

How to Write a Philosophy Essay

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Let me begin by stating some common misconceptions about a good philosophy essay.

1. A good philosophy essay is not a summary of the author's position. This is perhaps the most common error that students make. A perfect and complete summary of an author's position cannot possibly score higher than a B-.
2. A good philosophy essay is not a summary of the instructor's lectures. Having composed the lectures myself, I am particularly good at recognizing my own material in a student essay, even when that student has disguised the material from my lectures by making some superficial changes.
3. A good philosophy essay is not required to be brilliant and ingenious. While brilliance is appreciated and applauded, it is not required—even for an A!

A good philosophy essay shows that a) a student understands the author's position and the author's arguments for that position; b) a student can offer criticisms of the author's arguments; and that c) a student clearly states where he stands on the issue.

How do you go about writing a good philosophy essay?

1. Decide on a topic that really interests you rather than one that is easiest. As a rule of thumb, do not worry about your topic being too narrow. Most student essays are too broad and superficial. Four pages of Plato can easily serve as a basis for a 10-page paper.
2. Whether your professor has given you a general topic or you come up with your own, write down some questions that you want solved—especially, *the* question. Your paper will wander unless you have a good and clear guiding question. “Seek and ye shall find.”
3. Determine the passages relevant to your topic and take detailed notes on those passages. Good notes include direct quotations, paraphrases, questions and comments.
4. In one sentence, state what your author is getting at. This is the author's conclusion.
5. Track down the evidence that the author provides for that conclusion. This evidence is what philosophers call the premises of the argument.
6. Having summarized the passage in your notes and extracted the argument, you are now in a position to write down some problems that emerge from your reading. Do not ignore these problems. The examination of problems constitutes the essence of philosophy. The absence of discussion of difficulties will not impress the instructor and will not be taken as evidence that you understand everything. On the contrary, it will be taken as evidence that you have chosen the easy way out. Some possible problems you might consider:
 1. What does the author mean by certain key terms? Does he define them or does he assume that we know what they mean? Does his failure to define the terms lead to ambiguity?
 2. Does the author's position rest on any dubious or unstated assumptions?

3. Can you provide your own examples of what the author is talking about? (e.g., willing wrong-doing; injustice). If you can't do this, there is a good chance that you don't really understand what the author is getting at.
 4. Is what the author says consistent with your experience?
 5. Is what the author says consistent with what she says in other places?
7. The next stage is crucial. Having discovered a nest of problems from your initial groundwork, order those problems. Which problems are basic and which depend on the basic? For instance, isn't it better to consider the meaning of a key word before you explain why you disagree with a statement the author makes which uses that key word?
8. Now make a detailed outline of your paper. By an outline, I do not mean I. Introduction II. Body III. Conclusion. Such an outline is worthless. Your outline should have four main sections. **I. The Question.** In a paragraph, explain the precise problem you are considering. Don't just say, "I am considering the problem of evil". Your reader cannot possibly appreciate or understand your solution unless you explain precisely what the problem is that you are trying to solve. **II. The Author's Argument.** Under this heading, outline each step in the argument, explaining and illustrating as you go. Make sure that you quote your author on key points; especially when you disagree with what the author is saying. But while quoting the author is a good start, it is never enough; you also have to explain the quotation by putting the author's meaning in your own words and coming up with your own examples. **III. Criticism of the Author's Argument.** You must raise objections against the author's position. It does not matter whether you agree or disagree with the author. If you disagree, explain why you disagree. If you agree, raise the most plausible objections you can think of and then show how your author can solve those objections. **IV. My Own Position.** Finally, outline your own position and show how it is not vulnerable to the criticisms that you have already raised or to any obvious difficulties. It is not necessary to have a definitive answer to the problem at hand. Presenting your own position can quite well mean presenting a forceful dilemma that you are unable to solve. Many a published paper is valuable because it throws into sharp relief difficulties of interpretation and argument.
9. If you have made it this far, the thinking for your paper will be 95% done. Your main work now is to present the material from step 8 in an understandable way. It is always a good idea to supplement your abstract arguments with examples. A well-chosen example can help your reader understand your position more clearly; and a well-chosen counter-example can be particularly devastating to a position that you think is mistaken. Take the junk out of your writing; choose words that most appropriately convey your meaning; and make sure your spelling, grammar, footnotes and bibliography are flawless.

*Q: Get a good **question** = clear, of interest, and doable given constraints of space.*

*Q: **Quote** your author: you must present the data you are working with.*

*X: You must **explain** and interpret what your author means in your own words.*

*X: You must make up your own **examples** to show you understand your author.*

*E: You must **evaluate** whether the author is right or wrong and state your own position.*

*E: You should **edit** your work: appropriate word selection; correct grammar; no junk.*