

# How to Write a Good, Or Really Bad, Philosophy Essay

Bryan Frances  
Fordham University

The bulk of this document is on the problem of how to write a GOOD essay. After I've finished that task, I'll discuss how to write a BAD essay, by stealing a funny set of instructions from another philosopher.

The most important thing to remember about the essays is that ***your job is to help your reader figure out the truth regarding the essay topic***. You are *not* to merely tell us what you have concluded; you are *not* to merely tell us what someone else has concluded; you are *not* to tell us what view you're "comfortable with". You are to help us figure out the right answer. This is not to say that you are to *prove* beyond any doubt that such-and-such an answer is correct. Usually the questions we deal with are too hard to do that (although some of the tutorial questions have definite answers that you should be able to discover). Rather, you are to advance considerations that help your reader make significant progress in figuring out the truth.

There are some who say that this task of uncovering the truth, gaining genuine knowledge, is impossible. That's what they *say*, but I don't think they *believe* it, since they behave the same way everyone else does—assuming that they know millions of things (the earth is roughly spherical; Tony Blair is Prime Minister; most postgraduates have bachelor's degrees; most people work for a living; physics is hard; Einstein was smart; pressing the car brake pedal will usually slow the car down; fire is hot; deleting your hard drive is usually a bad idea; etc.). You will see many times in tutorial that there is such a thing as getting it right (and getting it wrong) in philosophy.

See some additional helpful remarks at <http://eee.uci.edu/programs/philoswr/>.

Finally: any student or teacher with experience knows the **BIG SECRET** to getting a good grade on an essay. It's obvious once you think of it and universally recognized to be right. Here it is: write a complete draft of your paper, give it to the person who will be grading your essays and get her to tell you the most important things that are wrong with it, and the best way to go about improving it. This is *guaranteed* to greatly improve your grade.

## A. Essay Mechanics

- a. ***Ensure that your essay observes the word limit!*** Otherwise your essay may not be graded and will thereby receive a zero. We grade partially on succinctness.
- b. Take care with spelling and punctuation. There is almost no good excuse for misspelling or punctuation; if you have any doubts, use a dictionary. Correct grammar is harder. Almost everyone who writes grammatically learned to do so by doing loads of reading and writing.
- c. It is sometimes helpful to the reader to divide your essay into sections with their own titles. It also helps you keep in mind that each paragraph needs to be making some point directly relevant to your essay theses.
- d. Avoid very long paragraphs. A full page is usually too long.
- e. Your teachers are very tired of encountering mistakes with *its* and *it's*. The latter is short for *it is*; so whenever you are tempted to use it, see if you can use *it is*. If you can, then it

- is permissible to use *it's*, if you can't, then you must use *its*. The string of symbols *its'* doesn't make any sense at all. Don't make mistakes with *there*, *they're*, or *their* either.
- f. Follow a consistent and current practice regarding bibliographical citations! Choose one style from one of the articles or books we read and follow it religiously. Please don't make up your own method or (worse yet) use several methods.
  - g. Incorporate citations into your text so as to minimize footnotes. For instance, use something like 'one of the foremost advocates of the theory is Fodor (1975)' to make a reference to the 1975 article or book by Fodor listed in your bibliography. Use 'In addition, Fodor (1975, 37) claims that the mental language is innate' to refer to p. 37 of that work.
  - h. Use footnotes, not endnotes. Footnotes should be used to make comments inessential to your main line of argument.
  - i. For grammar help see <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/>

### ***B. Essay Clarity, Economy, and Structure***

- a. Don't shoot for literary elegance. Use simple, straightforward prose. Keep your sentences and paragraphs short. Use familiar words. I'll make fun of you if you use big words where simple words will do. The issues we are examining are deep and difficult enough without your having to muddy them up with pretentious or verbose language. Don't write using prose you wouldn't use in conversation: if you wouldn't say it, don't write it. If your paper sounds as if it were written for an audience of ten-year olds, then you've probably achieved the right sort of clarity. When you're famous you can be as elegant, pretentious, humorous, or obscure as you please. Your goal is not to appear lofty or mysterious; it's to appear perfectly clear and honest.
- b. In your philosophy classes, you will sometimes encounter philosophers whose writing is obscure and complicated. Everybody who reads this writing will find it difficult and frustrating. The authors in question are philosophically important despite their poor writing, not because of it. So do not try to emulate their writing styles.
- c. Consider the following two essay fragments:

...We've just seen how X says that P. I will now present two arguments that not-P. My first argument is... My second argument that not-P is... X might respond to my arguments in several ways. For instance, he could say that... However this response fails, because... Another way that X might respond to my arguments is by claiming that... This response also fails, because... So we have seen that none of X's replies to my argument that not-P succeed. Hence, we should reject X's claim that P.

I will argue for the view that Q. There are three reasons to believe Q. Firstly... Secondly... Thirdly... The strongest objection to Q says... However, this objection does not succeed, for the following reason...

