I will consider whether eating meat is morally wrong."

If your thesis statement is difficult to condense into one sentence, then it's likely that you're trying to argue for more than one thesis.[10]

2.2. Arguments

Include at least one paragraph that presents and explains an argument. It should be totally clear what

reasons or evidence you're offering to support your thesis.

In most essays for philosophy courses, you only need one central argument for your thesis. It's better to present one argument and defend it well than present many arguments in superficial and incomplete ways.

2.3. Objection

Unless the essay must be extremely short, raise an objection to your argument.[11] Be clear exactly which part of the other argument (a premise, or the form) is being questioned or denied and why.[12]

It's usually best to choose either one of the most common or one of the best objections. Imagine what a smart person who disagreed with you would say in response to your arguments, and respond to them.

2.4. Reply

Offer your own reply to any objections you considered. If you don't have a convincing reply to the objection, you might want to go back and change your thesis to something more defensible.

2.5. Additional Objections and Replies

If you have space, you might consider and respond to the second-best or second-most-common objection to your argument, and so on.

2.6. Conclusion

To conclude, offer a paragraph summarizing what you did. Don't include any new or controversial claims here, and don't claim that you did more than you actually accomplished. There should be no surprises at the end of a philosophy essay.

3. Style

Make your writing extremely clear and straightforward. Use simple sentences and don't worry if they seem boring: this improves readability.[13] Every sentence should contribute in an obvious way towards supporting your thesis. If a claim might be confusing, state it in more than one way and then choose the best version.

To check for readability, you might read the essay aloud to an audience. Don't try to make your writing entertaining: in philosophy, clear arguments are fun in themselves.

Concerning objections, treat those who disagree with you charitably. Make it seem as if you think they're

smart, careful, and nice, which is why you are responding to them.

Your readers, if they're typical philosophers, will be looking for *any possible way* to object to what you say. Try to make your arguments "airtight."

4. Citations

If your instructor tells you to use a certain citation style, use it. No citation style is universally accepted in philosophy.[14]

You usually don't need to directly quote anyone.[15] You can paraphrase other authors; where you do, cite them.

Don't plagiarize.[16] Most institutions impose severe penalties for academic dishonesty.

5. Conclusion

A well-written philosophy essay can help people gain a new perspective on some important issue; it might even change their minds.[17] And engaging in the process of writing a philosophical essay is one of the best ways to develop, understand, test, and sometimes change, your own philosophical views. They are well worth the time and effort.

Notes

[1] Primary author: Thomas Metcalf. Contributing authors: Chelsea Haramia, Dan Lowe, Nathan Nobis, Kristin Seemuth Whaley.

[2] You can also do some kind of oral presentation, either "live" in person or recorded on video. An effective presentation, however, requires the type of planning and preparation that's needed to develop an effective philosophy paper: indeed, you may have to first write a paper and then use it as something like a script for your presentation. Some parts of the paper, e.g., section headings, statements of arguments, key quotes, and so on, you may want to use as visual aids in your presentation to help your audience better follow along and understand.

[3] Many of these recommendations are, however, based on the material in Horban (1993), Huemer (n.d.), Pryor (n.d.), and Rippon (2008). There is very little published research to cite about the claims in this essay, because these claims are typically justified by instructors' experience, not, say, controlled experiments on different approaches to teaching philosophical writing. Therefore, the guidance offered here has been vetted by many professional philosophers with a collective hundreds of hours of

undergraduate teaching experience and further collective hundreds of hours of taking philosophy courses. The editors of 1000-Word Philosophy also collectively have thousands of hours of experience in writing philosophy essays.

[4] For more about the areas of philosophy, see What is Philosophy? by Thomas Metcalf.

[5] For an explanation of what is meant by an "argument" in philosophy, see Arguments: Why Do You Believe What You Believe? by Thomas Metcalf.

[6] Outside research is sometimes discouraged, and even prohibited, for philosophy papers in introductory courses because a common goal of a philosophy paper is not to report on a number of views on a philosophical issue—so philosophy papers usually are not "research reports"—but to rather engage a specific argument or claim or theory, in a more narrow and focused way, and show that you understand the issue and have engaged in critically. If a paper engages in too much reporting of outside research, that can get in the way of this critical evaluation task.

[7] There are two reasons to avoid extremely controversial theses. First, such theses are usually more difficult to defend adequately. Second, you might offend your instructor, who might (fairly or not) give you a worse grade. So, for example, you might argue that abortion is usually permissible, or usually wrong, but you probably shouldn't argue that anyone who has ever said the word 'abortion' should be tortured to death, and you probably shouldn't argue that anyone who's ever pregnant should immediately be forced to abort the pregnancy, because both of these claims are extremely implausible and so it's very unlikely that good arguments could be developed for them. But theses that are controversial without being implausible can be interesting for both you and the instructor, depending on how you develop and defend your argument or arguments for that thesis.

[8] Whether a thesis is philosophical mostly depends on whether it is a lot like theses that have been defended in important works of philosophy. That means it would be a thesis about metaphysics, epistemology, value theory, logic, history of philosophy, or something therein. For more information, see Philosophy and Its Contrast with Science and What is Philosophy? both by Thomas Metcalf.

[9] Also, read the grading rubric, if it's available. If your course uses an online learning environment, such as Canvas, Moodle, or Schoology, then the rubric will often be visible as attached to the assignment itself. The rubric is a breakdown of the different requirements of the essay and how each is weighted and evaluated by the instructor. So, for example, if some requirement has a relatively high weight, you should put more effort into doing a good job. Similarly, some requirement might explicitly mention some step for the assignment that you need to complete in order to get full credit.

[10] In some academic fields, a "thesis" or "thesis statement" is considered both your conclusion *and* a statement of the basic support you will give for that conclusion. In philosophy, your thesis is usually just that conclusion: e..g, "Eating meat is wrong," "God exists," "Nobody has free will," and so on: the support given for that conclusion is the support for your thesis.

[11] To be especially clear, this should be an objection to the argument given for your thesis or conclusion, not an objection to your thesis or conclusion itself. This is because you don't want to give an argument and then have an objection that does not engage that argument, but instead engages something else, since that won't help your reader or audience better understand and evaluate that argument.

[12] For more information about premises, forms, and objections, see Arguments: Why do You Believe What You Believe? by Thomas Metcalf.

[13] For a philosophical argument in favor of clear philosophical writing, and guidance on producing such writing, see Fischer and Nobis (2019).

[14] The most common styles in philosophy are APA (Purdue Online Writing Lab, n.d.a) and Chicago (Purdue Online Writing Lab, n.d.b.).

[15] You might choose to directly quote someone when it's very important that the reader know that the quoted author actually said what you claim they said. For example, if you're discussing some author who made some startling claim, you can directly quote them to show that they really said that. You might also directly quote someone when they presented some information or argument in a very concise, well-stated way, such that paraphrasing it would take up more space than simply quoting them would.

[16] Plagiarism, in general, occurs when someone submits written or spoken work that is largely

copied, in style, substance, or both, from some other author's work, and does not attribute it to that author. However, your institution or instructor may define "plagiarism" somewhat differently, so you should check with their definitions. When in doubt, check with your instructor first.

[17] These are instructions for relatively short, introductory-level philosophy essays. For more guidance, there are many useful philosophy-writing guides online to consult, e.g.: Horban (1993); Huemer (n.d.); Pryor (n.d.); Rippon (2008); Weinberg (2019).

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