

WRITING PHILOSOPHY ESSAYS

How does one go about writing philosophy essays? Some of you may already have received, in other classes, detailed instruction on this matter. Some, however, may not. In what follows, then, I want to offer a few suggestions concerning characteristics that I feel make for better essays.

I. A Clear and Explicitly Stated Thesis

In my experience, one of the best indicators of when an essay is likely not to be very strong is the absence of a clear statement, at the very beginning of the essay, of the thesis that the author is going to be defending. What I usually find is that when the writer has not indicated, in the opening paragraph, the thesis that is going to be defended, no thesis emerges later on.

On the other hand, when a clear thesis is stated at the beginning, I usually find that the discussion that follows is generally well focused.

Thesis Statement Checklist: Key Questions

1. Have I stated the thesis that I am going to be defending **at the very beginning of my essay**?
2. Is the statement of my thesis **clear** and **concise**?

II. The Avoidance of Excessive 'Stage-Setting'

Quite a common weakness consists in devoting too much of one's essay to setting the stage – that is, to describing **the background** to the issue or question that one is going to tackle, thereby leaving too far too little time to setting out one's own arguments, to defending one's thesis, and to addressing possible objections.

What is a good balance in this regard? My feeling is that in essays of the length that one is writing here, one should certainly not devote more than a third of one's essay to describing the question or issue that one will be addressing, and that less than that would be even better.

Using Your Space Properly Checklist: Key Question

1. Have I devoted **at least two-thirds** of my essay to setting out **my own** arguments and/or analyses, and considering objections?

III. A Clear, Concise, Informative Introduction

A good introduction is short and to the point. You should indicate exactly what your topic is, and the view that you intend to defend. You should also tell the reader how your discussion will be structured, so that he or she knows from the very beginning the general lines along which you will be arguing in support of your conclusion. You should also indicate, very briefly, your main line of argument. Finally, you should do these things as concisely as possible, so that you can get on

with the business of defending the view that you are setting out on the topic in question.

Illustration

Suppose that you were writing about the following topic in epistemology: phenomenalism. You might begin your paper as follows:

"The issue that I shall be addressing is whether a certain objection to phenomenalism can be sustained. The objection in question is one advanced by David Armstrong, and the thrust of it is that phenomenalism cannot provide a satisfactory account of the public nature of space and time. After carefully setting out Armstrong's objection, I shall suggest that Armstrong has overlooked an important resource available to the phenomenalist - namely, the idea of counterfactual dependence between the experiences of different people. This idea, I shall argue, enables the phenomenalist to offer a satisfactory analysis of what it means to say that there is a public space and time."

A person who reads this introductory paragraph knows exactly what view you will be defending, the general lines along which you will be arguing in defense of that view, and the overall structure of your essay.

Or suppose that you were writing about the morality of abortion. You might begin your paper as follows:

"My topic is the morality of abortion. I shall defend an extreme anti-abortion position by arguing, first, that no satisfactory rationale can be offered for any moderate position on abortion, and secondly, that an extreme pro-abortion position cannot be accepted without also accepting infanticide."

Once again, a person who reads this introductory paragraph knows exactly what view you will be defending, the general lines along which you will be arguing in defense of that view, and the overall structure of your essay.

Introduction Checklist: Key Questions

1. Is my introduction **concise**?
2. Does it contain a **clear** statement of my **main thesis**?
3. Does it indicate very briefly my **main line of argument**?
4. Does it explain the **overall structure** of my essay?

IV. An Overall Structure for Essays Focusing Upon an Argument

Philosophy essays tend to come in two main forms. First, there are essays where one is setting out and evaluating an argument, and trying to show either that the argument is unsound, or that the argument can be sustained. Secondly, there are essays where the focus is instead upon some thesis, which one is either trying to establish, or trying to refute. In the case of essays of the former sort, if you are criticizing an argument, your discussion should involve at least the following elements:

- (1) A careful exposition of the argument that you are criticizing.
- (2) A detailed statement of your objection to the argument, and one that makes it clear exactly what step in the argument you think is unsound. (Is it

one of the premises that is faulty, and if so, which one? Or is one of the inferences invalid?)

(3) If you are claiming that an inference is invalid, you need to consider whether the argument could be slightly revised, by adding another premise, so that the faulty inference is eliminated. If, on the other hand, you are attacking one of the premises, you need to consider how a defender might respond. Could he or she attack your argument against the premise? Or might it be possible for him or her to respond by offering some strong, positive support for the premise that you are criticizing?

