

ESSAY WRITING HANDBOOK FOR PHILOSOPHY STUDENTS

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NOTE: This handout is *required* reading for *all* students. Part I is a guide to writing a proper essay for a philosophy course. Part II is meant as a corrective to errors frequently found in student papers. *You should become thoroughly familiar with the guidelines presented here, and you should check that your written assignments conform to them before you hand in your work.*

PART I: ANALYTIC AND ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAYS

Essays written for philosophy courses must be analytic or argumentative. An analytic essay is one in which you restate in your own words the argument—the line of reasoning from premises to conclusion—of an important passage of philosophy. In so doing, you show that you understand the structure of the argument. An argumentative essay is one in which you aim to convince the reader of the truth of an opinion or position. Usually, this will require analyzing arguments for other, competing opinions or positions (i.e., the counter-arguments against your position), and demonstrating that they are weaker than the arguments for your position. Thus argumentative essays include (indeed depend on) philosophical analysis, whereas analytic essays are not necessarily argumentative (unless you are called upon to evaluate critically the argument you are explicating).

1. The Analytic Essay

Read through the assigned passage of philosophy whose argument you are to explicate at least once before you begin writing. (It not only helps but often is necessary for you to have read the material preceding the passage.) Then try to isolate the principal claim(s) or conclusion(s), and the line of reasoning used by the author to support the claim(s) or conclusion(s). In doing this you may have to use your judgement as to what is central and what is tangential or peripheral to the philosopher's position. You are interested in the former. To show that you understand what is going on, it always helps if you can illustrate the main points, especially the main distinctions, with clear examples of your own, that is, ones other than those used by the author.

In writing up your results, avoid close paraphrase of the text: there is a difference between an analytic description and a close paraphrase of a passage of expository prose. Furthermore, though quotations can be helpful, do not quote unless you make clear that you understand what you are quoting. (See also the discussion below of quotation in argumentative essays.) Students often quote from hard passages because they do not understand them and this detracts from the paper. It is far better to try to work out a plausible interpretation of what is going on and to present it in your own words, than to feign understanding by the device of quotation. Finally, be as clear as you can. A helpful

guideline is to write as if you were explaining the passage to an intelligent and interested person who has not read the text.

2. The Argumentative Essay

The heart of the argumentative essay is the argument you present in support of your position. An argument is not simply a statement of your opinion; it is an attempt to support your position with reasons. This position is the critical stance, or thesis, that you take on your essay topic. You should be able to express your thesis in one or two sentences in the first paragraph of your essay. Your thesis states the conclusion you aim to prove. The argument you develop in the essay offers a set of reasons or evidence to support your conclusion or thesis.

Your essay topic is not a thesis. A thesis takes a critical stance on that topic. Showing me that you understand the course material by reiterating it does not amount to philosophical argumentation. Arguments inquire into the merits of a position, and then attempt to defend or criticize it. Writing a series of statements that describe the philosophical positions found in your readings does not offer me a reasoned argument by which I might conclude that a position you favour has been adequately defended. Nor would it allow me to conclude that a position you disagree with has been soundly criticized. Descriptive statements about the course material are expository, as opposed to argumentative. Some students who are new to philosophy make the mistake of writing expository essays. It is a basic requirement of the philosophical course of study that you develop your own ideas through argumentative writing. Take a critical stance on the course material. This does not necessarily mean disagreeing (although it often does), but it does mean assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the readings.

Your thesis is the foundation on which your supporting arguments are built. You begin an argumentative essay by presenting your thesis. You then develop the essay by arguing for your thesis, that is, by providing a set of reasons that supports your thesis. You end the essay by summarizing the supporting analysis and affirming your thesis as a conclusion. Thus your essay will have three parts—the introduction, the body, and the conclusion.

Introduction

This section presents your thesis in the form of a concise statement of the critical stance or position you take on the essay topic. This should be your first paragraph. Your first few sentences can briefly define the topic of your essay. The rest of the paragraph should state your thesis. Your thesis will be a proposition (or a number of related propositions) that you will attempt to defend with a reasoned argument. For example:

“In this essay, I will argue that penalties for sexual offences cannot be justified by a retributivist theory of punishment that is based on the principle that ‘All punishments must fit the crime’.”

