TIPS FOR WRITING A SHORT PHILOSOPHY PAPER

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How are philosophy essays different?
If you’re like the average college student, you probably haven’t written many philosophy essays. You may well be unsure as to how you should begin, and in fact they can be rather different from what you are used to. That’s where this guide comes in.

As a philosophy major, I’ve written plenty of these essays during my cadet career. It takes a step-by-step process, but the checklists in this guide will help ensure you’re developing your essay appropriately throughout the writing process.

Your Introduction: Informative, Clear, & Concise

Philosophy essays are short and to the point. The less flowery prose, the better: you don’t want to detract from or obfuscate your argument. Instead, indicate explicitly what your paper is about and the argument you intend to make. Additionally, create a ‘roadmap’ that informs your reader how your essay will be structured; then they’ll know from the start what general lines you’ll argue. Do all of this as concisely as possible so that you can get on to the business of explaining and defending your argument. Don’t waste time with grandiloquent claims about the importance of issues—get right to them!

Your Thesis & Organization

The thesis and related sentences are the heart of your paper. You’ll generate your thesis in response to the prompt, your reading, and the instruction of your professor. But here are some questions to ask yourself no matter what thesis you compose:

- Does my thesis answer the question or prompt? Is it stated clearly?
- Does my thesis take a stance that others may challenge or oppose? (It should.)
- Have I formulated the relevant supporting arguments carefully and explicitly?
- Have I set out the most important objections that may be offered to my thesis?
- Will the reader ask, “So what?” or “How?” after reading my thesis? If so, it may need revision. Do not leave room for the reader to be confused!

Your thesis will also inform how you organize your essay. I recommend a step-by-step structure that clearly identifies the argument you’re defending or refuting—and don’t include more than one argument in any single paragraph. Sometimes dividing the paper into sections and subsections will help you stay organized. In the end, you’ll look over your whole essay closely and ask whether every part of it supports your thesis specifically and without digressing. If you find something that doesn’t support the thesis but is still important, then you’ll need to revise your thesis to account for it.
Represent Other Arguments Fairly & Convincingly

Avoid falling into the trap of merely writing an “opinion” paper. As brilliant and groundbreaking as your views may be, you need to lay out the arguments of the authors you discuss and entertain credible counterarguments. This task will require both imagination and discipline! When refuting counterarguments you must give any views you oppose the most convincing formulation that you can. If you just state that your opponent is foolish, then you haven’t accomplished much. However, if you outsmart an intelligent opponent, then you have achieved a great thing! As such, paint your opponent in the best light possible before launching your refutation.

Clarity and Concision

Many cadets write their first philosophy essay their second year at West Point. Prior to that, their experience comes largely from first-year courses or high school, where specific word and page count requirements can lead to overly verbose writing. However, verbosity isn’t the way to go in philosophy, even if you believe you’ve achieved profound insights. Verbose, hard-to-understand prose doesn’t mean a writer’s ideas are unquestionably deep; actually, it usually indicates that a writer has had difficulty expressing their ideas. Instead of pointless verbosity, aim to strike a balance between clarity, simplicity, and intelligibility.

A good way of measuring this: consider how your essay would seem to another student who knew nothing about the topic. Would they be able to read it without difficulty? Would they be able to accurately explain your view and how you defend it? If you can answer “yes” to both questions, then all is well! If not, though, you may need to rewrite your essay so that your ideas are expressed in a simpler and more concise way.

A Note on Perspective

It’s usually okay to use the first person singular! Despite what you may have learned in other courses, in philosophy essays there’s usually nothing wrong with saying, “I argue that…” or “In this essay, I will contend…” Just remember that you’re not writing an ‘opinion’ paper—and don’t overdo it!

Sometimes you’ll use the first person to differentiate your position from that of another philosopher, as in “Whereas David Hume believes x, I argue that y…”

A Note on the Writing Process

Start writing early. Good philosophy papers take time to write, so sitting down the night before and hoping you can formulate a good argument won’t fly! Give yourself time to think about things. Try to sketch out your arguments and responses; you’ll appreciate taking the time when you’re not scrambling to think of refutations.

Also, don’t expect the reader, or professor, to fill in gaps in your reasoning, even if you know that they know the subject well. Write as if your reader has never taken the class before and has little understanding of the topic. A good way to test this: have a friend read and respond to your draft.

Don’t panic if you realize that you don’t know your topic as well as you thought! The point of writing an essay is to give you an opportunity to think things through, organize your thoughts and try to present them in a way that others can understand. So, as I said, start early!

Parting Questions to Ask

- Is my introduction concise?
- Does my introduction contain a clear thesis?
- Do my introduction and thesis succinctly explain the overall structure of my essay?
- Have I carefully formulated my argument clearly and explicitly?
- Have I raised the most important objections to the view I am defending, as well as presented those objections fairly and offered detailed refutations to them?
- Do my body paragraphs contain no more than one argument per paragraph?
- Is my essay organized effectively, with sections or subsections if appropriate?
- To what extent is my writing clear and straightforward?