# How To Write Philosophy

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Writing a philosophy essay can be tricky because it calls for a different skill set than what students have exercised in other subjects. Perhaps the best approach with which the student is familiar is to outline the essay beforehand by summarising its content in short, pithy subject categories. This approach may prove an ineffective exercise for the philosophy essay because outlines needn't display an argument and that's exactly what makes an essay a philosophy essay.

For philosophy essays, the best practice may be to begin by drafting an argument with supportive premises for a carefully considered conclusion before beginning the writing of a philosophy essay. If it's unclear what conclusion to draw, then here are a few tips for getting started.

Students should choose a topic that interests her, intrigues her, annoys her, or excites her. A student will do a much better job in writing an essay if she cares about the subject matter.

(This can be difficult for topics in metaphysics and epistemology because they are theoretical and abstract, and who really cares about abstract or theoretical topics. Writer's block is common for such essays, so begin by writing down a few positions one could take up if they cared about the subject matter. Then, ask whether one of these positions is something that is interesting.)

The essay should be a carefully constructed critical analysis of some question or issue, typically as discussed by one of the author's the student has read for lecture.

The student should:

- Clarify the issue. Put it in one's own words.
- Explain the arguments given for different positions on the issue.
- Take and defend a position of one's own.

Philosophy essays for my courses are usually between 1500 and 5000 words. In other words, they are quite short. Avoid introductions using flowery language, such as "Since the dawn of time, philosophers have wondered..." Similarly, avoid unnecessary points or points that are orthogonal to the thesis of your essay. Doing this can be difficult because writers have a tendency to believe that everything written is important. The writer will want to keep everything in the essay. It's important to be choosy about what to include in an essay. Get right down to business and put ideas as simply, concisely, and clearly as possible.

If the maximum word limit is difficult to meet, write a longer essay, let it sit a while, and then return to it with the objective of pruning what has been written. One may find that much of the initial writing is unnecessary to make the point.

Do not submit the first draft. No one who writes seriously does this. Write a draft, put it aside for a time, then work on it again. It can always be made better and it will be a better product and likely receive a higher mark if this is done. This means that the essay should not be written the night before it is due. Write it sooner and then work on it a second (or third) time.

The student should not consider the audience that she is writing for to be the lecturer who already knows a lot about the subject. Rather, the audience should be an intelligent person who knows nothing of the subject, for example, the student at the beginning of the semester, or a friend or roommate. Try to say enough to make what is said in the essay clear to that person. Do not omit such things that an intelligent person would need to know in order to understand the essay. Always keep the audience in mind as during the writing process.

If possible, give a draft of the essay to such a person to read. Ask them to point out places where they can't understand it or where the argument seems weak. It won't help if the person is so nice that they will say it's great, whether it is or not. So pick a mean person! Or at least make clear that in philosophy it is deeply appreciated when a writer receives helpful criticism and constructive feedback. Only constructive criticism will help make for a better essay. Everyone who writes seriously seeks such criticism and learns how to 'take' it.

The student's work will be judged on the clarity of communication, on how well it presents the issues, and on how well the essay defends a view; the essay will not be judged on the answer one gives or the view one defends. Past experience suggests that those essays that receive higher marks tend to be the ones with which I disagree most.

Being able to write a good short essay is a useful skill. It comes in handy in many contexts.

While I have a great deal of advice to give, I haven't settled on how to explain this advice. So, since there are many philosophers with an online presence who have provided their own advice for writing philosophy papers, I provide a number of hyperlinks for students to use.

For a very long time (at least in the internet age), **Jim Pryor** (NYU) provided the best writing guide for students in philosophy classes. Admittedly, when I was an undergraduate and graduate student, I called upon Jim's webpage for advice in approaching the philosophy essay. Thankfully, Jim has maintained his webpage through the years – even adding some new information over the years. So, here's a link. Here's a nice guide to philosophical writing by **Stephen Yablo**, which is largely a recapitulation of Pryor's guide.

**Elijah Chudnoff** (Miami-FL) has published a helpful guide for writing philosophy papers (see here). His guide should be required reading for postgraduates, since his aim seems to be to mentor rising professional philosophers. Undegraduates who may not be thinking that philosophy is their career choice, nevertheless, should heed Elijah's advice, for it applies just as well to professional settings.

**Peter Horban** has published a nice guide for writing a philosophy paper (available here). **Michael Huemer** (CU-Boulder) has a nice guide, too (available here). Tips on writing a philosophy paper by **Doug Portmore** (ASU) are here.

For those of you with a little more pocket change, here is a list of books available regarding your philosophical writing. Read them. You'll likely improve your writing abilities.

- *Philosophical Writing: An Introduction*, by A.P. Martinich
- *Writing Philosophy: A Student's Guide to Writing Philosophy Essays*, by Lewis Vaughn
- *Thinking and Writing about Philosophy*, by Hugo Bedau
- *Writing Philosophy Papers*, by Zachary Seech
- *Writing to Reason: A Companion for Philosophy Students and Instructors*, by Brian David Mogck

For early drafts, attempt to cut the essay by at least one third. Here's an excellent toy example from my former colleague at the University of Wyoming, **Jeff Lockwood**. Students should emulate Jeff's exercise in preparing drafts of their essays for my paper or for research projects, such as a dissertation or thesis.