

# Guidelines for Writing a Philosophy Essay

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## General requirements

Philosophy essays usually discuss a difficult question or a controversial initial claim.

Essays are NOT:

1. A mere summary of the views expressed by authors *X* and *Y* on an issue *I*. Essays are expected to engage critically with the considered claim or question.
2. A mere statement of your personal opinions on the considered claim or question. What matters is not so much the content of what you argue for (you will not get a low mark if the teacher disagrees with your views), as how you are able to argue for it. *Every view you advance must be supported by an argument* and grounded in reasons. A good essay does not include such sentences as ‘I am convinced that *P*’, but rather ‘I believe that *P* for reasons *A* and *B*’.

The essay title might take the form of a question (e.g. “Is the right of secession based on a right to national self-determination?”), or a controversial claim to discuss (e.g. ‘“A justified claim to national self-determination is sufficient to ground a right to secede”’. Discuss this claim’). In addressing the question, or assessing the controversial claim, the essay may criticize or defend the initial claim, or defend one answer to the question posed; or it may assess the arguments on both sides without taking a particular stance, aiming instead to provide a balanced discussion.

Whichever strategy you adopt, it is essential that you do not merely make assertions, but provide *arguments* to support your views. The claims presented or defended must be *justified*, and the arguments provided must be as clear and as persuasive as possible.

You should picture your reader as a lazy simpleton to whom you must explain every single detail of your argument. In this connection, the three recommendations are in order:

- a) Write your essay in a clear manner, without assuming that your reader knows the preparatory readings as well as you do; explain every assumption on which you rely and any idea to which you refer. If an idea is crucial for the argument you are trying to build, make it explicit in the body of text. Otherwise you can add footnotes.
- b) Make the reading of your essay an enjoyable experience. The reader should not be required to make an extraordinary effort in order to understand what you mean. Be clear and concise. Always re-read (and re-read again) what you have written to make sure it is comprehensible. Always ask yourself whether what you have written actually expresses what you meant. Use plenty of examples to illustrate your claims.

c) Imagine that your reader, confronted with an ambiguous statement, will always interpret it in the manner least favourable to you. Conversely, always imagine that your reader, confronted with an argument you have defended, will always come up with the strongest possible objections.

Your essay should show that:

- (i) you have understood the theoretical issue raised by the considered claim or question;
- (ii) you have understood the readings;
- (iii) you are able to *critically assess* the claim or the possible answers to the question posed.

In order to do this, the essay should reveal a capacity for independent thought. This does not mean that you are expected to develop a revolutionary philosophical theory. But you should be able to prove your ability to ‘think with your own head’ by accurately reporting and autonomously criticizing the views of others.

### **How to write your essay**

Once you have chosen your topic and identified the relevant bibliographical references, the first step is to do the assigned readings. In so doing, remember that:

1. Not everything that you have read will be directly relevant for your essay topic. Select, *while you read*, the relevant parts of the texts and focus on them.
2. Do not treat readings with deference: engage critically with them! Always ask yourself whether the author's argument is clear and persuasive. Take note of all critiques when they come to your mind.

An important implication of 1 and 2 is that reading for the sake of philosophical inquiry is *not* a *passive* but an *active* process.

After this first step, organize the material. Write an outline of your essay. The course teachers are available to discuss such an outline during their office hours (but not to give an opinion on a completed essay before its submission).

When it comes to deciding what to include in your outline, use the question posed in the title as a compass. For example: not everything that McMahan has written about the ethics of war is relevant in assessing whether we should consider soldiers as moral equals. Anything that does not make a direct contribution to your essay topic must be left out.

Think about the order of presentation of the arguments for or against the position you are examining. The essay needs a clear structure. You are not writing a spy story with dramatic turns of events or a surprise ending. The claim to be discussed and the argument you want to present must be made clear from the very beginning of the essay.

The following guidelines may help in structuring your essay:

#### 1. Introduction:

- present the issue you want to address (above all this requires an explanation of the essay title).

- Explain *why* the issue is worth discussing (Why is it problematic? Why is it important to address it?).
- Specify *how* you are going to tackle the issue and why that is a good strategy.
- Briefly anticipate your conclusion, to give the reader an idea of the *direction* in which your essay is going.

