

# Tips for Writing a Philosophy Essay

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## I Structuring a Philosophy Essay

### *Introduction*

The goals of an introduction are (1) to give your reader a sense of the topic and problem of the essay; (2) to identify clearly what your thesis is (i.e., where you stand on the issue); and (3) a brief roadmap of the argument, i.e., how you plan on defending that thesis. (See my “Writing an Introduction” document for more details on this.)

### *Background*

You should clue your reader in on the necessary background early in the essay so they can understand the more specific arguments that will form the core of your essay. You should only include the relevant parts of the background—that is, only that which is necessary for the particular arguments. Notice that this is often much harder than it seems! Students have a tendency to include everything they think *may* be relevant, but this often has the unfortunate effect of alerting your reader to the fact that you might not *know* what is relevant, which is a bad strategy.

### *Argument/Thesis Defense*

Most philosophy essays involve taking a stand on a controversial issue. You should always make your position clear, and then show why that is the right view/best interpretation/etc. This involves providing *arguments*, which means introducing and defending other claims that support that idea. These need not be (and generally aren't) empirical.

Be sure to avoid logical fallacies, since your reader is likely to spot these rather easily. If you aren't familiar with the basic fallacies, you should read around online. In general, the most common are (1) circular arguments, or “begging the question”; (2) the naturalistic fallacy; (3) and various appeals to authority, consensus, and so on.

You should also be careful about appeals to intuition. How sure are you that readers will agree with your intuitions. Is there anything you can do to convince your reader that they ought to share this intuition?

Finally, be sure that the arguments you provide actually defend the thesis you want to defend. For example, if you're objecting to a claim that says “Sometimes X”, it probably isn't enough to say “Yes, but sometimes not-X,” since that seems compatible with “Sometimes X”.

### *Conclusion*

In most short essays, a conclusion section probably isn't necessary. If, however, you opt for one, be sure to keep it brief. Don't merely summarize what you've just said (the paper isn't that long and your reader's memory

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probably isn't that bad). Also, avoid introducing any major new claims that you can't defend.

## 2 Planning Your Essay

*Pick a topic you're most comfortable in; re-read the relevant readings front to back*

Generally, it's best if you pick the topic about which you're clearest, though it is also true that you are applauded for choosing the harder topics—that is, your grader recognizes it's harder, and you are assessed accordingly.

*Make an outline*

You should have a good idea of how you're going to go through the essay—i.e., what you're going to say—before you get started. This may of course change as you go; indeed, it often does. But it helps to have a clear path forward so you can see what adjustments are necessary.

*Consider carefully what thesis you want to defend.*

Is it trivially true? If so, it's probably not interesting. Is it controversial (i.e., will some people deny it?) This usually makes for the best essays. Make sure you clearly identify the thesis and state it explicitly early on.

## 3 Writing & Editing Strategies

*Give yourself plenty of time to write and revise*

Good philosophy essays take time; it is rare that an excellent essay is written quickly. You will also notice many flaws if you give yourself a day or two between your first and second draft to view it with fresh eyes. Plan for this if you're able.

*Before your second draft, mark it up as though you were grading it*

Read your own work critically; question every assumption; pretend you're assigning a grade to it. When you read it through this lens, you're more likely to notice the errors and confusions.

*Have a friend read it for clarity*

This can be a friend in the course (though it helps if they're writing on a different topic, so there aren't concerns about plagiarism), or someone outside the course. In general, you should ask them—and have them commit to being honest!—whether or not what you say is clear, concise, and grammatical.

## 4 Other Resources

1. Jim Pryor's Guide: [www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html](http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html)
2. U-Calgary's Guide: <http://phil.ucalgary.ca/undergrad/howtowrite.html>
3. Harvard's Guide: <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~phildept/files/ShortGuidetoPhilosophicalWriting.pdf>