“My aim in this essay is to show that the philosophical theory of mind-body dualism must be rejected, because it cannot account for mental causation, the role that our minds play in causing our actions.”

In a 1500-1800 word essay, your introductory paragraph should comprise about 1/4 to, at most, 1/2 of your first page. Avoid redundant prose and get to the point.

The Body: Developing the Arguments in Support of Your Thesis

Each paragraph in the body of your essay develops the reasoned arguments you offer in support of your thesis. It contains the details and examples (evidence) that build toward your essay's conclusion.

(a) Specify your arguments one at a time:

Tell me what your particular arguments will be. For example:

“I will develop two arguments in support of my thesis. First, I will argue that this retributivist position is problematic because retributivists cannot provide a general defense for their principle that punishments should fit the crime. Second, I will argue that... (state your second argument).”

“To show that dualism cannot account for mental causation, I will argue, first, that we cannot explain human behaviour without appealing to mental causation, and second, that the dualist thesis that a nonphysical mind can bring about physical (e.g., bodily) effects is unintelligible.”

As you develop your arguments, imagine that you are trying to convince a skeptical reader. How might she or he argue against the claims you are making? Address the strongest of those counter-arguments within the body of the essay.

(b) Addressing the counter-arguments:

You have told me what your arguments will be. Now you have to show me how they work. You are not arguing in a vacuum. Developing your own arguments means that you show how they respond to other arguments that oppose them. You must attempt to show that the arguments you develop in support of your thesis are better than the counter-arguments that object to it. In our two examples, the counter-arguments you have to deal with are the ones that retributivists would use to argue against your thesis, or that dualists would use to argue against your thesis. For example:

“The retributivist might object that the point of punishment is not simply to deter, but to redress a wrong by repaying an act by a like act. There are at least two problems with this response, however. First, it makes the base desire for vengeance the foundation of justice. Second, even if we were to allow that the retributivist principle might be attractive in theory, it is often difficult to apply in practice: it is not always easy to find a morally acceptable punishment that resembles the crime.”

“The dualist might reply that we simply do not yet understand how the nonphysical mind can cause physical effects. This is a weak counter-argument,

however, because science gives us no good reason to believe in such a yet-to-be-explained mental force. On the contrary, the dualist position lacks credibility because it violates one of the most basic laws of nature as determined by physics, the law of the conservation of energy.”

In general, remember that you are arguing that your thesis can resolve certain objections that can be made against it.

Conclusion

This part of the essay summarizes the thesis and analysis developed in the introduction and body of the essay. It also makes a final effort to convince the reader that the thesis has been established as a reliable conclusion with effective supporting arguments. Do not conclude more than you have argued for. The conclusion should be roughly the same length as your introduction.

Quotations

Academic honesty requires the proper citation of sources. Citations indicate that the words and ideas are not your own. Direct quotation marks reproduce the exact words of an author within the quotation marks. Keep them short and to the point. A direct quotation of eight lines or more should be set off from the main text of your essay, single-spaced, and indented five spaces from the left margin, with no quotation marks at the beginning or end. Indirect quotations paraphrase an author’s words and are not placed within quotation marks. You must cite every idea that is not your own. Failing to do so results in plagiarism, or the use of another person’s ideas as your own. Plagiarism is a serious academic offence. Avoid frequent and lengthy quotations. Explain how the quotations you use bear upon either the immediate point or the overall argument.

Ideally, references should be footnotes (appearing at the bottom of the page) or endnotes (appearing on a separate page at the end of the essay). See, for example, the format of the footnote at the bottom of this page for the following quotation:

Many books and articles on consciousness have appeared in the past few years, and one might think that we are making progress. But on a closer look, most of this work leaves the hardest problems about consciousness untouched. Often, such work addresses what might be called the “easy” problems of consciousness. How does the brain process environmental stimulation? How does it integrate information? These are important questions, but to answer them is not to solve the hard problem: Why is all this processing accompanied by an experienced inner life?¹ⁱ

For an explanation of common abbreviations used in footnotes (*ibid.*, *op. cit.*), see Part II of this handbook.