- Isn't it easy to see what the structure of these essays is? You want it to be just as easy in your own papers. THIS MAY BE THE MOST IMPORTANT BIT OF ADVICE. If you write your paper this way your teacher will love and admire you endlessly.
- d. Your essay topic description will dictate the structure of your essay. Often you'll be asked to evaluate a certain view. If so, then you're obligated to (a) explain what the view is, (b) present the arguments that support it, (c) present the arguments against it, (d) state

your own opinion, and (e) defend your opinion. Five sections. If you wish, you can divide your essay into these sections so that it is perfectly clear to your reader what you're doing and where you're doing it.

- e. Pretend that your reader has read but not understood the material you're discussing, and has not given the topic much thought in advance. This will of course not be true: your teachers have read and understood the material, and they have thought about these issues. But if you write as if it were true, it will force you to explain any technical terms, to illustrate strange or obscure distinctions, and to be as explicit as possible when you summarize what some other philosopher said.
- f. In fact, you can profitably take this one step further and pretend that your reader is LAZY, STUPID, AND MEAN—although once again keep in mind that this is pure fiction! I'm lazy in that I don't want to figure out what your convoluted sentences are supposed to mean, and I don't want to figure out what your argument is, if it's not already obvious. I'm stupid, so you have to explain everything you say to me in simple, bite-sized pieces. And I'm mean, so I'm not going to read your paper charitably. (For example, if something you say admits of more than one interpretation, I'm going to assume you meant the less plausible thing.)
- g. Don't begin with a sentence like "Down through the ages, mankind has pondered the problem of..." There's no need to warm up to your topic. You should get right to the point, with the first sentence.
- h. Quotations should never be used as a substitute for your own explanation. And when you do quote an author, you still have to explain what the quotation says in your own words. If the quoted passage contains an argument, reconstruct the argument in more explicit, straightforward terms. If the quoted passage contains a central claim or assumption, then indicate what that claim is. You may want to give some examples to illustrate the author's point. If necessary, you may want to distinguish the author's claim from other claims with which it might be confused.
- i. Make sure every sentence in your essay does useful work. Get rid of any that don't. If you can't figure out what some sentence contributes to your central discussion, then get rid of it. Even if it sounds nice.
- j. You should never introduce any points in your paper unless they're important to your main argument and you have the room to really explain them. So don't bother to very briefly state X's theory and then say that you don't buy it. I don't care. I want to see some reason why it's good or bad, and if you cannot do that in a short compass and it isn't critical for your goals in the essay, then get rid of it entirely.

### ***C. Essay Content***

- a. Try to anticipate objections to your view and respond to them. This is crucial for earning a good grade (A or B). For instance, if you object to some philosopher's view, don't assume she would immediately admit defeat. Imagine what her comeback might be. How would you handle that comeback? It is better to bring up an objection yourself than to hope your reader won't think of it (they will). Explain how you think these objections can be countered or overcome. Of course, there's often no way to deal with all the objections someone might raise; so concentrate on the ones that seem strongest or most pressing.

- b. An important consequence of the previous point: choose just a couple arguments and treat them thoroughly. **THIS IS PROBABLY THE SECOND MOST IMPORTANT BIT OF ADVICE.** You have a small number of words to work with, and in order to get a decent grade you need to go beyond the lecture material. So in order to not do poorly you'll need to severely restrict the number of arguments you present in your essay. It's almost worthless to just say something like 'Evolution is one of our best, most justified theories. If it's right, then token identity theory is true. So that's a powerful argument for token identity'. That argument sucks. It's way too sketchy. It fails to back up its key premise—that evolution proves that token identity is true—and it also fails to consider what a dualist might say in response. It's a bumper sticker, not a decent argument. It could be made into a decent argument, but that will take some work—and that's what distinguishes the essay that earns a C from the essay that earns an A or B.
- c. A sobering fact: almost no one really cares what philosophical view you have. Maybe your mother does, but your teacher doesn't. Your teacher cares about this only: how well you understand the philosophical issue you're writing about; how well you can articulate your view, carefully distinguishing it from other, closely related views; and how well you can defend it. There shouldn't be anything in your essay other than sentences devoted to these three tasks. Your tutor isn't interested in reading biographical information or remarks on what theories you're "comfortable with". She wants evidence, in the form of arguments, that your view is the true one.
- d. Don't use sentences such as 'Webster's Dictionary defines a soul as...' Dictionaries aren't good philosophical authorities. They record the way words are used in everyday discourse. Many of the same words have different, specialized meanings in philosophy.
- e. Don't assume that the positions we deal with in this class are obviously wrong. They aren't, or we wouldn't be studying them. Feel free to be bold and daring in your arguments and theses, but never forget to acknowledge, at least implicitly, the difficulty of the issues, the intelligence of your opponents, and the inadequacies—however hidden to you and me—of your own arguments and claims.
- f. Saying what a philosopher thinks can be tremendously hard; don't underestimate the difficulty here. If I remember correctly Saul Kripke, Donald Davidson, Noam Chomsky and some other notable philosophers had a reading group in the 1970s devoted to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. They gave up eventually because it was too hard to figure out the book! Mind you, Kripke and Chomsky are almost universally judged to be among the very smartest people in philosophy (the stories about Kripke's intellectual powers are particularly stunning); and Davidson is certainly no slouch. Furthermore, after Wittgenstein used that book to defend his Ph.D., he put his arms around the shoulders of his examiners—Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore, two of the best philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—and told them not to worry about their lack of understanding because they will never understand it. This is an extreme case, but the lesson applies all the time.