## 2. Main body of the essay:

- divide your essay into sections. To this end you can use (numbered) headings and sub-headings.
- Divide each section into paragraphs. Every paragraph should present one main idea (*but it usually consists of more than one sentence!*).
- Write in a clear and plain prose. Do not use synonyms only for the sake of varying your vocabulary. Associate each concept with a single term and employ it consistently.
- Always make it clear in what sense you are using a term. Philosophical terms are very often expressed by words used in ordinary language but with a different meaning (consider, for example, the meaning of ‘utilitarian’ or ‘liberty’ or ‘immunity’). You too can do this. What is necessary is that you state your usage of a given term without ambiguities.
- In presenting an author's view, do not let biographical details lead you astray. What matters about Michael Walzer is not where he was born or where he taught, but what his position was on the issue under consideration.
- In criticizing an author, make sure you present her views carefully. Resist the temptation to build a straw-man to destroy. If you criticize an author, you must give the most charitable interpretation of her views to show that *even taken at their best* they are not persuasive for such and such a reason. This is called the principle of interpretive charity. Only if you respect this principle will your arguments be effective.
- Draw a clear distinction between your thoughts and the thoughts of others that you are simply reporting. Do not ascribe to others your interpretations. Do not pretend that the ideas of others are your own. The latter is plagiarism, and is a serious offence.
- When you refer to an author's views, give full bibliographical references. Give textual evidence in support of your interpretation of an author's views by quoting the author's own words. When you do so, make sure you use quotation marks and cite the source (page numbers included). Notice that a quotation does not exonerate you from explaining the author's views in your own words (you can do that either before or after the quotation itself). Keep direct quotes to an absolute minimum.
- Do your best to defend your views, but show awareness of their limits. An essay is not a political *pamphlet*. If you are aware of the limits of your argument, do not obscure them. Account for them and explain why you think that your argument is worth making despite those limits.

## 3. Conclusions:

- Summarize the fundamental steps of the argument.
- Explain how your argument contributes to assessing the considered question.
- Never introduce new issues that you do not have space to address.

In doing all of the above, be clear but concise. If you are given a word limit it, stick to it. Try to divide the available space in a well-reasoned and balanced way. Do not sacrifice any section for the sake of another. Should you realize that you need more space to make an additional point or develop a new argument – one that is related to, but not essential to, your own argument – say so. You could write – perhaps in a footnote – that although saying that *P*, or examining the further position *Q*, would be useful at this point, you do not have the space to do so. Obviously, you cannot gloss over a point that would be fatal to your argument. But

for points that are relevant but non-essential to your argument, this strategy is perfectly acceptable.

### **Before submitting your essay**

Once you have finished writing, put your essay aside for a few days. Re-read your essay later to check that it is actually understandable. For every sentence, ask yourself whether it really contributes to addressing the essay topic. Check whether the essay's structure is clear. The topic must be clearly stated and your arguments must be clear and consequential.

At this stage, asking a fellow student to read your essay might be very helpful. Another useful strategy is to read your text out loud. This enables you to check the coherence of the text, the quality of the prose, and the argument's flow. Check the grammar and syntax. Sometimes even published works contain typos. However, they must be the exception and not the rule.

Be accurate in the graphic presentation of the essay. Do not use small fonts (at least 'Times New Roman' 12 pts. for the body of text, 10 pts. for footnotes). Use a line-spacing of 1.5 and adequate page margins so that the course teacher can jot down comments. Don't forget to insert page numbers.

Do not use the functions 'bold' or 'underline' (if not in headings). If you wish to emphasize certain words use '*italics*'. Do not type out quotations in italics. Quotations are indicated by inverted commas, not by italics.

You may use the first person singular to present your ideas (e.g. 'I will explain Rawls's position about *P* in the first place, and then I will hold that *Q*'; 'Although Kant explained that *P*, I believe that non-*P* for reasons *X* and *Y*').

### **Bibliographical references**

#### **Traditional style**

Citations in footnotes:

Book:

Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

Article in a multi-authored collection of essays:

Charles Taylor, 'What's Wrong with Negative Liberty', in A. Ryan (ed.), *The Idea of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

Journal article:

Gerald C. MacCallum Jr., 'Negative and Positive Freedom', *Philosophical Review*, 76 (1967), pp. 312-334.

The names of authors should correspond to the authors' name as it appears on the work. For instance, 'G.A. Cohen' (this is how his name appears in his books), and not 'Gerald A. Cohen', or even 'Gerald Alan Cohen'. Or else, use initials throughout: I. Berlin, G. C. MacCallum Jr., G. A. Cohen, etc.

Repetitions of the same works in footnotes:

For repeated citations, you may use the following Latin expressions:

*ibidem* (or *ibid.*) = in the same place (the same citation of the previous footnote).

*ivi* = in the same place (to indicate the same work as that in the previous footnote but with different page numbers).

*op. cit.* = in the work already cited (to cite an already mentioned work, although not in the previous footnote).

*cit.* = as already cited (for a previously cited work, the title of which must be repeated).

*idem* (or *id.*) = the same author.

Examples:

1 Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 23.

2 *ibid.*

3 *ivi*, p. 25.

4 I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity. Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Harper Collins, 1991), p. 134.

5 MacCallum, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

6 I. Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, *cit.*, pp. 80-84.

7 Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, *cit.*, p. 97.

Alternatively, you can repeat the author's surname and the work's title (but not its subtitle):

1 G.C. MacCallum Jr., 'Negative and Positive Freedom', *Philosophical Review*, 76 (1967), p. 313.

2 MacCallum, *Negative and Positive Freedom*, p. 317.

3 MacCallum, *Negative and Positive Freedom*, p. 316.

4 I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity. Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Harper Collins, 1991), p. 134.

5 MacCallum, *Negative and Positive Freedom*, p. 27.

6 I. Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 80-84.

7 Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, p. 97.

