

Ten rules for writing a philosophy essay

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Many people find the thought of writing philosophy intimidating, but it doesn't have to be that way. We've put together 10 rules to help you understand what a good philosophy essay is, and how to write one. We'll take you through what preparation you need to do and how you need to structure your essay and we'll give you some tips on how to avoid some common errors. Some of the rules apply to good essay writing in any subject and others apply specifically to philosophy.

1. Know the study material

Time spent planning is always time well spent. Work out what the question is asking for, and from that, work out which parts of the study material you will need to focus on (there will sometimes be a steer about this in the guidance notes). Then re-read the study material, making a note of where you will be able to find stuff that is useful for your answer (quotable sentences, for example). And although you need to show familiarity with the study material, your tutor will not be looking for mere regurgitation. Read on to find out what they will be looking for.

2. Write a structured essay plan

Before writing, plan out what you want to say and what order you want to say it in. Get this bit right and the actual writing should be plain sailing. The structure of your essay will depend in part on the question asked and in part on how you set about answering it. But typically you'll need to have sections where you present someone's view, and sections in which you assess that view, giving your own view in the process. One thing you need to be absolutely sure of is that your essay plan addresses the question asked, and that you're not going to be going off on an irrelevant tangent.

3. Say what you are going to do

Write an introductory paragraph laying out what you're going to do. You don't have many words, so keep this short. State your conclusion, and spell out the various stages of your argument. This provides your reader with a map of what they can expect when they read the essay and it also inspires confidence that you know what you are doing.

4. Argue to your conclusion

The introduction was where you said what you are going to do. Now is where you start to do it, and the key word in this rule is 'argue'. The conclusion you decide to defend matters less than how well you defend it. The tutor reading your essay is going to be looking for convincing arguments. With a solid essay plan, the arguments you need to make your

case can just be written out. In reality complications or changes of mind nearly always emerge as you go along, so you'll need to adapt when things don't go quite to plan.

5. Signpost your argument

A car journey is less stressful if, at any time in the journey, you know where you are going, and the same is true for reading a philosophy essay. So as well as arguing to a conclusion, you need to let your reader know where they are in your argument. Sentences such as the following can be useful: 'Having shown that such and such, I will now show that so and so or 'Smith has two arguments for this position. In the first he says this and in the second he says that... .'

6. Write clearly and concisely

Philosophy is complex enough as it is, so aim for a straightforward style in which you say what needs to be said in as clear a way as possible before moving on to the next point. Novels and poems call for an evocative style. In philosophy the opposite holds: you want your reader to be focusing on *what* you say, not on *how* you say it. Ideally, the reader won't even notice the style.

7. Give examples

Philosophy is an abstract subject, and sometimes a point can be made more effectively with the help of an example. Compare the following two ways of making the same claim: First, 'it does not follow from the fact that we can imagine that some one thing is two things, that there really are two separate things there'. And second, 'it does not follow from the fact that we can imagine that Clark Kent is not Superman, that Clark Kent and Superman are really distinct'. The second is clearer than the first. But be careful in using examples, and make sure they are making the point you want them to make.

8. Consider opposing views

Make sure you leave room to present and assess different takes on the topic, but that means presenting competing answers and your reasons for rejecting them. It also means anticipating objections someone might raise to your own answer. It's far better that you do this yourself than that you leave it for your reader to do. You should signpost this with phrases like 'A possible objection to what I have just said is...such and such' and then you deal with the objection.

9. Avoid common errors

We have spent many years assessing philosophy essays. Here are some of the things we have noticed which cause students to lose marks:

- *irrelevance*
Don't be tempted to make fascinating but irrelevant points. Every paragraph, every sentence should be stating or defending your answer to the question.

- *repetition*
This can occur in two forms. The first is getting bogged down. In an essay you should make a point and then move on to another. The second is if you find yourself making points in one part of your essay that you have made earlier, and this could be a sign that your structure is wrong.
- *inaccurate interpretation*
Inaccurate representations of somebody's position usually arise *either* from not reading what they say with due care *or* from a lack of charity in presenting their view. Beware the temptation to make an opposing view seem more ridiculous than it really is just so you can blow it away with a puff of common sense. If you find yourself thinking 'Wow, Plato what an idiot *he* was!', double-check that you have given the best possible report of what Plato in fact wrote.
- *imprecision*
Avoid obscure or ambiguous or vague language. They are never good in a philosophy essay.
- *poor arguments*
It's not enough to defend your conclusion, you need to defend it *well*, that is with decent arguments. So make sure your conclusion doesn't depend on highly contentious assumptions; or giant leaps of logic; or for that matter the kind of imprecise language mentioned above.
- *overlooking obvious responses*
When you make a claim, don't leave yourself open to an obvious and quick rejoinder, and you can sometimes avoid this by phrasing what you say carefully.
- *not doing what you said you'd do*
A helpful way to avoid this mistake is to re-draft your introduction after you've finished – but make sure that what you end up with is still an answer to the assignment question. You may also wish to include a final paragraph in which you summarize what you have shown and how. You don't have to do this if you're desperately short of space, but otherwise it is always a good idea.

10. Read and revise your final essay.

Before submitting your essay, read it through and check for the various pitfalls we have mentioned. Does everything you have written play a role in the argument? Is there repetition? Would an example help? Is the structure and content as clear as it could be? It helps your reader if you write clearly, concisely and elegantly. Watch out for ill-formed sentences and for grammatical or spelling errors.

So there you have it: ten basic rules for writing a great philosophy essay. You'll find a checklist associated with these ten rules on the Exploring philosophy website for registered students. You should take note of these rules and the checklist for *every* assignment, not just your first.