

How to write a good essay in philosophy

1. Contents

Your essay should display (i) originality and critical engagement with the topic; (ii) structured philosophical argumentation; and (iii) knowledge of the topic and of the philosophical discussion around it. All these factors are equally important.

(i) Originality and critical engagement

Your essay should not be a mere summary of class materials or readings. You should critically develop your own ideas about the course topics and your essay should reflect that. It should contain a statement of the main thesis that you want to defend and an argument in its support. You should consider objections to your argument's premises and do your best to satisfactorily rebut them. Your claims should be duly explained and motivated and supported by examples.

(ii) Argument

The argument in support of your main thesis must be clearly formulated. Ideally, you would run it in a premise/conclusion form, where the conclusion logically follows from the premises:

(P1) ...
(P2) ...
(P3) ...
(C) ...

You should then provide support for each premise and defend your argument from potential objections.

Your thesis may also be an objection to a particular view or philosophical position. In such a case, your main thesis will be a negative one (e.g. View X is false) and your argument will aim at motivating your objection against the relevant view. Still, you will need to formulate your argument rigorously and consider potential counter-objections.

(iii) Knowledge

Although your essay must not simply regurgitate class material but should contain independent critical thinking, it must nonetheless display knowledge and understanding of the problems, positions, arguments, objections, etc. featuring in the philosophical debate around the topic you discuss. The terms you use should be clearly defined and the relevant positions, arguments, objections, etc. accurately reported.

2. Form

Your essay should be (i) well-structured; (ii) clearly written; (iii) relevant; and (iv) consistent with academic citation, quotation, and reference rules.

(i) Structure

The reader should be able to identify what you argue for from the start. Your main thesis should therefore appear in the first paragraph of your essay. The statement of your main thesis should be followed by a plan of the paper (e.g.: “First, I will explain...; second, I will argue that...; third, I will reply...; finally, ...”). You should contextualize your thesis (e.g. by explaining the philosophical debate or issue you are engaging with) and define the terms that are relevant to your thesis and the philosophical issue you discuss. You should then provide a rigorously formulated argument for your thesis, defend its premises, consider objections and try to rebut them.

(ii) Clarity

Your essay should be clear, concise, and easy to understand. Avoid obscure or convoluted sentences. Let the reader know what the structure of your essay is from the start and, if necessary, keep track of the structure along the way (e.g. “I have argued that... . Now I will consider...”). You may divide your essay in sections if you think this could help make its structure clearer.

(iii) Relevance

Include only what is strictly relevant to the purpose of your essay and avoid unnecessary digressions.

(iv) Citations, Quotations, and References

When you report someone else’s ideas, either by quoting a passage from an article, book, or presentation of theirs, or by paraphrasing it, you must provide proper citation and reference to the relevant work to credit the author, enable the reader to consult the original source, and avoid plagiarism, which is a serious academic misconduct and a violation of the Rice Honor Code. You may choose the citation style of your preference, as long as you are consistent with it.