

An Essay Writing Guide

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NOTES FOR STANFORD'S ETHICS COURSE:

1. This is **optional** reading
2. This doesn't guarantee a good grade
3. This is just **ONE** of many approaches to the essay

Having marked the essays for the first semester epistemology course, I unfailingly found that what helped or hindered students in achieving high marks was the extent to which they performed or failed to perform on the following criteria. (Of course, if they failed to do obviously important things, like handing in their essay in the first place, then this also had an impact on their grade [or lack thereof!].) So the following suggestions and criteria are not meaningless; they have direct implications for how you can achieve a good grade!

Importantly, **please make sufficient time to satisfactorily complete your essay**. Based on my observations of students who submitted their work, my strong opinion is that what prevents many students from achieving high marks is not that they cannot perform well on the following criteria, but rather that they do not give themselves enough *time* to make sure that they perform well on the criteria. So please make enough time to satisfactorily complete your essay and try not to leave things until the last minute. In fact, one may wish to consult time management guides online if need be.

We will now consider the marking criteria which follow:

1. *Relevance*
2. *Good Understanding of the Philosophical Terrain*
3. *Good Structure*
4. *Rationality*
5. *Clarity*
6. *Originality*
7. *Charity*

Let us now on to examine each criterion in more depth.

1. *Relevance*

Your essay needs to be relevant in two senses.

First, your essay needs to be relevant to the question – that is, your essay must address the question, the whole question and nothing but the question (unless there is a really good reason to give a tangential comment). A way of testing the relevance of your essay is to take any segment of the essay, such as a paragraph or a sentence, and ask yourself, “if I were to delete

this segment, would my answer to the question be just as compelling and clear?” If the answer is yes, then you may wish to delete that segment to enhance your essay’s relevance.

Second, your essay also needs to be relevant to the literature. This means that your essays must connect to philosophical literature somehow, perhaps by discussing, critiquing and/or defending ideas from the philosophical literature (as well as providing references). You do not need plenty of references, but for this particular essay, you should take into account any content in the textbook that is relevant to your question. In order to perform well, stage III students in particular are also encouraged to pursue their own research beyond the textbook.

2. *Good Understanding of the Philosophical Terrain*

Your essay should demonstrate a good understanding of the philosophical terrain. This can be achieved through accurate presentations of positions and of arguments and objections in the literature (if they’re relevant). Obviously, you should consider carefully the presentations found in the textbook, other readings and in lecture materials. But it is important to give a presentation that you understand clearly yourself, and that expresses the problems, issues, arguments, etc. in your own way. And it’s okay to be upfront about aspects of the topic which seem to you not to be clear (indeed, it is often a useful way to develop a criticism to begin from a point that you *don’t* find clear in other people’s presentations of the topic).

As with the criteria of clarity and rationality, it’s important that your essay does not bite off more than it can chew by discussing too much material. In particular, it should not prefer breadth at the expense of discussing less material with clarity, rationality and a perceptibly sound understanding of the terrain.

3. *Good Structure*

It is important that your essay has a good structure.

While there is no strict formula for a well-structured philosophy essay, I have myself found the following overall plan useful:

- Introduction
 - Here you should succinctly state what the conclusion of your essay will be
 - You should then state how you will argue for this conclusion and what the structure of your essay will look like
 - Be relatively specific:
 - For example, do not say things like “I will outline the main philosophical positions and then provide my own argument that one of these positions is superior”
 - Instead, say something like, for example, “I will first introduce one to the philosophical territory by describing what Bayesian confirmation theory (BCT) is and how it differs from a hypothetico-deductive account of confirmation. I will then argue that BCT is a superior account of confirmation because, unlike hypothetico-deductive accounts, BCT allows one to see how *strongly* some evidence supports a hypothesis.”
- Introduction to the philosophical landscape

- As alluded to above, every essay should discuss all and only those philosophical positions and distinctions that are relevant to answering the essay question
- Where appropriate, define the main positions, explain important distinctions and use examples to illustrate your points
 - For example, suppose you are discussing foundationalism and coherentism. You may define what a justified basic belief is, distinguish it from justified non-basic beliefs and then give an example of what arguably could be a justified basic belief and a justified non-basic belief. You would then move on to characterise foundationalism and coherentism.
- Sometimes an introduction to the philosophical territory will also require an outline of some argument
 - For example, an essay question may ask you to critique the argument from evil for atheism.
- Your argument
 - Here, you spell out your main argument
- Objection to your argument
 - Every good essay considers how a rational critic would react, or has reacted, to their argument, so it is important to discuss at least one objection to your position in order to demonstrate critical thinking skills (stage III essays may have the opportunity to consider more objections than stage II essays given their larger word count)
- Your response
 - Here, you respond to the above objection
- Additional argument or objection
 - You may wish to consider an additional objection to your argument which you will then respond to or, if appropriate, you may wish to discuss a separate, additional argument for your position as well as any relevant objections to that argument
- ...
- Conclusion
 - To use the words of a former lecturer of mine, if your introduction tells readers what you'll tell 'em and the main body of the text tells 'em what you said you'd tell 'em, then the conclusion merely tells 'em what you told 'em
 - It does not introduce new, substantive material
 - Like the conclusion, it reflects the structure of the essay and is relatively specific

In terms of preparing your essay, I strongly recommend that you consider planning your essay using a similar bullet-point format to the plan that I gave above (if you are not doing this already).

