

UCD School of Philosophy

I. General Guidelines for Writing Essays in Philosophy

1. Answer the question

If the assigned essay title is in the form of a question, your essay must answer the question. Here is a useful strategy for many philosophical essays: before you begin your essay, write down ‘*Therefore...*’ and complete the sentence as what will be the *final sentence of your essay*. This will be the *thesis* you are defending. (Note: some essay titles may require more exposition and interpretation rather than arguing for a thesis of your own; but even in these cases it is always a good idea to have a clear focus for your essay, for example, an aspect of the topic you will critically examine.)

Suppose the essay title is: “Is Sartre’s conception of freedom defensible?” What is your hunch? Perhaps you think that it is not defensible. Your essay might end: “Therefore Sartre’s conception of freedom, all things considered, is not defensible.” That is your thesis. Your whole essay is an extended argument for that conclusion.

At the beginning of your essay you should avoid vague generalities in introducing the topic and get to the main issue as soon as you can. Here is a very weak opening paragraph (partly plagiarised from Wikipedia for good measure): “Throughout the course of this essay I will consider the question of whether Sartre’s conception of freedom is defensible. Ever since the dawn of time, people have been fascinated by the question of freedom. Jean Paul Sartre was a French existentialist philosopher, playwright, novelist, and, political activist, who was no exception. He was one of the leading figures in existentialism and Marxism and was also noted for his long relationship with the feminist author, Simone de Beauvoir. He had a conception of freedom that was particularly interesting and influential in existentialist circles. Some philosophers have agreed with it and others disagreed. In my essay I will examine some arguments on both. In my opinion Sartre’s account is defensible but there are good arguments against it.”

In general, biographical and historical information does not belong in a philosophy essay at all. Nor does purple prose (“since the dawn of time”). Nor do vacuous phrases (“He had a conception of freedom that was particularly interesting”). Here is a much better opening paragraph (whatever you think of the actual philosophical claim being defended): “Sartre defended a conception of freedom according to which a person’s choice as to what sort of person they are is radically free in the sense of not even being determined by reasons. I will argue that such radical ‘choices’ are not best thought of as exercises of free agency but can only be understood as the agent lurching one way or the other. I will argue that the only defensible notion of freedom must respect Kant’s conception of free agency as involving sensitivity to reason, and that Sartre’s does not.” (Note that in Philosophy essays it is usually perfectly acceptable to use the first person pronoun, “I”.)

Even if your essay is largely expository (e.g., if the essay title was: ‘*What is Sartre’s conception of freedom?*’), you should still have a thesis: a particular slant, or focus or strategy. For example, “In this essay I shall highlight the influence of Heidegger’s thinking in Sartre’s analysis.” Of course, your thesis could be purely destructive: “In this essay I will argue that the concept of freedom as invoked by Sartre is ultimately incoherent” or “I will argue that the philosophical problem was misunderstood by Sartre, and that therefore there is no need for his ‘solution’.”

Philosophical essays of all kinds consist largely in providing reasons for believing your thesis or interpretation to be true. You will find arguments in primary sources, secondary sources, the lectures, and in your own reflections. Even if your essay is largely *expository* (explaining a philosopher’s view, for instance), you will still be presenting evidence—analysing passages, for instance—for your particular interpretations.

Here is another useful strategy for good philosophical essay writing: whenever your essay makes a claim, reflect on how an opponent might object to that claim. So one chunk might comprise a detailed objection to

Sartre's view; but the next chunk could begin "Sartre might respond to this by saying...". And then you can respond to the response. It's your essay, you still get the last word.)

A clear central example may help to focus the essay. Sartre himself offers a number of examples that you can pick up on, or you can take one from literature or history, or make one up. You should obviously not spend too much time discussing the details of the example unless those details are relevant to the philosophical point you want to make.

Remember the importance of not making your opponent look like a fool. This is sometimes called the 'Straw Man fallacy: if you build Sartre's position out of straw, then you will not get many points for blowing him away. Instead, you should make his position look as strong and plausible as possible before you begin to attack it.

Finally, you should remember that you are usually not writing for the lecturer but for a relatively naive reader: someone who needs to have the issue explained to them and then to be persuaded of your answer. As a general rule, you should err on the side of explaining more rather than less, especially central concepts and technical terms. Even an ordinary word like 'freedom', when used by Sartre, becomes a technical term, one that might have more than one plausible interpretation – so you should tell us how you are taking it in this essay. But try to use ordinary language and avoid fancy jargon, unless it really does make expression more efficient.

