

Guidelines to Writing an Essay in Philosophy By Professor Lou Marinoff

1. Overview

You are required to write a 1,500 - 2,000 word essay. This is very brief by traditional philosophical standards, in which an essay often meant a full-length book; e.g. David Hume's essay *On Human Understanding*, or Thomas Reid's *Essays on the Intellectual and Active Powers*. A philosophical essay can also be a short book, as in Henry David Thoreau's *On Civil Disobedience*, or John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*.

Even though your essay will be much shorter than these, it will share certain features with them. The noun "essay" comes from the French *essai*, which means an "attempt," from the verb *essayer*, which means to attempt or to try something. These in turn derive from the Late Latin *exagium*, a weighing, and from the Latin *exigere*, to investigate. Your essay will indeed weigh a question on the scale of inquiry, and will attempt to convince a rational reader (me) of a particular viewpoint, interpretation or description (yours) of some philosophical issue or question.

2. Function

Your essay may serve one of three main functions: argumentative, evaluative, or descriptive. The essay's function largely determines its style.

If you are attempting to defend, refute or extend a particular point of view, the functional style is more argumentative – not a pejorative term in philosophy. E.g.: "In this essay, I will attempt to defend/refute/extend Thoreau's view of civil disobedience."

If you are attempting to compare or contrast two or more points of view, the functional style is less argumentative and more evaluative. E.g. "This essay will compare and contrast deontological versus teleological theories of right in dealing with terrorism." But in making an evaluation, you will still be weighing arguments in favor or disfavor of a given viewpoint.

If you are attempting to describe a given philosopher's contribution to the history of ideas, or to the understanding of a particular issue, your functional style will be more narrative than argumentative, but will still embody evaluative discourse. "This essay will examine the influence of John Stuart Mill's philosophy on 20th-century human rights movements in America."

My main functional advice to you is this: Choose your topic and your purpose in advance, and do the associated reading, note-taking and thinking before sitting down to write. This will make writing the essay as efficient and enjoyable as possible. It will also make space for you to exercise creativity as you write, but will help keep you on track at the same time.

3. Structure

Like any coherent story, an essay has a beginning, and middle, and an ending.

In the beginning, you should clearly state what kind of attempt your essay will make. For example, “In this essay I will endeavor to convince the reader that ...” or “The purpose of this essay is to compare and contrast two perspectives on ...” or “This essay will explain why X’s philosophy of Y is important for Z” are all credible openings. Of course you should say more than this by way of introduction.

In the middle, you should state the main reasons (called “arguments”) for espousing your viewpoint, if you are writing an argumentative essay. You should explain, compare and contrast in detail the perspectives you choose to treat, if you are writing an evaluative essay. You should survey both in depth and in context your chosen thinker or idea, if you are writing a descriptive essay. In any case, the middle section embodies the main substance of your work.

Whatever kind of essay you are writing, it is desirable to anticipate the strongest possible objection that could be made to your argument, interpretation or description, and to raise and counter that objection itself. This ultimately strengthens your position.

In the ending, depending on the kind of essay you will have written, you can draw the conclusion or conclusions that follow from your argument; you can summarize or contextualize your evaluation; or you can frame or project your description.

4. Presentation

Presentation of the essay is important. Leave adequate margins for comments. Longer quotations (more than three lines) should be indented without quotation marks.

All essays must be typed. Double space throughout. Make sure the print is legible. Use a normal font and size (e.g. Times Roman 12 point), preferably black characters on white paper.

References should be made to all quoted or paraphrased materials. Any standard method of footnoting may be used (e.g. Chicago Manual of Style, APA style, etc.). You must footnote author's name, year, title, publisher, and page number(s) in some consistent order, and give a "List of Works Consulted" ("References") at the end of the essay. If quoting from or referring to a web-site, give at least the URL (and author, if known) in a footnote.

Here, for example, is a website that shows you how to use Chicago Manual of Style: https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html

While you may discuss your essay with fellow students, it is extremely important that the work you present be your own. Do not let your essay be copied by a classmate, for you may well face the same penalties as the person who copies it.

NB: Plagiarism of any kind – that is, representing another person’s writing as your own, whether verbatim or by paraphrase and without quotation or citation – is the most serious academic offense a student can commit. Plagiarism will result in a grade of zero on the essay, possible failure of the course, and possibly other consequences.

Correct spelling, sentence structure, and paragraphing are all vital to making your point known. Avoid distracting your readers with sloppy work. Your presentation should be carefully proof-read for spelling, grammar and sense. Always run your final draft through a spell-checker. There may be a Writing Center on campus, where you may benefit from some technical help.

Finally, remember that writing is best done in stages: a rough draft, an improved draft, and a final draft being minimally three stages. The more time you allow between drafts, and the more drafts you produce, the better your essay will become.

Please include a cover page with your name and student number as well as the title of the essay. Optionally, have some fun by placing graphics your cover page, but don’t spend more time on this than on your essay! I admire cover art, but won’t grade it.

5. Further Reading

It might help you to read some philosophical essays before writing yours. I highly recommend any of Bertrand Russell’s many short essays, including those in *The Problems of Philosophy*. He is a classic essayist, independent of whether you agree with him or not.

Of course, you can and should read some essays by or about other philosophers, especially those relevant to your interests.

Ultimately, you can also read books or browse websites devoted to the art of writing philosophy essays.