

Writing for philosophy classes

The writing you are asked to produce for philosophy classes may be different from other kinds of writing you have done in the past. What follows are some things to consider when writing a philosophy essay (whether short or long, formal or informal). The pointers below are not comprehensive; I suggest A. Weston's *A Rulebook for Arguments* for a more extended discussion of the elements of a good philosophical essay.

Why do we have to argue? In philosophy and other forms of analytical writing an argument is a *good* thing; it is not a disagreement or angry exchange. It is a set of claims that hang together in a supporting way. An argument consists of a thesis (claim or conclusion) that is supported by a set of reasons or evidence. These are often referred to as premises. The premises support the thesis by providing reasons for accepting it.

Philosophical essays present arguments in support of a conclusion or conclusions; they are not simply opinion pieces. Whether the assignment asks you to discuss someone else's position or your own, you should focus your essay on a specific thesis (or theses) and on the arguments (reasons, evidence, support) being presented for that thesis. The tips below are applicable whether you are analyzing and presenting someone else's position or arguing for your own.

Thesis: *State the thesis clearly.* The thesis is the *conclusion* of the argument – what the author is trying to convince the reader to accept. Always formulate the thesis as specifically as possible; avoid vague thesis statements that don't tell the reader much.

Examples of vague thesis statements are:

- “The author argues for a position on the ethics of euthanasia”
- “In this paper I will discuss and criticize X's article” or
- “I will argue against euthanasia”.

Better thesis statements are:

- “The author argues that neither active nor passive euthanasia is acceptable on the grounds that both violate human dignity” or
- “I will show that X's argument is flawed because s/he fails to attend to the distinction between doing something and allowing it to happen.”

The second set of thesis statements give the reader a clearer idea of your (or the author's) project in the essay. It also forces you to attend to what, specifically, you/ the author are arguing for, and makes it easier for you to tell whether you/ the author really have defended that thesis.

If the project of the essay is to address a particular problem or question, make the problem/question clear to the reader. In this case your thesis will be your response to the problem. Make sure that your thesis and the arguments you give in support of it actually answer the question or address the problem!

Exegesis - presenting others' arguments: When presenting someone else's arguments, you should pay attention to the reasons or evidence an author gives in support of the conclusions. Pay close attention to how an argument is constructed, and present it in a clear and detailed manner in your paper. This prepares you to present your analyses or criticisms of the author's position, and lays the groundwork for your reader.

Presenting an argument is different from giving a blow-by-blow description of what the author says. You aren't describing the piece ('first X says this, and then she says that'); you are pulling out and presenting the author's argument: what the thesis or theses are and what the author presents as evidence/reasons in support of the thesis or theses.

Avoid making fun of an author's position or presenting it unfairly. If you turn your author's argument into a 'straw person' – a position so weak that it is unclear that anyone holds it – your entire project will be weakened. You will be responding to a nonexistent position, and your reader will be puzzled about why you are wasting your time on such a silly position. Think how much stronger your paper will be if you present a very strong and compelling argument, and then argue successfully against it!

Logic and development of arguments: *Make sure that your essays present arguments, and not mere statements of opinion.* Avoid using phrases such as, "I feel," "I think," or "I believe." Your project is to convince the reader of a particular conclusion by giving rationally persuasive arguments, not to share your feelings or opinions.

Instead of saying: "I disagree with X because I feel/think/believe that capital punishment is wrong"

Say: "Capital punishment is wrong because it is an expensive but ineffective deterrent "

You want to make your arguments convincing to as wide a range of people as possible. This means that you must support any premises or claims that someone might reasonably challenge. Back up your claims with compelling reasons. Avoid appealing to special knowledge or your own experience.

In general, whenever you make a claim in a philosophical essay, it is a good idea to imagine how you would respond to someone who said, "Why should I believe *that*?" You don't want to assume that the reader will fill in the reasoning for you, so you should make it explicit. This process also helps you to get a clear picture of your own position.

Analysis and response: Often your assignment requires you to think about and weigh in on the issues yourself. This is a lot more difficult than it sounds because you need to *back up any claims or criticisms you make with arguments* (sense a theme here?).

When analyzing argument pieces, ask questions such as:

- Do those reasons work to support the conclusion?
- Do the author's claims require additional support?
- Is the author making any unwarranted assumptions?

(You should ask these same questions of your own work as well).

If you disagree with something in an article or theory, you need to state what it is precisely, and why you disagree. Do not simply state that you disagree. If you're not sure what it is that bothers you, then look at the argument or theory more closely. Ask yourself the questions above. Also, consider:

- whether the author is ignoring an important point, or
- if there is another way to approach the problem.
- See if you can generate counter-arguments or counter-examples (see below).

Whatever your position, state it clearly and defend it with yes, you guessed it, arguments.

Consideration of counter-arguments: *Whether you are presenting your own arguments or analyzing someone else's, you should always think about counter-arguments – arguments that challenge, instead of support, the conclusion being argued for.* This allows you to test the arguments, anticipate objections and address them

Example:

Claim/conclusion of an argument: Cigarettes should be banned because they are bad for you.

Counter-argument: That something is bad for you is not sufficient reason to ban it. If it were, we should also ban knives, tall buildings and fast sports cars. Clearly we aren't justified in banning all those things.

Response to counter-argument: Cigarettes differ from knives, tall buildings and fast sports cars in that not only are they bad for you, but also (once you are addicted) impair your ability to objectively assess their harm.

The example obviously uses 'cartoon' arguments, ones that aren't fleshed out, but they serve to illustrate the point that considering and addressing counter-arguments not only confronts potential criticisms that that a reader might have, but also allows you to focus and clarify your own arguments. If you can respond effectively to counter-arguments, it makes your position even stronger. Often philosophers will present an argument (or series of arguments) for a position, and then discuss various counter-arguments or counterexamples. Many people who are new to philosophy find this confusing because it can seem that the author is arguing both for and against the same position. What the author is doing, however, is defending her view against counter-arguments. Particularly in longer papers, you are expected to anticipate and defend your views against relevant counter-arguments.

Other things to keep in mind:

- Use quotes sparingly, and only to illustrate a point. *Do not let quotes do your explaining for you!* If you do use a quote, then explain its significance, or analyze it in relation to the point you want to make. And, of course, cite and reference any quotations or close paraphrases.
- In longer argument papers be sure to refer to any arguments, distinctions etc. that are in the class materials and are relevant to your discussion.
- *Explain, explain, explain!* Write a rough draft and then leave it alone for a day. Come back to it and see if you have explained each idea and the connections between ideas thoroughly and completely. Remember that it has to make sense (and be persuasive) to someone other than you! The test: have a friend or roommate who is not familiar with the course material read it. It should make complete sense to him/her. Don't assume that the reader will fill in the missing pieces for you.

(LS)