

# Guide to Philosophy Essay Writing

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While this guide contains some points that you may find useful, it should not stop you from researching further to enrich your resourcefulness as an academic writer.

## Research your paper

As you go through your sources, you may find it useful to make use of index cards (or note slips). This readily enables you to relate notes together under common topic-piles, change the order of ideas, and look for new patterns in the material. Be sure to include a citation on each card or slip. For example, when citing p. 16 of a book by Regan, you can write, say, “R16” in the top-left of a given card (keep a list of your abbreviations). Also record your own comments on these cards, challenging yourself to think critically as you go. To avoid confusion, be careful to separate your comments from your notes on other material—I use square brackets for my own comments. Also, distinguish quotes from paraphrases, possibly by putting quotation marks around actual excerpts. Do not be too sparing with your slips—one point per slip will allow you to sort them much more easily. (Besides, you can recycle the lot after you are finished.) With each new source, you can prepare a full bibliographic reference on a separate slip, which will later help you with your citations.

## Prepare your notes for writing

By now you may have sorted your notes into piles by topic or subtopic, and can get a sense of the main ideas that you wish to pursue. You can put the notes in each of these piles into a logical order, and likewise the piles themselves. Next, you may well wish to construct an outline (which is now much easier to do), so that you can best formulate your ideas as a strong argument, without repetitiveness, inconsistency, or wandering from what you are setting out to argue.

## Compose the body of your paper

It is your job to argue in favour of your thesis. Consulting your notes, in the order that you have determined, will help you to formulate the thesis, and also give you a series of touchstones for drafting. Your thesis will usually be found in a sentence—or a small number of them—most commonly located in the first paragraph. Sometimes, authors use several relevant prefatory paragraphs which ably introduce and motivate interest in the thesis. However, avoid any temptation to ramble on... Each paragraph should help with the task of defending your thesis. Indeed, avoid including any extraneous points. Not only should you justify your views, but ideally, you should indicate what you think are the deficiencies in other views. Certainly, you must anticipate and answer convincingly at least the major objections that could be brought to bear against your thesis. In the end, you *may* find that you are a fence-sitter on a problem, i.e., you are indecisive. This is fine, so long as you explore the reasons both for and against a given position, and show how they are not conclusive either way. There are a great many ways to “argue” in the academic sense of the term. You will need to clarify key concepts, analyze the state of the debate as best you can, and then criticize. You may give conceptual, logical, observational, scientific, ethical, or other arguments for your view, as the case may be. Analysis is crucial as you must know what it is you are criticizing, and the reader must know your own particular interpretation of the problem at hand. Good criticism will not only find fault with other positions, but also highlight what is worthwhile in others’ offerings. Although the views you offer may seem convincing to you, they may not seem so to your reader, who might not share your viewpoint. Even if he or she does, he or she will expect you to ground your position as solidly as possible within the limited space of your paper.

## Citations

Use either endnotes, footnotes, or in-text citations (but no combination of these) to cite material within your essay. See sample entries near the end of this document. **YOU MUST CITE NOT ONLY ALL QUOTATIONS, BUT ALSO EVERY IDEA THAT IS NOT YOUR OWN, OR ELSE YOU COULD BE CHARGED WITH PLAGIARISM.** Plagiarism amounts to knowingly representing others' ideas or expressions of ideas as your own, which can be considered the theft of these ideas. It is not enough to list all of your sources in your bibliography, nor to put others' ideas in your own words. If something is "common knowledge" within the discipline, a citation is unnecessary. But use your judgment (and your instructor's) and *if in doubt, cite*. If a quotation would take up more than three lines of your main text, then you must indent the quote by five spaces on each side, single-space it, and omit any use of quotation marks in this case. Do not produce 'strings of quotations,' and be sparing with quotes in general, explicating what they are saying and demonstrating their relevance to your argument where needed. Show that you understand what is being said in a quotation. Do not lose your own voice.

