

Writing philosophy essays

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1 Thesis

- The golden rule of writing philosophy: always remember that you are *making an argument*
- So, the structure of a philosophy essay should be the structure of an argument
- It follows that it needs to be an argument *for* something: your essay should have a clear central thesis, with everything else organised as reasons for believing that thesis
- This thesis should be clearly stated, as early as reasonably possible, and defended consistently throughout the essay
- If something is not relevant to your defence of the central thesis, don't say it: this includes
 - discussions of bits of the literature that are included just because you happen to have read it
 - arguments which proceed from assumptions equivalent to, or stronger than, the thesis you're defending
 - and most of all, pointless journalistic waffle about how impressive, important, etc. the question under discussion is
- Some exposition of ideas or concepts is appropriate (especially in the context of philosophy of science), but only insofar as is necessary to ensure your reader understands your argument

2 Analysis and argument

- This is the core skill for philosophical writing
- At its most basic, analysis is a matter of stating a thesis and providing reasons to believe it; then providing reasons to believe the reasons; etc. etc.
- Obviously this process doesn't go on indefinitely: you're aiming to get to a point where you're saying things that are either self-evident or as near as possible, empirically verified, or accepted by both sides in the relevant debate
- The counterpart of defending your thesis is attacking alternative positions (or objections to your thesis), and the arguments for them
- Always make sure you present these alternatives as charitably as possible
- When addressing an argument (assuming it has the format of reasons for believing a thesis), there are three classic modes of attack:
 - Deny that one (or more) of the reasons adduced is true
 - Deny that the reasons do support the argument
 - Identify an ambiguity, such that some reason is true only on one reading, and supports the argument only on the other
- In order to make your own argument as proof as possible against these attacks, you need to
 - provide as much support as possible for your claims
 - make the links between the claims as tight as possible; and
 - guard against ambiguity or equivocation
- Avoiding ambiguity also leads to a core part of philosophical writing style: don't change vocabulary unless you're changing concepts (or if you've explicitly flagged that you regard two terms as interchangeable)
- More generally, your writing should retain an appropriate level of formality, and avoid vague phrasing (e.g. "basically", "mostly", "sort of", "kind of"), weasel words (e.g. "it is often said", "according to some", "clearly", "surely"), and scare quotes (e.g. "objects have "more reality" than properties")
- We are also looking for evidence of *originality* in your analysis
- This doesn't mean that you need some grand new idea which no-one in the history of philosophy has considered before; it does mean that you are using and adapting the ideas of others in a way which makes them your own
- Finally, don't neglect the importance of examples or illustrations—although equally, don't confuse the statement of an example for a statement of a general thesis

3 Structure

- The easy part of essay structure is just making sure that your essay is structured, and that it is structured as an argument
- Insofar as you are providing the reader with distinct reasons to believe your thesis, you should keep those reasons distinct, and address them sequentially
- Some overlap is to be expected and allowed for (e.g. "I will return to this idea in more detail below"), but don't put off until p. 17 what can be done on p. 3
- Even easier than having structure is telling your reader about your structure
- Tell the reader what the structure will be at the start, and remind them throughout the essay of where they are in that structure
- At any moment, the reader should know exactly why you are saying the specific thing you are saying at that moment: they should understand what point you are making, and how that point fits into a defence of the central thesis
- The more difficult part of structure is what we might call *strategy*: this is a question of having a *good* structure
- As a rule of thumb: positive reasons for the thesis take precedence over responding to objections; and more important reasons or objections take precedence over less important ones
- Like all rules, this should be violated when necessary

4 Literature

- One of the things you should be demonstrating in your essay is an awareness of the general literature on the topic
- However, irrelevant name-dropping will only serve to confuse and enrage the reader
- What you are really aiming for is *familiarity* with the literature: sufficient knowledge of and comfort with the literature that you can use and deploy it for your own argumentative purposes
- Part of this is making sure that you have really thought about the spectrum of possible considerations that are relevant to a particular issue
- Another is ensuring that you have really understood the alternative positions, especially if you are going to attack them
- Quotations should be used sparingly: their purpose is to demonstrate that you are not misrepresenting, not to be a substitute for your own writing

5 Grading scale and marking criteria

Very good: (1.0), (1.3)

- Clear and unambiguous thesis, explicitly stated and defended
- Transparent and well-designed structure, with signposting throughout
- Detailed and original analysis
- Strong familiarity with the literature

Good: (1.7), (2.0), (2.3)

- Clear thesis, explicitly stated and defended
- Transparent structure, but perhaps less strategically considered or well-signposted
- Strong analysis, with some evidence of originality
- Familiarity with the literature, although lacking in depth or comprehensiveness

Satisfactory: (2.7), (3.0), (3.3)

- Identifiable central thesis, but not as clearly articulated as it should be
- Structured, but not well-directed and typically without signposting
- Arguments are mostly relevant, but lacking in originality or clarity
- Knowledge of the literature

Pass: (3.7), (4.0)

- An identifiable thesis or theses
- Some structure, but undisciplined and poorly signposted
- Arguments present, but frequently unclear or irrelevant
- Some indications of knowledge of the literature

Fail: (5.0)

- No clear thesis
- Little or no evidence of analytical structure
- Arguments and analysis poor or irrelevant throughout
- Little or no evidence of knowledge of the literature