If, on the other hand, that you are trying to show that some argument is sound, your discussion will need to contain the following elements:

- (1) A careful setting out of the argument that you are defending.
- (2) A formulation of the most important objections to your argument - either objections to premises, or objections to steps in the reasoning.
- (3) Detailed responses to those objections.

Checklist for Overall Structure for Essays Focusing upon an Argument

1. Have I formulated the relevant argument in a **careful and explicit** fashion?
2. If I am criticizing the argument, have I made it clear **exactly what step** in the argument my criticism is directed against?
3. Have I set out the **most important objections** that might be raised to the view that I am defending?
4. Have I offered **careful and detailed responses** to those objections?

V. An Overall Structure for Essays Focusing Upon a Thesis

Suppose, instead, you are focusing upon some thesis that you wish to defend. In this case, your essay should contain at least the following elements:

- (1) A clear and precise formulation of the thesis that you are advancing.
- (2) A careful setting out of your argument (or arguments) in support of that thesis.
- (3) A statement of the most important objections that can be directed, either against your thesis itself, or against your supporting argument.
- (4) Detailed responses to those objections.

Similarly, if your goal is to give reasons for rejecting some thesis, your discussion will need to contain the following elements:

- (1) A clear and precise formulation of the thesis that you are attempting to refute.
- (2) A careful exposition of your argument (or arguments) against that thesis.
- (3) A statement of the most important counterarguments that can be offered, either in support of the thesis that you are criticizing, or against the objections that you have offered to that thesis.
- (4) Detailed responses to those criticisms.

Checklist for Overall Structure for Essays Focusing upon a Thesis

1. Have I stated the thesis **clearly**?

2. Have I formulated the relevant argument (or arguments) in a **careful and explicit** fashion?
3. Have I set out the **most important objections** that might be offered?
4. Have I responded in a **careful and detailed** way to those objections?

VI. Exposition of Arguments

Both in essays where you are focusing upon some specific philosophical argument, and in those where you are either defending, or criticizing, some philosophical thesis, the setting out of arguments, and the evaluation of them, are absolutely central. How well you do these things, then, will have a very important bearing upon the strength of your discussion.

How can one formulate arguments in an effective fashion? One thing that I would strongly recommend is that you set out any argument in a careful step-by-step fashion, so that it is clear, both to yourself and to the reader, both what assumptions the argument involves, and what the reasoning is. For when this is done, it is usually much clearer exactly which premises, or which steps in the reasoning, are most in need of support, if the argument is one that you are defending, or which premises or inferences might most profitably be questioned and examined, if your goal is instead to show that the argument is unsound.

When you are advancing a number of arguments, either for or against some thesis, it is very important to avoid setting out more than one argument in a single paragraph. For this often results in too brief an exposition of either or both of the arguments.

Finally, it is not a good idea to combine the exposition of an argument with a consideration of possible objections to it. Set out the argument first, and when that has been done, go on to evaluate the argument, and to consider possible objections that might be directed against it.

Checklist for your Exposition of Arguments

1. Are your arguments **carefully** and **explicitly** set out so that both all of the **assumptions**, and all of the **reasoning**, are clear?
2. Have you, at any point, set out **more than one argument in a single paragraph**?
3. Are objections and responses set out in **separate paragraphs**?

VII. Examining Responses to your Arguments

One crucial point to note is that responses to your arguments come in two different forms. First, there are responses that are directed against your argument itself, and which claim, therefore, either that some of your assumptions are implausible, or that some of your reasoning is invalid. Secondly, there are responses that are directed against the conclusion of your argument, and which attempt to provide reasons for thinking that that conclusion is false.

Objections of both sorts are important. For if you confine your discussion to a consideration of objections to your thesis, and you fail to consider objections to your argument, then you haven't shown that you have made out a satisfactory positive case in support of your thesis.

How do you arrive at interesting objections to your own arguments? The crucial thing is to look carefully at the assumptions that you have made, and to ask yourself which of those are philosophically controversial. Then you can turn to the relevant literature to see what sorts of argument are offered against the assumption in question by philosophers who reject it.

Checklist for Responses to your Argument

1. Have I explicitly indicated to the reader which of the assumptions in my argument are **philosophically controversial**, and **why**?
2. Have I then offered reasons for thinking that those assumptions are nevertheless plausible?
3. Have I considered, and responded to, counterarguments directed against **the conclusion** of my argument?