## Style and Grammar

Some pointers: (1) Put clarity of expression at a premium, preferring simple to verbose word choices, concise to excessive sentences; clarity not only show that you understand the subject at hand, but helps the reader to understand your own writing; (2) avoid excessively long paragraphs; (3) avoid sentence fragments that are not grammatically complete (see *The Random House Handbook* or other guides for other rules of grammar); (3) use the first person, "I," when discussing your own views; although some find it hard to do this, it is not only acceptable in philosophy, but expected, since otherwise you are posing your opinions as objective facts; (4) I suggest you avoid sexist language, such as "he" presumptively referring to males and females; sexist language arbitrarily favours one sex over another, thus belittling the importance of female existence; if you disfavour "he/she," or "he or she," you can use "he" or "she" in alternation; (5) avoid the passive voice, favouring the active voice instead (e.g., "The culture was carefully observed by us" is passive, whereas "We carefully observed the culture" is active); (6) "i.e.," means "that is," and "e.g.," means "for example"; (7) please be sure to proof-read your essay for spelling, looking up uncertain cases; it does not impress your reader if you do not look after many easily correctable details; (7) include a minimum of one-inch margins on all sides of the page; (8) number your pages, standardly, but not inevitably, on the top-right of the page (do not number p. 1); (9) the first paragraph in your essay, and/or the first in each section, should not be indented; (10) double-space the body of your paper to help ensure ease of reading.

## Title

Formulate a title that indicates your point in writing the paper. Avoid long, wordy titles. Try to be imaginative or interesting without losing the precise substance of what you are writing about.

## Conclusion

Look at the argument you have created, and tie the threads together. A strong conclusion will not merely summarize, but also point towards, say, further research, the future, or else offer an overarching insight which stems directly from what you have done. However, it is not a good idea to introduce new evidence or arguments in the conclusion.

## Introduction

I find it is helpful to write this last, so that you know exactly what it is that you are introducing. For example, as you are writing, you will find that the argument may take a course that differs from your initial expectations. It is better to give a solid, more knowledgeable introduction than a vague, speculative, or less convincing one. The introduction looks ahead to the rest of the essay, even as the conclusion is backwards-looking. However, an introduction can make reference to a wide body of existing scholarship, even as a conclusion can refer to lines of further research (excessively vague gestures are not very helpful in this respect). Do not let your reader be surprised in the essay by material that has not been aptly introduced. Lead up to the statement of your thesis in your introduction. Trickle down from the general to the more specific.

## Revise and Rewrite

Many writers say that most of the writing process is one of revision—1% inspiration and 99% perspiration. You may wish to write a whole new draft, using the previous as a reference, rather than merely rework sentences on your word processor. This allows for fresh creativity and better, freer reworking of sentences. Give yourself enough *time* to rework afresh after putting the paper away for awhile.

## Standards

Be aware of Queen's academic standards for evaluating essays. Ask yourself how well you have met those standards, and if not, why not? What flaws exist in your paper that you might improve? See how your paper does by others' lights if possible. Read it to someone unfamiliar with the problem and see if they understand it or are convinced by it. Do not go over the prescribed length, as a rule. If you find yourself absolutely compelled to do so, after unsuccessful attempts to shorten the work, it had best be good, concise material, otherwise the extra length constitutes a liability for the work. Avoid playing tricks with your word processor in order to make your essays appear shorter with different line-spacing, margins, text-sizes and fonts. This will only tend to irritate your reader.

## Suggested Further Reading

Crews, Frederick. *The Random House Handbook*.  
Jackson, Brett. *Writing philosophy essays: a handbook for students*.  
Martinich, Aloysius. *Philosophical writing: an introduction*.  
Norman, Colin. *Writing Essays: A Short Guide*. (from Queen's Department of English)  
Seech, Zachary. *Writing Philosophy Papers*.  
Strunk, William, Jr., and White, E. B. *The Elements of Style*.  
Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*.

## The Writing Centre

### Writing Centre

Location: 140 Stuart Street

Director: Dr D. Babington

Discuss your current writing assignments during free one-to-one tutorials with a professional tutor. For appointments, phone 533-6315. For advice about grammar and usage, phone the writer's hot line at 533-6294. For details of talks and workshops (on writing your first essay, writing examinations effectively, etc.), phone 533-6315.

### Resources on the World Wide Web

#### Writing in philosophy:

<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca:8080/philosophy/phlwrite/phlhome.html>

What is an “excellent” essay? It will generally and outstandingly reflect the following:

#### **Content**

- Shows sufficiently clear understanding of issues
- Analyzes effectively (captures most basic points + refined approach)
- Shows knowledgeability
- Shows familiarity with literature
- Notes occur where required
- Self-consistency
- All material in paper is relevant
- Argues effectively, with evidence and valid logic
- Criticizes effectively
- Anticipates and answers objections
- Originality

#### **Style**

- Organization conducive to overarching purpose
- Conciseness (includes nonrepetitive)
- Appropriate length
- References in proper form
- Page numbers included
- Apt word usage
- Correction for grammar and spelling
- Suitable formatting

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