¹ David J. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind. In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. xi-xii.

Alternatively, you may use the system in which the author, date, and page number of the work you are quoting from appear in parentheses directly after your quotation in the text (e.g.: Chalmers 1986, pp. xi-xii). You then provide an alphabetical list of all the works cited at the end of your essay on a separate page titled “References.” The work just quoted would be listed thus:

Chalmers, David J. 1996. *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Finally, your essay must contain a bibliography that lists in alphabetical order all of the secondary sources you have cited and consulted. The list of books at the end of this handbook under “Further Reading” is an example of a bibliography. Note: The difference between a list of references (in the author, date, page number system of citation) and a bibliography is that the former lists only those works you have cited, whereas the latter lists not only the works you have cited, but also any you have consulted in doing the research for your essay.

Style

Edit your essay for stylistic errors (see Part II). Use your spell-check. Reread each paragraph to ensure that it develops one point or idea. It is helpful to read the final draft out loud to a colleague. This will enable you to determine whether what seems clear to you is clear to anyone else. Ask yourself the following questions:

- a) Are there any contradictory or dogmatic statements in the essay?
- b) Is any of the material redundant?
- c) Do the arguments follow a logical order or are there gaps in the reasoning?
- d) Are there any terms that need to be defined?

It is always helpful to make an outline of your paper, compose a rough draft, revise it a few times, and then prepare a final draft, which you will proofread for errors. Remember what impresses the reader are clear ideas, not complicated wording. Simplicity is a virtue in good writing.

Presentation

Your essay should be double-spaced and the pages numbered consecutively. The references and/or bibliography should be on a separate page at the end. The title page should include the title of your essay, your name and student number, my name, and the name and number of the course. Use standard margins and font size.

PART II: MATTERS OF STYLE

1. Grammar

Complete Sentences. Always use complete sentences (with a subject and a main verb). Conversational styles of writing often lead students to present a sentence fragment as if it were a complete sentence.

Wrong: Spinoza is one of the most intriguing philosophers. A deeply religious yet original thinker whose work demands careful study.

Right: Spinoza is one of the most intriguing philosophers, a deeply religious yet original thinker whose work demands careful study.

Wrong: René Descartes undertook to doubt anything for which there was reason to doubt. Which led him to an extreme skepticism in the first *Meditation*.

Right: René Descartes undertook to doubt anything for which there was reason to doubt, which led him to an extreme skepticism in the first *Meditation*.

Agreement Between Parts of a Sentence. A verb should agree in number with its subject, and all pronouns should agree in number with their antecedents. In other words, if the subject is singular, the verb should be singular, and if the subject is plural, the verb should be plural. Agreement is usually straightforward, but there are tricky cases:

Wrong: A new set of regulations were adopted.

Right: A new set of regulations was adopted.

The phrase “a new set of regulations” is singular, even though it contains as a part the plural “regulations.”

Two or more singular subjects joined by *or* or *nor* take a singular verb. Thus: “Neither he nor she *is* going to the concert.” Two or more singular subjects joined by *and* take a plural verb. Thus: “He and she *are* going to the concert.”

A tricky case occurs in a sentence with two subjects, one singular and the other plural, when the subjects are joined by “or” or “nor.” The general guideline is that the verb form should match the nearer subject:

Wrong: Either the Greek philosopher Pythagoras or the later Pythagoreans was responsible for the now famous Pythagorean theorem.

Right: Either the Greek philosopher Pythagoras or the later Pythagoreans were responsible for the now famous Pythagorean theorem.

Another tricky case is caused by phrases that modify the subject and that occur between the subject and the verb:

Wrong: The complexity of Spinoza’s “geometrical” demonstrations frustrate many students.

Right: The complexity of Spinoza’s “geometrical” demonstrations frustrates many students.

“Complexity” is singular, and so the appropriate verb form is “frustrates.” The noun nearer the verb (“demonstrations”) is plural, but this noun is not the subject of the sentence. It is the object of a prepositional phrase.

