

ESSAY WRITING INSTRUCTIONS AND TIPS

1. Introduction: The introduction should explain the question the paper addresses and the thesis being argued for in the paper. What is the question, issue or argument the paper is examining?

State a definite thesis in the introduction. What is your claim or proposal concerning the issue or argument? The thesis of your paper is the conclusion of the argument that you will develop. Not formulating the thesis statement precisely is one of the most common mistakes of an essay. A weak thesis statement usually leads to a weak paper.

Place the thesis statement in the first paragraph of your paper. After completing your first draft and before handing in the paper, go back to your thesis statement and check whether your paper has argued for that thesis.

Examples of vague and unacceptable thesis statements: "In this paper, I will discuss and criticize X's article", or "I will argue that euthanasia is morally permissible in some situations." Neither of these thesis statements tells the reader what your essay is about, except that you will discuss X's article and that you will discuss euthanasia. Better thesis statements are: "I will show that X's argument fails because he or she does not make the distinction between doing something and allowing it to happen", or "I will argue that neither active nor passive euthanasia is acceptable because both violate human dignity." NOTICE: It is the reason(s) *after* the "because" that is your thesis statement.

2. Develop your arguments--one good argument is better than a dozen bad arguments. Are there details surrounding the argument being analyzed that should be considered? Be sure to state how these details are relevant to your argument. Don't forget to be clear about what it is you are arguing (what is your conclusion and what do you want to prove?). Are your reasons (premises) reasonable? Are they clearly stated, using concrete language and unambiguous terms? Is the argument valid? Are the premises true?

Originality of Ideas: I do not expect your essay will bring forth insights that no other philosopher has ever had (although it may). However, you are expected to think about these issues for yourself and not merely summarize points that are made in the readings or class. It is fine to mention the arguments that have been made. In fact, I expect these readings to inform and influence the direction of your papers. Usually, one uses another's paper as a springboard for one's own ideas by disagreeing with the ideas of the other's paper. Then, one shows how one's own position uniquely addresses issues or problems not addressed by the other.

When you quote, paraphrase, or make use of a point made by others, be sure to document the source. The particular style is not important, as long as your references be precise and usable. The easiest way to give a reference is simply to put the source and page number(s) in parentheses; e.g., (Warren, p. 124). Essays without clear references will be marked down. Essays that give no indication of quoted, paraphrased, or borrowed ideas will be considered plagiarized. Plagiarism is grounds for failing the paper, if not the course.

3. What are the objections to your thesis? Are there arguments in the readings that are objections to your thesis? If so, state these objections (citing author and page number). Consider how you would respond to these objections and attempt to show how your response strengthens your initial argument.

As you have seen from the readings, serious consideration of counter-arguments is essential to philosophical writing. Anticipating counter-arguments to one's own position has benefits; it strengthens one's own ideas and, if done successfully, makes one's position more persuasive.

A well-informed paper is one that considers other's views, as well as your own. Do not summarize class readings or lectures. Rather, use the readings and lectures to address issues raised by your paper or objections to your thesis. If there are arguments, distinctions, etc. which are relevant to your argument but your essay demonstrates no awareness of this, then the essay will be marked down.

4. The points above constitute the structure of your paper. Hence, the outline is:

- I. Introduction with thesis
- II. Arguments for your thesis
 - A. Brief review of the topic/problem
 - B. Your argument
- III. Objections to your thesis
- IV. Your response to the objections
- IV. Conclusion

The conclusion is a brief restatement of your thesis and some brief remarks about your arguments. By the time you reach the conclusion, your paper should have persuaded the reader that your position is a good one. Simply remind the reader of this.

Tips to Remember

1. Follow the outline you developed above.
2. Keep the introduction brief. I absolutely do not want preambles in the introduction!! In other words, I do not want to hear about how important a social issue abortion is. Get straight to the point — "In this paper I will argue _____ because _____."
3. State your arguments one at a time, making one point per paragraph.
4. Clarify and simplify! Be as clear and concise as possible; this requires several editing sessions.
5. Do not claim more than you have shown. Remember not to conclude the paper with claims which do not follow and are not proven by your paper and arguments.
6. The task of writing a good essay is virtually identical with the task of thinking out a clear thesis or conclusion that you want to defend and then explaining it and defending it. You should be able to clearly and concisely say what your essay is about and toward what position it attempts to persuade.
7. In a philosophy essay, there is nothing wrong with using first-person pronouns. After all, the thesis that you are arguing for is what you believe is true. However, this requires a disclaimer. It is not acceptable to write something like, "It is my personal belief that it is always wrong to kill a person," unless you provide reasons why anyone else should share your belief. That you believe it is true is neither an argument nor a reason that anyone else should believe it. Remember, you are trying to persuade your reader that your view or thesis is correct. To do this, you need

reasons, evidence, and arguments justifying your view.

8. Keep your focus philosophical. Although many sociological, economic and psychological facts may be relevant to the issue you are addressing, keep your paper philosophical.

9. After writing your paper, here are several questions to ask yourself:

- a) What is my thesis?
- b) What is the main argument for my thesis?
- c) What is the most important objection to or criticism of my thesis? Have I formulated that objection as an argument?
- d) What is my response to this objection? Have I formulated that response as an argument?

If you cannot answer these questions clearly and easily, then your essay has problems that require attention. Do not consider your essay complete until it answers these questions.

Essay Grading Rubric

	Excellent ←	↔		Poor →
Argument	Central argument/answer is clear, concise, interesting, and based on evidence (and not opinion). It displays a very thorough, accurate understanding of the problem and key ideas and thinkers.	Central argument/answer is clear and based on evidence. It displays a good understanding of the problem and key ideas and thinkers.	Central argument/answer is not clear and/or not based on evidence. It displays a fair understanding of the problem and key ideas and thinkers.	Fails to satisfy the assignment. Central argument/answer is unclear and not supported by evidence. Little to no display of an understanding of the problem and key ideas and thinkers.
Structure	Your argument/answer is presented in a logical and coherent manner, which the reader can easily follow.	The reader can follow your argument with a little effort.	The reader cannot always follow your argument or train of thought.	The reader cannot follow your argument.
Clarity and Mechanics	Your sentences are concise and vocabulary precise. There are no distracting spelling, punctuation, or grammatical errors. All quotations are properly cited. The reader and effortlessly discern your meaning.	There are some distracting spelling, punctuation, or grammatical errors. Quotations are properly cited. The reader can discern your meaning with very little effort.	There are several distracting spelling, punctuation, or grammatical errors. Some quotations are not properly cited. The reader cannot always discern your meaning.	There are many significant spelling, punctuation, or grammatical errors. Quotations are not properly cited. The reader cannot discern your meaning.