2 Tips and strategies for writing a good paper

A good philosophy essay simply cannot be dashed off in a single sitting, the night before the deadline. You need to start your essay early, and give yourself multiple sittings at it. If you suffer from writer's block (which most people do to some extent), dash something off quickly and then when you read it over you'll have a much better sense of what you really want to be writing. The second draft will be much easier to write. To get the structure of argument right, you may have to write several drafts of the essay.

Philosophy essays are not a matter of gathering information from various sources and stuffing them into a small space. Remember you are being assessed on how clearly and effectively you can defend a line of thought that answers the question precisely. The grading criteria for philosophy essays usually include the following:

Organisation and Argument

Try to order the expression of your thoughts in such a way that they build upon what comes before and support what comes after so that nothing irrelevant to the matter at hand remains to interrupt the flow. Ensure that it is always clear to the reader just what the current point is and how it relates to what you've done and are about to do. Try to satisfy yourself that you have succeeded in showing that everyone ought to believe what you in fact do believe (and where you do not feel satisfied, say so, and try to indicate why). To accomplish this, always establish your points by providing good reasons—the most relevant and persuasive ones you can think of, structured as rigorously and incisively as you can—in support of your views.

Precision and accuracy

In order to be precise, you have to look at the words you are using and ask yourself: what they mean in this context exactly. For example, in the Sartre question considered above, what does "freedom" mean? If there is ambiguity, spell it out, and then tell us which meaning you are using. You have to look at the argument you are using: is there a hidden premise that needs to be spelled out? Is there a condition that might limit its application? Furthermore, never use any word (even a quite ordinary one) unless you are confident that you know what it means (if in doubt, look it up in a dictionary).

Your interpretation of texts must be accurate and sensitive to the primary source. It is never sufficient to rely on a secondary source's interpretation. Be sure that you know and render the precise claim or argument or view that a philosopher intends or is committed to before you go on to evaluate it.

Scope and depth

In order to get the scope right, you have to realise that you do not have to solve the *whole* problem of freedom in 2000 words! Instead, you should stipulate at the beginning of the essay what you will be talking about and what you will *not* be talking about. "in his defence of radical freedom, Sartre offers three arguments: A, B and C. In this essay I will not be talking about B and C, and will challenge him on A alone." In general, the narrower the scope, the deeper you can go, and the better the essay will be. As long as there is a clear philosophical problem at the heart of your essay, then you can go as narrow as you like. Your writing should manifest careful, reflective thinking carried on in an imaginative and critical frame of mind. Probe the issue at hand so as to stretch yourself intellectually.

Presentation and clarity

Grammar, spelling and punctuation are of primary importance. Unclear and imprecise language reveals unclear and imprecise thinking. So it is not just a matter of making the package more attractive; it's also a matter of cultivating an attention to detail in everything you do.

3 Avoiding plagiarism

Any claim you make in your text that is not your own idea, whether it be a quotation or a paraphrase, must be referred to the relevant source. Never use quotations or paraphrases of other people's work as a way of expressing your own ideas. Otherwise your essay may be guilty of plagiarism. Only use quotations or paraphrases in order to present some idea that you are discussing.

For example, the following is a case of plagiarism:

Plato's image of the horseman shows reason and passion in a fight with one another. But, reason only works through abstract demonstration or probabilistic inferences about the relations between objects. Since neither of these types of reasoning could ever motivate the will by themselves, reason cannot motivate the will and therefore cannot oppose the will either.

That would be a case of plagiarism even if the essay included a footnote at this point referring to David Hume's *Treatise*. The following avoids plagiarism:

Plato's image of the horseman shows reason and passion in a fight with one another. But, David Hume was quite right to argue that reason only works through abstract demonstration or probabilistic inferences about the relations between objects, and that since neither of these types of reasoning could ever motivate the will by themselves, reason cannot motivate the will and therefore cannot oppose the will either. (Hume, 1888 edition, p. 413) Even if we think that Hume's conception of reasoning was too limited, his argument can be extended to any sort of reasoning.

Don't get anxious that what you are saying has probably been said by someone else at some stage and that unless you can be sure you are the first to say something you are plagiarising. Your ideas are bound to be a mixture of things you have read, heard and thought, and you don't have to deconstruct them completely into their original sources. You'll know when you are plagiarising: it's when you decide not to think about some question for yourself but find someone else who has thought about it and put down their ideas instead.