A collective noun takes a singular subject when the group is thought of as a unit, a plural verb when the members are thought of separately. Thus: “The committee was unanimous in its opinion,” and “The audience was bored.” But “The committee were of different opinions on the matter,” and “The audience were questioned individually to ascertain their reactions to the play.” Also: “A number of students have already turned in their papers,” and “The number of students in this class is very large.”

A pronoun must agree with its antecedent, just as a verb must agree with its subject. If the word to which the pronoun refers is singular, the pronoun must be singular. Otherwise, both are plural. *Each, every, either, neither, somebody, someone, anybody, anyone, everybody, everyone, nobody*, and *no one* (not “noone”) are all singular. Thus: “Each of them has his (or her) hat on,” “Neither of them has his (or her) hat on,” “Everybody has his (or her) hat on,” “No one has his (or her) hat on.” Note that the possessive pronoun is also singular: “Everyone has *his* (or *her*) hat on”; NOT “Everyone has *their* hat on.” THIS IS A VERY COMMON MISTAKE THAT SHOULD BE AVOIDED. If you are worried about sexist language (i.e., using the pronouns “he,” “him,” or “his”), then you should rephrase the sentence as discussed in the section on Gender below.

Case. A pronoun’s case is the form it takes to indicate its role in the sentence as a subject, object, or possessor. Subjects take the nominative case (e.g., I, we, he, she, they, who). Objects of a verb or preposition take the objective case (e.g., me, us, him, her, them, whom). The possessive case shows ownership (e.g., my, our, his, her, their, whose).

Wrong: Spinoza and me agree that God and Nature are one and the same.

Right: Spinoza and I agree that God and Nature are one and the same.

Wrong: The professor gave the book to Tom and I.

Right: The professor gave the book to Tom and me.

Wrong: Leibniz is a far more original philosopher than him.

Right: Leibniz is a far more original philosopher than he.

2. Punctuation

Comma. The main uses of the comma are as follows:

(1) In a series of three or more terms with a single conjunction, use a comma after each term except the last. Thus:

red, white, and blue

gold, silver, or copper

He opened the letter, read it, and made a note of its contents

(2) Enclose parenthetical expressions between commas. Thus:

J.L. Austin examines the concept of responsibility, which is central to moral philosophy, in his essay, ‘A Plea for Excuses.’

The best way to tour France, unless you are not adventuresome, is by bicycle.

(3) Place a comma before a conjunction introducing an independent clause. Thus:

His writing is argumentative, but it is occasionally insightful.

Spinoza’s philosophy is difficult to understand, for it contains many concepts whose meanings are the subject of much debate.

A comma should not be used to separate two complete thoughts—that is, two independent clauses without a conjunction connecting them. The result is one form of a “run-on” sentence:

Wrong: Plato’s *Symposium* is entertaining, it has a lively cast of characters.

The proper mark of punctuation is a semicolon:

Right: Plato’s *Symposium* is entertaining; it has a lively cast of characters.

The sentence could also be rewritten with a comma and a conjunction:

Right: Plato’s *Symposium* is entertaining, for it has a lively cast of characters.

Colon and semicolon. A colon follows an introductory phrase that directs attention to what follows (after the colon). What follows usually explains or amplifies the introductory phrase. Thus:

Spinoza's monism is unwavering: all that exists is the one substance "God-or-Nature," and we are but modes of this substance.

A semicolon separates two main clauses that could stand alone as sentences. The semicolon is used instead of a period to show a special relation between the two statements: each illuminates the other. Thus:

The seventeenth century empiricists believed that there is nothing in the mind that does not come from the senses; they supposed that experience is the foundation of knowledge.

3. Gender

Many writers now consider some previously accepted uses of language to be unacceptable because of the gender inequities that they imply. You must use your own judgement here. What follows is my (Thompson's) current thinking on the matter.

The use of the masculine pronoun in reference to groups that include males and females should be avoided, if possible. Thus:

To be avoided (but grammatically correct): A philosopher must be prepared to argue for his views.

Wrong (grammatically incorrect): A philosopher must be prepared to argue for their view.