For example, consider this essay plan:

- Introduction
 - This essay will argue interactionist dualism is a more plausible account of the mind than physicalism.
 - To argue this thesis, I will first explain the distinction between interactionist dualism and physicalism as competing theories of mind.

- I will then set out the argument from mental objects before responding to an objection to this argument.
- ...
- Dualism and physicalism
 - Interactionist dualism can be understood as a position which asserts that 1) the mind is partly or entirely non-physical and that 2) the non-physical mind, or the non-physical parts of it, have a two-way causal interaction with the physical body.¹
 - Examples of non-physical aspects of the mind may include, for instance, so-called *qualia*, the experiences of “what it’s like” to be in certain mental states, such as when tasting cheese, seeing blue or feeling pleasure.
 - An interactionist dualist might assert that these aspects of the mind are not physical and that they have a two way interaction with the mind since, for example, physical neurons can give rise to the non-physical sensations of tasting John’s cooking and these non-physical sensations may in turn cause the physical reaction of throwing up.
 - In contrast, physicalism in the philosophy of mind is the doctrine that the mind is entirely physical.
 - Perhaps, for example, a physicalist would assert that the mind is nothing over and above physical neurons located in time and space.
- Argument from mental objects
 - An argument for the plausibility of dualism comes from the fact that mental objects seem wildly dissimilar to any physical phenomenon.²
 - To appreciate this argument, try to imagine a rainbow.
 - Assuming that you imagined one, consider the following:
 1. There exists an imagined rainbow - a mental object - that is multi-coloured (e.g. it is green, purple, etc.)
 2. If there exists an imagined rainbow and this object is a physical brain state, then there must exist a brain state which has the property of being similarly multi-coloured (from the substitutivity of identicals)
 3. There does not exist a brain state that has this property
 4. Therefore, it is not the case there exists an imagined rainbow (a mental object) which is a physical brain state
 5. So this imagined object must not be a physical brain state
 - Hence, we have a valid argument that there exists some non-physical mental phenomena
 - ...
- Objection and a response
 - Now one might object to the argument by asserting that there simply is no imagined rainbow with those properties.³

¹ Shaniqua Tyress, “Interactionist dualism is the bomb,” *The Journal of Metaphysical Hair-Splitting* 6, no. 2 (2016): 666.

² This argument can be found in Humper Dinkleschmidt, *Why I’m right and everyone else is wrong: a typical philosophical monograph* (Hell: Philosopher’s press, 2013), 23-5.

³ Indeed, this objection can be found in Imer Hardkor Fizigalist, *Why all dualists are just dumb* (San Francisco: Bath House Press, 1991), 356.

- But it is dubious that this assertion is true
 - Clearly, it seems that I really can imagine an object with these properties
 - But surely something must make it true that I am imagining a rainbow with these properties rather than another thing – such as a colourless concrete wall
 - Indeed, then, the only truth conditions for the claim that I am imagining a coloured object is that there actually exists something in reality with the properties which I imagine of it, although this thing would not necessarily exist in physical space with physical properties.
- Hence, this objection fails
-
- Conclusion
 - In conclusion, interactionist dualism is a more plausible account of the mind than physicalism
 - In support of this thesis, I first outlined interactionist dualism and physicalism before defending the argument from mental objects in favour of dualism.
 - ...

Of course, my purpose here is not to endorse this essay plan as perfect nor to endorse this argument for dualism either (to be sure, the argument as stated above is insufficient to establish the plausibility of interactionist dualism, irrespective of whether some suitable development of it could suffice). My purpose is merely to illustrate one way of structuring and planning essays which I and others have found indispensable over the years since it allows one to visually see how different points relate to each other (e.g. whether one point is an elaboration or example of another).

Here are some other strategies for developing good structure which you might like to consider:

- Perhaps consider using section headings to make the purpose and content of each section more apparent.
- If you are responding to multiple arguments, perhaps consider responding to each argument immediately after you have described it as opposed to describing all the arguments together and then giving responses to each one.
- Maybe consider using sign posts which make it clear what your essay is doing at a given point, particularly in the first sentence of each paragraph of the main body (e.g. “My main argument for X position concerns Y”, “One objection is...”, “My reply is that ...”, “A separate argument for position Z is the argument from W”).

4. *Rationality*

Another criterion for your essays is that they must be rational. By this, I mean that they have (arguably) plausible premises and valid or cogent inferences from those premises. A way of test the rationality of your argument(s) is by asking 1) whether a philosopher could reasonably doubt your premises and 2) whether the conclusions which you draw from your premises could

fail to be true (or probably true) even if your premises were plausible.⁴ Sometimes, the plausibility of a premise will depend on it according with reasonable philosophical intuitions or you giving a citation (such as where your premise may be an empirical claim that is supported by a study).