Introductory texts, internet sources like Wikipedia and the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, and articles found on the internet through Google are the most common resources for plagiarism. It is sometimes very tempting when tired and ill-prepared and facing a deadline to try to find the answer on the internet. This strategy is positively encouraged in other activities in life and may have been quite useful when you were at school. But it is quite the wrong strategy for a philosophy essay and will very likely have much worse consequences than just doing your best without the help of these resources. All essays you submit will be run through anti-plagiarism software. This software has access to all Internet texts, and searches them systematically and very effectively. The software can also detect when individual words have been changed or inserted by someone trying to hide the plagiarism. In addition, the lecturer can easily recognise a plagiarised paragraph simply because it is so much more fluent than the rest of the essay. Remember: It is always better to submit an essay late and accept the penalty (see above) than to plagiarise.

The procedure that is followed if your essay is found to contain significant plagiarism is outlined in the School's Plagiarism Policy. Please read this document, which is on the School of Philosophy website under "Undergraduate Programmes" and also the University's Plagiarism Policy.

II. Required Format

1. Formatting the text

- Essays must be typewritten; hand-written work cannot be accepted (medical-certified reasons aside).
- Use double-spaced or one-and-a-half spacing. In *Microsoft Word*, select 'Double' or '1.5 lines' under *Format/Paragraph/Line spacing*.
- The standard font size is 11 or 12. Do not type in 10 font (except perhaps footnotes) or in 16 font. Use 'Times New Roman' (or some other standard font). **Don't get FANCY with fonts!**
- Indent the first line of all new paragraphs about 5 spaces; alternatively, insert an extra space between paragraphs and begin the new paragraph flush with the left margin.
- Use page numbering. This can be done automatically in MS Word.
- Quotations of less than 2-3 lines are enclosed within quotation marks ("Mary had a little lamb") and included within the text of your paper. Quotations longer than 2-3 lines (block-quotations) should be indented from the left margin, single-spaced, without quotation marks:

I am a sample block-quotation, indented from the margins. Block-quotations can be 10 or 12 font. Do not put quotation marks around block quotations and do not italicise (except where italics are in the original). Always provide a reference, either in parentheses or by footnote or endnote (Billingworth, 1968: p. 104).

2. Referencing

- All quotations should be accompanied by a reference to the text from which the quotation came, including the page number.
- All ideas of another person, even without a quotation, must be referenced in the same way.
- All essays require a Bibliography at the end. Only include those works that you explicitly mentioned in the text. There are a number of acceptable formats for bibliographies. Use either the Harvard citation style or the Chicago citation style. You will find detailed guides to these styles in the Philosophy subject portal on the library website.
- Here is an example using a version of the Harvard style.
 - Bloggs P. 'A friend of mine once met a philosopher' in: Smithers B. (ed.) *Different Strokes for Different Folks*, Routledge 2002.
 - Jones S. 'I do not know what philosophy is' in: *Journal of Philosophical Brilliance*, vol. 12 no. 5, 1994.
 - Smith J. *What is Philosophy?*, Cambridge University Press 2005.

3. Submission

- You must proofread your essay for spelling errors and grammatical mistakes. Use your word processor's spell-checker but don't rely on it exclusively. It is difficult to eliminate errors completely (there may even be some in this document!) but do try.
- You must submit two copies of your essay, one hard copy, one electronic copy. The hard copy must have a completed and signed cover sheet – available in the box outside the Philosophy Office D504. The Philosophy essay cover sheet should be attached to one copy, which should be handed in at the Philosophy office. Simply staple your essay in the top-left corner; no hard plastic cover sheets or folders are necessary. The other copy should be submitted electronically to Safe Assign on Blackboard.

- If *either* hard copy or electronic copy are late, without an extension having been granted, your essay will be penalised. The standard university penalty is TWO GRADE POINTS (i.e. a C would be reduced to a D+) for up to one week's delay. FOUR grade points will be deducted for up to two weeks' delay. Essays submitted any later will not be accepted, and will score an 'NG' (no grade, i.e. zero).
- Deadline extensions should be applied for before the submission deadline. Application forms are on the Philosophy website and available from D503. Generally extensions will only be offered if backed up by documentation – e.g. med cert or death notice.
- The word-length for your essay (not including footnotes/endnotes or bibliography) will be specified by the module co-ordinator. Normally there is a 10% leeway either side of the word limit. If an essay significantly longer than the word limit is submitted, only the amount under the limit will be read and graded. (*Microsoft Word* has a 'word count' facility under *Tools* on the toolbar.)
- Once the essays are graded, they might be available in the lecture or in your tutorial group. If not, students will be informed by e-mail to come and collect them from the School Office in D504.
- If you have any questions about the marking of their essay, you should arrange to meet the person who marked it (tutor or lecturer) in the first instance.