The first sentence uses the masculine pronoun to refer to male and female philosophers. A common attempt to resolve this difficulty is given in the second sentence. This approach to the problem is unacceptable because we now have a plural pronoun, *their*, referring to a subject that is grammatically singular (even though the subject is meant to refer to all philosophers). The following two sentences are both acceptable.

Acceptable: A philosopher must be prepared to argue for his or her view.

Acceptable: Philosophers must be prepared to argue for their views.

The term *humanity* is preferable to *mankind*, and the term *human being* to *man*. Sometimes the term *person* can be used in place of *man*.

4. Misuse of Expressions

As to whether. Avoid this expression. *Whether* is sufficient.

Different than. Just as you would not say “This differs than that,” so you should not say “This is different than that.” The proper English idiom is “differ from.” Thus: “This differs from that”; “This is different from that.”

Extremely. Hardly ever necessary. “Very” will do fine, though it too can often simply be dropped.

However. Avoid starting a sentence with “however” when the meaning is “nevertheless.” The word should be inserted parenthetically between commas. Thus:

Wrong: Ludwig Wittgenstein contributed to the formation of modern symbolic logic. However, in his later work, he severely criticized the Logician philosophy.

Right: Ludwig Wittgenstein contributed to the formation of modern symbolic logic. In his later work, however, he severely criticized the Logician philosophy.

If for whether. “He wanted to know if I had gone.” (WRONG) “He wanted to know whether I had gone.” (RIGHT) “In the first *Meditation*, Descartes resolves to determine if there is anything immune from doubt.” (WRONG) “In the first *Meditation*, Descartes resolves to determine whether there is anything immune from doubt.” (RIGHT) On a related point, the phrase “whether or not” is almost always redundant. To ask whether there is anything immune from doubt allows for a negative as well as an affirmative answer.

Infer and imply. Do not use “infer” when you mean “imply,” and vice versa. If I say “All human beings are mortal, and Socrates is a human being” I *imply*, and what I say *implies*, that Socrates is mortal. But *from* what I say you *infer* that Socrates is mortal.

Irregardless. There is no such word. Should be *regardless*.

It's and its. “It's” always means “it is.” “Its,” on the other hand, is the possessive form of “it.”

Like and as. “Like” governs nouns and pronouns; before phrases and clauses the equivalent word is “as.” “Aristotle, like Plato did before him, held that sensuous particulars are unknowable.” (WRONG) This should read either: “Aristotle, like Plato before him, held...” or “Aristotle, as Plato did before him, held...”

Most. Not to be used for “almost.” “Most everybody..” (WRONG) “Almost everybody...” (RIGHT)

None. Use the singular verb when none means “no one” or “not one.” (See above discussion of Agreement.) “None of us are perfect.” (WRONG) “None of us is perfect.” (RIGHT)

One and the same. Sloppy diction results in this phrase being heard as “one in the same,” which leads some people to write “one in the same.” The proper expression is “one and the same”; “one in the same” makes no sense at all.

Only. Perhaps the most misused word in the English language. It is an adverb, and so make sure that it goes with the word or phrase it modifies. Do not say “He only spoke three words” if you mean he spoke only three words. “He only removed his hat” says that that is all he did, namely, remove his hat; he didn’t do anything else. It is not to be confused with “He removed only his hat,” which says that the only thing he took off was his hat; he didn’t take off his shoes and coat as well. In philosophical writing the proper use of “only” is crucial: “Descartes held that prior to establishing the existence of God, he could only know with absolute certainty his own existence.” (WRONG) “Descartes held that prior to establishing the existence of God, he could know with absolute certainty only his own existence.” (RIGHT)

Site and cite. “To site” means to locate, to place, or to be situated. Thus: “Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia is sited on the old French town of Port Royal.” “To cite” means to quote, to adduce by way of example or precedent, to mention or refer to. Thus “Hume cites (NOT sites) Berkeley when he sets out to show that there are no abstract ideas.”

That, which. “That” is the defining, or restrictive, pronoun, “which” the non-defining, or nonrestrictive. Thus:

The lawn mower that is broken is in the garage. (Restrictive — tells which one)

The lawn mower, which is broken, is in the garage. (Nonrestrictive — adds a fact about the only mower in question)

Note that nonrestrictive clauses are parenthetical, and therefore commas are needed. A nonrestrictive clause is one that does not serve to identify or define the previous noun. Thus:

Spinoza’s propositions, which make up his *Ethics*, present a completely rationalist form of pantheism.