#### ***D. Grading***

- a) A big portion of your grade is based on how well you perform on three basic criteria:

1. How well do you understand the issues you're writing about?
2. How good are the arguments you offer?
3. Is your writing clear and well organized?

We do not judge your paper by whether we agree with its conclusion. In fact, we may not have any firm opinion about what the correct conclusion is. But we will not have much trouble determining whether you do a good job arguing for your conclusion.

b) More specifically, when grading we'll be asking ourselves questions like these:

- i. Do you clearly state what you're trying to accomplish in your essay? Is it obvious to the reader what your main theses are?
- ii. Do you offer supporting arguments for the claims you make? Is it obvious to the reader what these arguments are?
- iii. Is the structure of your essay clear? For instance, is it clear what parts of your essay are expository, and what parts are your own positive contributions?
- iv. Is your prose simple, easy to read, and easy to understand?
- v. Do you illustrate your claims with good examples? Do you explain your central notions? Do you say exactly what you mean?
- vi. Do you present other philosophers' views charitably and relatively accurately?
- vii. Are your arguments plausible?
- viii. Did you consider criticisms of your own view, and then reply to them?

This is how we will grade your essays, so use (i)-(viii) as a checklist. The answers to the first six questions should be 'yes'. The final two questions count much more in a more advanced course. But they are crucial for getting a good grade in this class.

- c) The comments I find myself making on students' philosophy papers most often are these:
- "Explain this claim" or "What do you mean by this?" or "I don't understand what you're saying here"
  - "This passage is unclear (or awkward, or otherwise hard to read)" "Too complicated"
  - "Too hard to follow" "Simplify"
  - "Why do you think this?" "This needs more support" "Why should we believe this?"
  - "Explain why this is a reason to believe P" "Explain why this follows from what you said before"
  - "Not really relevant"
  - "Give an example?"

Try to anticipate these comments and avoid the need for them!

A good portion of what appears above is stolen from a similar document put together by philosopher Jim Pryor, who has my thanks. See his website: <http://www.jimpryor.net/>

Okay, now that we know how to write a GOOD essay, here are some excellent thoughts from philosopher Jimmy Lenman on how to write a BAD, truly awful, essay, taken from his website: <http://www.shef.ac.uk/philosophy/staff/profiles/lenman.html>

## **How to Write a Crap Philosophy Essay**

### **A Brief Guide for Students**

Always begin your essay along these lines: “Since the very dawn of time the problem of free will has been considered by many of the greatest and deepest thinkers in history.”

Always end your essay along these lines: “So it can be seen from the above arguments that there are many different points of view about the free will problem.”

Whenever in any doubt as to what to say about X, say, apropos of nothing in particular and without explanation, that X is extremely subjective.

When that gets boring, try saying that X is all very relative. Never say what it is relative to.

Use language with as little precision as possible. Engage heavily in malapropism and category mistakes. Refer to claims as “arguments” and to arguments as “claims”. Frequently describe sentences as “valid” and arguments as “true”. Use the word “logical” to mean plausible or true. Use “infer” when you mean “imply”. Never use the expression “begging the question” with its correct meaning but use it incorrectly as often as possible.

“Argument” is perhaps the most important word in philosophy. So why not impress the marker [that’s *grader* to Americans] by spelling it with two “e”s?

Get into the habit of inserting words like “so” and “therefore” between sentences that are entirely irrelevant to one another. This, all by itself, will bring into being a mutual relevance that previously did not exist.

Be careful always assiduously to avoid answering the question asked. There are so many other more interesting things for you to discuss.

Put “quotation marks” round words “entirely” at random.

Be completely defeated by apostrophes. Systematically confuse “its” and “it’s”.

At some point in every essay, treat the marker to a brief Dr McCoy [a character from the TV series *Star Trek*] style sermon about the dangers of being too “logical” when trying to think about the existence of God/moral obligation/free will/the theory of knowledge/any subject matter whatever. To reinforce the point it always helps to point out how once again how very subjective the subject matter in question is.

Avoid clarity at all costs. Remember: nothing that is clear can possibly be really deep. If as a result the marker gives you a third [that’s about a C- or D+ for Americans] that just shows that your wisdom is going straight over his/her head.

(*Don’t*, whatever you do, heed the words of Peter Medawar: “No one who has something original or important to say will willingly run the risk of being misunderstood; people who write obscurely are either unskilled in writing or up to mischief.” – What a *silly* man!)

Remember. Paragraphs are for sissies. So are headings.

Only little people use examples. Avoid them strenuously. If you must insist on using some, be sure to do so with studied irrelevance.