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How to Write a Philosophy Dialogue

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Writing a dialogue

Writing philosophy essays doesn't have to be boring. (Perhaps I'm not the best person to talk about this because I never find philosophy essays boring!) The trick is to make it interesting for you. There are different ways you can do this. In this hub I will illuminate one way in which you might achieve this. I will describe how one would go about writing a dialogue between two or more characters. This is a legitimate way to write a philosophy essay (some very good writing in philosophy is in dialogue form), but you have to ensure that you cover everything that is asked of you in the essay question. Here is how.

What a Dialogue is About

A dialogue is a discussion between two or more people (or perhaps even one person and their conscience, or a better self). It is written much like a stage play is written. So when you write a dialogue imagine that you are writing a stage play. It requires some sort of narrative at the start to introduce the characters (and perhaps the scenario) and then a discussion between the characters. For example:

Alan and Lady Lovelace are having a cup of tea in Alan's parlour. As usual, their discussion becomes somewhat philosophical.

Lady Lovelace: So what is it I hear about you and thinking machines, Alan?

Alan: Well, with the advances in modern technology and our advances in computer science, I think we are in a good position to say that there is a possibility of a thinking machine.

Lady Lovelace: Are you quite serious, Alan!?

Alan: Certainly I am, my Lady...

This is the basic format of a dialogue. You can include more characters if you need to. Importantly, however, you need to ensure that you answer the essay question in your discussion. This will include some preparatory work before you go ahead and write your masterpiece. In particular, this will require analysing the essay question and some initial planning.

Why Write a Dialogue?

There are plenty of reasons to write your philosophy essay in dialogue form. Here is a list:

- It is fun
- It is a different and creative way to write a philosophy essay
- It allows you to ask questions (by one of the characters) that you think the reader might be thinking
- A conversation between two people naturally brings out the *reasons* one holds a particular position, which is very important in any philosophy essay
- Because it is naturally suited for outlying reasons for holding certain positions, it can help you in both writing a good essay as well as getting further understanding of the topic
- It is a tried and true form of philosophical writing

Analyzing Stage

In the first stage it is very important to analyse the essay question. I have covered this in a different hub, on writing an argumentative philosophy essay. I suggest you have a look at this now, before proceeding.

Planning Stage

The first thing you need to do is to consider what you are going to do in your essay. This is a very tricky question, for how do you know what to do!? But we can break it down into two broadly different types: either you want to argue for a particular position, or you are really unsure and just want to conduct a discussion on the topic. Either option is as good as the other. Just remember who you are writing for. Basically, you aim to write for an educated layman. You don't assume that they have any prior understanding of the topic on which you are writing, but you can assume that they have some degree of academic acumen.

A great deal of planning should go into your essay before you start writing it. I suggest that you plan it much the same as you would any normal essay. I discuss how you might do this for both an argumentative essay and discussion essay under the planning stages. What you end up doing here greatly depends on the type of essay you are planning on writing. Remember, this is only a *planning* stage. You will not yet be writing the dialogue, only planning what you are going to write. Here is a brief summary of what you might want to do in the planning stage (although, my hubs on argumentative essays and discussion essays have much more details in the planning stages):

1. Explain each position you will be dealing with. This is also called exposition. It is really important to do this first, *before* launching into a detailed discussion, or attack against, the various positions.
2. You then need to compare, contrast and discuss these different positions. This will take the form of giving your own examples. Fortunately, dialogues are really good for this kind of thing, because you can make one of your characters ask clarifying questions, which gives you a chance to expand on different ideas.
3. What you do here will depend on what you are trying to do. You might want to argue for a certain position, or you might want to merely discuss a position. I expand on this point in my hubs on discussion essays and argumentative essays.

Brainstorming

Here is where you start to really think about your characters. Make each character in your play hold a different position. For example, suppose your essay question is as follows:

Discuss three objections to the existence of thinking machines that Turing attempts to answer. Do you think he is successful?

In this example you might want to have four characters in your play: one representing Turing and the other three representing the three objections. You can then start your brainstorming by writing each of the different characters names down on a sheet of paper and jotting some notes under each one. You might have some quotes from different readings to write here, or you might have some ideas as you do your readings that relate to a particular objection. You might want to draw lines on the page to show what the argument relates to... and so on. The idea is to create a kind of brain map of the points you want to cover in your essay, so the writing stage is easy (well, easy enough!).

Writing Stage

Most essays have an introduction, main body and conclusion. A dialogue is no exception. Well, it should have something that resembles these things, but it is a lot different. You cannot tell the reader exactly what you are going to do in the essay, but you should lead them through it (with the dialogue) so they can follow what you are saying.

Here are some pertinent points:

- Keep the characters consistent (if one of your characters initially thinks that machines can't think you don't want to put arguments into their mouth that claim machines can think)
- Ensure your reader knows what is going on (ensure there is a clear train of thought throughout the dialogue)
- Remember your goal (don't just have the characters ramble on. Sure, make it funny or entertaining, but ensure what they say is *important*)
- Make sure it is clear to your reader what the ending position is (do the characters agree? Do they agree to disagree? Have they made a new discover? And so on)

And Finally

Make it fun! That is to say, make sure that you enjoy what you are doing. There is no point in making the effort to write your philosophy essay in a dialogue and not enjoy it! Other than having fun, you would do well to read other dialogues. Almost all of Plato's work is in dialogue form, and there are other good dialogues around, also. And it is different, so your tutor/marker will most likely look upon it with a kind eye, as it is a change from 'the norm'—this I can say from experience.



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