A restrictive clause, on the other hand, does serve to identify or define the previous noun:

Spinoza’s propositions that demonstrate the existence of God occur in Book I of his *Ethics*.

Utilize. Hardly ever necessary. *Use* is preferable.

5. Abbreviations

The abbreviations “i.e.,” “e.g.,” and “viz.” “E.g.” is an abbreviation for the Latin phrase *exempli gratia* and means “for example.” Thus: “Some philosophers, e.g., Aristotle,

Berkeley, and Hegel, were married.” “I.e.” is an abbreviation for the Latin phrase *id est* and means “that is.” Thus: “The quiddity, i.e., the essence, of a thing is different from its accidents, i.e., its incidental or non-essential properties.” “Viz.” is an abbreviation for the Latin word *videlicet* and means “namely.” Thus: “In order to establish that material things exist independently of the senses, Descartes appeals to a certain conception of God, viz., a benevolent God who is not a deceiver.” CORRECT.

The abbreviations “ibid.” and “op. cit.” (used in footnotes). “Ibid.” is an abbreviation for the Latin *ibidem* and means “in the same place.” It is used to indicate that a passage quoted or referred to (1) occurs on the same page of the same work that has already been identified or (2) occurs in the work that has already been identified. In the first case, “ibid.” occurs alone (“ibid.”), whereas in the second case it occurs with the appropriate new page number (e.g., “ibid., p. 234.”). “Op. cit.” is an abbreviation for the Latin phrase *opere citato* and means “in the work cited.” It is used instead of “ibid.” when in a series of notes you cease to refer to the same work and later wish to refer to that work again. Thus a series of numbered footnotes might read:

1. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 234.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., pp. 15-16.
4. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 295.
5. Hume, op. cit., p. 16.
6. Ibid.

Note 2 signifies that the passage quoted or referred to occurs on the same page of the same work as the one cited in note 1. Note 3 means that the passage quoted or referred to is to be found on pp. 15-16 of the same work as the one cited in notes 1 and 2. Note 5 signifies that the passage quoted or referred to is to be found on p. 16 of the work by Hume already cited in notes 1-3. And note 6 signifies that the passage quoted or referred to occurs on the same page of the work cited in note 5, viz., the work cited in notes 1-3.

6. Misspellings

WRONG: “replied,” “denyed,” “applied.” RIGHT: “replied,” “denied,” “applied.” Rule: A verb ending in *y* and preceded by a consonant forms the past tense by changing the *y* to *i* and adding *ed*. But when the *y* is preceded by a vowel, the *y* remains unchanged. Thus: pray, prayed; display, displayed; relay, relayed. Similarly, “replys,” “denys,” and “applies” are WRONG: “replies,” “denies,” and “applies” are RIGHT.

WRONG: “percieve,” “concieve.” RIGHT: “perceive,” “conceive.” Rule: when sounded as long-*e* (as in seed), put *i* before *e*, except after *c*. Thus: achieve, belief, brief, piece; but ceiling, conceit, perceive, conceive, deceive, receive. When not sounded as long-*e* (e.g., when sounded as long-*a*, as in cake), the order is usually *ei*. Thus: freight, weight, neighbor, reign, veil; but also height, foreign.

Other misspellings:

WRONG

arguement
procede
preceed
existence
existant

RIGHT

argument
proceed
precede
existence
existent

Correct singulars and plurals of nouns derived from Greek and Latin:

SINGULAR

criterion
datum
hypothesis
phenomenon
schema
stratum
thesis

PLURAL

criteria
data
hypotheses
phenomena
schemata
strata
theses

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The material presented in Part II is revised from a handout entitled “Some Rules for Writing Presentable English” distributed by my former undergraduate teacher, Professor William E. Kennick, to his philosophy students at Amherst College. Professor Kennick would not give an “A” to any paper containing the errors he detailed.

FURTHER READING

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