

Some guidelines on how to write philosophy essays  
Giada Fratantonio  
giada.fratantonio@gmail.com

**A. Before Writing**

- Choose a topic:
  - o Choose a question.
  - o Do the readings related to the question and take notes on the main points as you go.
  - o Focus on one problem (generally already addressed in the chosen question).
  - o Do *not* focus on too many things. Pick one issue/problem/argument and focus on that. A short but clear and well-argued paper is way better than a long and complicated paper full of confused thoughts.
- Plan:
  - o Everyone's writing process is different. I like to "write as I read". I find it useful to take notes and write up short sections for myself (almost as a philosophy journal!). What matters is that *before* you write the actual paper you have a **plan** to: i) better understand what you want to say, ii) see what material is relevant/what's superfluous, and iii) understand the structure of your paper. Writing up a paper plan allows you to have a **narrative**.
  - o Be flexible: it is ok to change the plan while writing!
  - o A paper plan can be in the form of a mind-map with concepts, arguments, and references relevant to the chosen topic; or it can be in the form of an extended abstract; or both.
- Answer the Question:
  - o Remember to plan, read, draft while never losing the focus on the main aim of the essay: to answer the question!

**B. When Writing:**

(Here's what I look at when grading a paper. It's also what I think of when writing):

*Clarity – Structure – Argument – Understanding – Originality*

**i) Clarity**

1. Everything you do can be a political choice. Writing is no exception.
  - a. Write as clearly and accessibly as possible
  - b. Never assume the reader knows or should know what you are talking about.
2. Writing is a selfless exercise
  - a. it's not really about you, it's about the reader!
3. Write as if you are talking to someone who cannot reply you back

How to write clearly:

- Make sure your writing follows a narrative.
- Use simple sentences/words when possible.
- Use appropriate terms
- You are encouraged to use technical philosophical jargon. However: i) make sure it is appropriate to the chosen topic. For instance, if you are writing about contemporary analytic epistemology, you would probably not need to talk about

Leibniz's "monads" (unless your paper is explicitly about Leibniz's monads and contemporary epistemology!); ii) make sure you always introduce the technical terms and explain what they mean.

- Limit the use of adverbs ending with "ly", e.g., Importantly, Interestingly. More often than not, these adverbs are superfluous.
- Remember that you are not writing literature. You are writing a philosophy paper. Avoid sentences like "once upon a time, humans have started wondering: will we ever be able to solve the problem of induction?"
- Do not try to impress with your language: keep it simple.
- NB: if you are not a native speaker of English and you feel not confident with your English, ask for someone to read through the grammar.

## ii) Structure

1. Make sure your paper has various clear sections that allow the narrative to unfold clearly.
2. Make sure the material you have is in the right and appropriate section.

## INTRODUCTION:

- Clearly introduce the topic/main questions you address in the paper.
- State what the aim of your paper is: do you *defend* X Or *object* to X? Or argue that we should *suspend judgment* on X?
- State briefly but clearly what your **thesis** is.
- If possible, anticipate your strategy: give a spoiler of your **argument**.
- You want to give the reader an idea of what's going to happen in the paper. This will make the paper easier to read.

## STATE THE PROBLEM/TOPIC:

Here is your time to show your understanding of the relevant text/issues. (See *Understanding*).

## ARGUMENT:

(See *Argument*)

ANTICIPATE OBJECTION (when possible)

RESPONSE TO THE OBJECTION (when possible)

## CONCLUSION

Make a clear summary of what you have done in the paper, what you have achieved and make some conclusive remarks supporting your thesis. It is ok for the Introduction and the Conclusion to look very similar!

## iii) Argument:

- State the argument in a clear way.
- Evaluate each PREMISE of your argument: explain why they are true/plausible/convincing, so to make sure your argument is sound. Make sure you avoid equivocations. To do so, clarify and explain every technical term that appears in the premises.
- Make sure the argument is valid, i.e., the CONCLUSION follows from the premises. (if that's what you want to establish of course)
- You may consider numbering and indenting premises and conclusion.

- EX.
- 1) Socrates is a man.
  - 2) All men are mortal.
  - 3) Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

- Numbering and indenting is absolutely optional. What matters is that your argument follows. In any case, if you present your argument in a schematic way, it is often very helpful to also present it in a more prosaic way.

**iv) Understanding:**

- Make sure the exposition of the philosopher's view is accurate.
- In order to do this, you can use text-evidence to support your interpretation of the author's view.

**v) Originality:**

- It's tricky to assess originality given: i) it probably means different things to different people and ii) it should mean different things relatively to the different stages of one's academic studies/career.
- Examples of what I take as mark of originality in a 2<sup>nd</sup>-year Undergraduate Course:
  - o Disambiguating concepts
  - o Using the readings to defend/object to a claim/view/argument (as opposed to merely repeating someone else's argument)
  - o Using original examples/thought experiments

**C. After Writing**

- Go celebrate and be proud of what you have just done!
- Take some time off your paper.
- Go back to it with a fresh and detached mind: you want to become the reader of your own paper.