VIII. Logical and Perspicuous Structure

A crucial factor that makes for a good essay is the presence of a logical and perspicuous structure. So it is important to ask how one can both organize one's discussion in a logical fashion, and make that organization perspicuous to the reader.

Some suggestions concerning logical organization of essays of different types were set out above - in sections IV and V. But how can you also make the structure of your essay perspicuous? The main ways are, first, by beginning with an introductory paragraph of the sort described above; secondly, by dividing your essay up into relevant sections (and possibly also subsections); and thirdly, by using informative headings to mark off those sections (and subsections). The reader will then be able to see at a glance how you have structured your discussion.

The main reason why a perspicuous structure is desirable is not, however, to make life easier for readers. It is rather that when the structure of your essay is clear at a glance, it is much easier for you to notice, when you are writing and revising your essay, that there are gaps in your discussion, where additional material is needed, or that your essay as a whole is not organized in the most logical and effective fashion.

Checklist for Logical and Perspicuous Structure

1. Is my essay organized into **sections** in a logical fashion?
2. Are the sections divided into appropriate **subsections**?
3. Have I made the overall structure of my essay clear by using **informative headings** for sections and subsections?

IX. Overall Clarity and Conciseness

Many people, confronted with an essay that is difficult to understand, but which is written in a style which sounds profound, may be tempted to conclude that the topic must be a difficult one, and the writer's ideas unusually deep. The appropriate conclusion, however, will generally be a rather less positive one – namely, that the author either has muddy ideas, or has not made the effort to

communicate his or her ideas to others in a satisfactory fashion. Obscurity is not a sign of profundity.

I suspect that this point probably needs to be labored a bit, as there are reasons for thinking that many people, in their secondary school education, are encouraged to express their ideas in a fashion which sounds profound. Consider, for example, the following experiment, carried out by two English professors at the University of Chicago. Joseph Williams and Rosemary Hake took a well-written paper, and changed the language to produce two different versions. Both versions involved the same ideas and concepts, but one was written in simplified, straightforward language, while the other was written in verbose, bombastic language, loaded with pedantic terms. They then submitted the two papers to nine high-school teachers, and found that all nine gave very high marks to the verbose paper, but downgraded the straightforward essay as too simple and shallow. Williams and Hake then repeated the experiment with a group of ninety teachers, and came up with similar results. Three out of four high-school teachers (and two out of three college teachers!) gave higher marks to pompous writing!

What should you be aiming at, in terms of clarity, simplicity, and intelligibility? One way of estimating how successful your essay is in these respects is by considering how it would seem to a secondary school student who knew nothing about the topic. Would he or she be able to read your essay without difficulty? Having read it, would he or she be able to say exactly what view you were defending and how you were supporting that view? If you can confidently answer 'Yes' to both questions, then all is well. But if there is any room for doubt, then you need to rewrite your essay so that your ideas are expressed in a simpler and more straightforward way.

Checklist for Overall Clarity and Conciseness

1. To what extent is the writing **clear and straightforward**?
2. Is the writing **concise**?

X. Planning your Essay

In the preceding sections, I have discussed some features that make for a good essay. In this final section, I want to mention briefly what I think is a very helpful way of producing an essay that has most of these characteristics - namely, **the formulation of an explicit plan**, both for the essay as a whole, and for individual sections.

To do this, you might proceed as follows. First, on a filing card, or a small sheet of paper, list the main sections into which your discussion will be divided, as discussed above. Secondly, for each of those sections, take a filing card, and write down both the main claims that you want to advance in that section, along with a brief description of any arguments that you'll be putting forward, or examining. Thirdly, for each of the arguments that you'll be discussing, write down, on another filing card, the basic structure of that argument. Finally, re-examine everything that you have written down. Can you see a more effective way of dividing the discussion up into sections? Is there a better way of organizing the material within a

given section? Can any of your arguments be given a better step-by-step formulation?

The plan that you initially draw up is not, of course, set in concrete, and as you do more reading for your essay, or talk to other people about the issue that you're considering, you'll often see a better way of organizing the material, or think of other arguments or objections that you need to consider, and so on. You can then modify your original plan. The crucial thing is **always** to have at least a **tentative** plan in mind, since even when you're just beginning to think about a topic, working with a plan in mind will help you to think about the topic in a focused way.