While you draft your essay, it is advisable that you use the second of the above models, because you might move parts of your text around, thus changing the order of the footnotes.

## Harvard style

In the alternative system known as the Harvard System, works are cited directly (within brackets) in the body of text, with the author's surname and the publication year. In some cases, this style is used to cite works in footnotes, but this is rare because one of the main

aims of choosing this style is precisely that of reducing the number of footnotes. At the end of the essay, a list of bibliographical references is included.

Examples:

In the main body of the text:

To address this issue, I will rely on the distinction between positive and negative liberty (Berlin, 1986, pp. 121-31).

In footnotes:

To address this issue, I will rely on the distinction between positive and negative liberty.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This distinction is used for the first time by Isaiah Berlin (1989, pp. 121-31). The same distinction is questioned by some theorists who have criticized Berlin (see, for instance, MacCallum, 1996; Pettit 1997a).

Pros and cons of the Harvard style

Pros:

- it minimizes the use of footnotes and allows you to cite each work fully only once.
- It offers a quick and easy way to refer to a well known work.
- The reader might find it useful to have all the references collected at the end of the essay, rather than looking for them in footnotes.

Cons:

- if there are many references, the reading of the text may be not very smooth or easy.
- Publication years may sometimes look counterintuitive or odd, in particular with recent editions of classic authors of the past. For instance, you might find yourself reading: Plato, 2002; Mill, 1958.
- Some authors are very prolific, and you might find citations such as the following: Pettit, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1997e; Pogge, 1992a, 1992d, 1993b, 1993c, 1993f – in such cases understanding what the references stand for can be cumbersome.

## **Bibliography**

In most publications, a bibliography is required if you use the Harvard style; if you use the 'traditional' style, it is optional.

At the end of a *student essay or thesis*, on the other hand, it is always best to provide a bibliography that includes all the readings you have consulted in preparation for the essay, even if they have not all been cited in the main body of the work (such a bibliography need not be included in the word count).

Examples:

Traditional system:

Berlin, I., *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

Pettit, P., *Republicanism. A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

Pettit, P., 'Republican Theory and Criminal Punishment', *Utilitas*, 9 (1997), pp. 59-79.

Harvard style:

Pettit, P. (1997a), *Republicanism. A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

Pettit, P. (1997b), 'Republican Theory and Criminal Punishment', *Utilitas*, 9, pp. 59-79.

Taylor, C. (1979), 'What's Wrong with Negative Liberty', in A. Ryan (ed.), *The Idea of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Philosophical writing is different from the writing you'll be asked to do in other courses. Most of the strategies described below will also serve you well when writing for other courses, but don't automatically assume that they all will. Nor should you assume that every writing guideline you've been given by other teachers is important when you're writing a philosophy paper. Some of those guidelines are routinely violated in good philosophical prose (e.g., see the guidelines on grammar, below).

### Contents. What Does One Do in a Philosophy Paper? Three Stages of Writing.

Earl UCD School of Philosophy. I. General Guidelines for Writing Essays in Philosophy. 1. Answer the question. If the assigned essay title is in the form of a question, your essay must answer the question. Here is a useful strategy for many philosophical essays: before you begin your essay, write down "Therefore" and complete the sentence as what will be the final sentence of your essay. This will be the thesis you are defending. In general, biographical and historical information does not belong in a philosophy essay at all. Nor does purple prose ("since the dawn of time"). Nor do vacuous phrases ("He had a conception of freedom that was particularly interesting").

I discovered a secret about writing an essay. I learned how to not only write a great essay, but how to have fun while doing it. That's right. I said FUN. Every once in a while, I would write a really good essay, but mostly I skated by with B's and A-minuses. I know personally how boring writing an essay can be, and also, how hard it can be to write a good one. However, toward the end of my time as a student, I made a breakthrough. I figured out how to not only write a great essay, I learned how to have fun while doing it. That's right. Fun.

### Why Writing an Essay Is So Hard? Here are a few reasons: You'd rather be scrolling through Facebook.

### A Brief Guide to Writing the Philosophy Paper. The Challenges of Philosophical Writing.

The aim of the assignments in your philosophy classes is to get you doing philosophy. But what is philosophy, and how is it to be done? An ideal philosophical argument should lead the reader in undeniable logical steps from obviously true premises to an unobvious conclusion. A negative argument is an objection that tries to show that a claim, theory, or argument is mistaken; if it does so successfully, we say that it refutes it. A positive argument tries to support a claim or theory, for example, the view that there is genuine free will, or the view that we should never eat animals. Philosophy papers usually follow the guidelines outlined in The Chicago Manual of Style. You can find some more information on this citation style in the "Student Resources" section of the Debby Ellis Writing Center website. Endnotes or footnotes are appropriate places to expand on an aspect of the argument that is not central to your essay and to give more kinds of evidence for your position.

### A Few Common Errors to Avoid.

Students often write essays that are too broad and, thus, superficial. Philosophy essays cannot be written the day before they are due. You should write a draft at least a week in advance and then engage in thorough revisions of it. The point of these revisions is to make the essay as effective as possible in convincing the reader of your argument.