Now we will not necessarily be marking you on whether you give *the* true answer or whether we agree with you. Hence, you may have some premises which we disagree with, but which we think are not obviously irrational nevertheless - and that is fine. However, we do expect that you will not merely assume premises which are philosophically controversial and in need of argumentation.

So which premises will need justification and which ones will not? Well, sometimes this is a tricky question, but if the answer doesn't seem obvious to you, then perhaps all you can do is ask John or myself whether a particular premise seems too controversial and would need defending.

5. *Clarity*

Clarity is a prime philosophical virtue. To use the words of the late Jonathan McKeown-Green, you should write as if your audience is a philosopher who knows the area, but needs reminding. To do this, you need to clearly articulate concepts and arguments so that your audience can appreciate them. Correct spelling and grammar are important in this respect. It is also important to avoid ambiguous language, such as obscure metaphorical expressions and the like.

Perhaps there are several tests of the clarity of your essay. You can take a segment of your essay and ask, "Is it possible that a reasonable philosopher could interpret this segment to have more than one meaning?" If so, then perhaps you may wish to clarify the segment so that that possibility is eliminated. Another test concerns definitions. If you are defining a position by saying "X position is the claim that Y", you may wish to ask yourself whether one could endorse Y but not endorse X (and vice versa). For instance, we might define atheism as the claim that there is no consciousness that is superior to human consciousness.⁵ But this is not a clear (nor plausible) characterisation of atheism, at least as commonly understood. An atheist could fail to come under our definition if she believes that there are aliens with cognitive faculties that are superior to humans. Likewise, a very liberal theist could come under our definition if she believes that God is within us all and has no cognitive capacities that are superior to humans (while also denying that there are life forms superior to humans). In this case, one can be an X without believing Y and one can believe Y without being an X.

In light of the recent markings, clarity was a criterion which a lot of students faltered on. Perhaps students might find it useful to get feedback on their essay by sharing them with friends, family or even their philosophical peers (while taking care to avoid plagiarism, of course).

6. *Originality*

⁴ In the unlikely event that you are unaware of what a "premise" is, please consult this authoritative and academic guide: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Premise>.

⁵ I doubt that anyone has seriously defined atheism in this manner, but other philosophical positions have been defined in similarly unclear ways and the general points about clarity which follow are plausible nevertheless.

Your essays are expected to be original, particularly if you want to do well and/or are at stage III. You can integrate originality into your essay in several ways. First, one can use original examples to explain concepts, ideas, argument or objections. Second, one can provide original arguments, objections or responses to objections. Third, one can propose a new position. Of course, you will not be expected to completely reinvent the wheel in your essays and you do not have to use all of these strategies, but it may be useful for you to reflect on the extent to which your essay makes a philosophical contribution that is novel and not merely a repetition of the content in the lectures or the readings.

Now attempts to be original come with their risks. For example, in trying to give an original Gettier case, one might demonstrate that they do not really know what Gettier cases are. Additionally, in trying to give a new argument or position, they might propose some irrational ideas. In fact, it is arguable that originality is valuable precisely because successful attempts to be original often require careful thought and a sound understanding of the philosophical terrain. So please be careful to not pursue originality to the detriment of your performance on other of the marking criteria.

John Bishop also had this comment to add:

I'd say that the key to the kind of 'originality' we are looking for is to honestly think through the issue raised by your essay topic for yourself, and make sure that you are not simply repeating what you have read, but explaining it to yourself and your reader and making an attempt to evaluate the arguments, objections, etc. for yourself. You may come to agree with an author you have read (or, even, with something either young John or old John has said in tutorials or lectures!), but you can still 'be original' in articulating the point you agree with in your own way, and giving your reasons for it.

7. *Charity*

Your essays have to be charitable. By this, I mean that they cannot interpret or describe the views of others in ways which are unfavourable when more favourable, alternative interpretations and descriptions are equally viable. If someone says something that is stupid, and you're responding to it, so be it. But often there are somewhat reasonable motivations for particular viewpoints which one disagrees with, and it is not charitable to misrepresent those viewpoints or their motivations as being the epitome of irrationality because doing so makes one's own position look stronger.

My own perspective is that philosophers should aim to conform their opinions to the truth rather than to conform the truth to their opinions, so to speak. So if a philosopher finds that she needs to misrepresent another's viewpoint or its motivation in order to resist endorsing it, then she should perhaps consider changing her opinions so as to endorse any truth in the viewpoint which she finds is otherwise irresistible.

That concludes our essay writing guide. Yet again, I apologise if the content is already familiar to you, as I'm sure some of it probably was. Nevertheless, I hope that at least some of this guide has been useful. If you had any opinions about how useful this guide is and/or suggestions for how it could be improved, then I would be very grateful to hear it.

Anyway, my sincere best wishes to you with your essays and John and I look forward to reading your insights about topics in epistemology!