

HOW TO WRITE A PHILOSOPHY ESSAY

1. Preparation

Take notes from recommended books and articles. Structure note-taking towards the essay question. Discuss the topic, and your proposed answer, with others.

2. Structure

a) Your essay must have one. Write out a rough plan in note-form before beginning to draft your essay.

b) Your aim is to argue to a conclusion. Thus every point you make, every paragraph, must be advancing your argument. If any paragraph doesn't do this, remove it.

c) Make the structure clear to the reader, not just to yourself. Say what you will do (introduction), do it, say what you've done (conclusion). Divide the essay into paragraphs. Limit yourself to one point per paragraph. 1 paragraph per side means your paragraph is too long; 6 per side means they are too short.

3. Content

a) Argument is what matters: rational persuasion; there is little scope for non-rational persuasion (rhetoric) and no scope for assertion in a philosophy essay. So always **SUBSTANTIATE YOUR OPINIONS**. i.e. give reasons for your views.

b) Your opinions will have been formed by close reading of philosophical texts. Explaining—and often criticising—arguments from these texts is the basic task of your essay. You must explain arguments in your own words, giving references to the texts and editions and to any commentators whose views you discuss: don't write about a philosopher if you haven't read his views, or if you can't give proper references. Use reference books such as encyclopedias and 'philosophy made simple' books **ONLY** to guide your preparation—not as sources.

c) **NEVER**, ever mention an author's views without giving full and accurate reference to the appropriate text, i.e. proper footnotes.

d) As a preliminary to argument it is often necessary to **EXPLAIN YOUR TERMS**. If a philosophical concept is important in the essay (e.g. 'natural law', 'truth'), give at least a working definition of it; then, since your choice of definition is part of the position your essay is defending, either stick to your definitions or expand them as necessary.

e) Avoid the following—they incur severe penalties

- i irrelevance (especially answering a different question from the one set)
- ii waffle (a waste of everyone's time)
- iii plagiarism (always acknowledge every source used, and give a bibliography)
- iv long quotations (if you feel you must quote at all, keep it short. Only quote from important writers; it is almost always best to put it in your own words).

4. Style

Clarity is the main requirement. Imagine you are arguing a position to someone much younger than yourself who knows nothing about philosophy (try it). Always allow time to put the essay draft aside and then return to it: do you understand what you have written? If not, others are unlikely to. If you cannot show you understand a topic, you probably don't. Read your essay draft aloud, or to another person.

Also, be concise. A long-winded style is irritating. Keeping to the word-limit is good discipline, and part of what the question is testing.

You must know what plagiarism is and know the College's plagiarism policy