Steve's Guide to Writing a Philosophy Essay[1]

These are some tips to help you write a successful standard philosophy essay – one in which the prompt looks something like the following:

> Explain one version of the command theory of law and evaluate Hart's criticism of it.
>
> Explain Descartes's argument for the existence of God in Meditation III. Is it a valid argument?

These essay prompts have two components: they ask you to *explain* someone's argument and then to *evaluate* that argument.[2] Though she may not break your grade down explicitly in this way, your grader will have three criteria in mind as she grades it: (1) the success of its exposition of the argument, (2) the persuasiveness and originality of its evaluation of the argument, and (3) the clarity of its writing.

1 Explaining an Argument or Position

The part of an essay that explains an argument is called the 'exposition'. First of all, your exposition should be *self-sufficient*. Someone who has never read the paper you are writing about, or the essay prompt, should still be able to understand, from what you have written, what is going on. You can assume that your reader is smart, but don't assume that they know very much about philosophy.

The most frequent mistake that students make is to rely too much on their slides or lecture notes. For example, here are my lecture slides on H.L.A. Hart's discussion of the command theory of law:

The Command Theory of Law

- In the first part of *The Concept of Law*, Hart criticizes an earlier positivist theory (Austin's Command Theory of Law) that he thinks is too simplistic.
- Austin's main idea is to analyze the idea of a law in terms of *commands (orders), sanctions* and *habits*.
- Before criticizing the Command Theory, Hart tries to create the best possible form of it.

Building up the Command Theory of Law

- Version 1: Law is an order (command) backed by a threat (of sanction)
  - Problem: Laws must be general: 'they indicate a general type of conduct and applies to a general class of persons who are expected to see that it applies to them and to comply with it'. (21)
- Version 2: Law is a general order backed by a threat
  - Two clarifications: (1) orders must be understood as not necessarily addressed to anyone in particular. (2) threats must be understood as in force until withdrawn.
  - Problem: This seems to suggest that *any* gunman is a source of law.

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[2] Note that some prompts contain multiple sub-component questions. Here is one example:

> What is clinical equipoise and how is it distinguished from theoretical equipoise? What moral considerations does Freedman think support the adoption of clinical equipoise as a requirement for clinical trials (be sure to explain why). Do you think researchers must be in a state of clinical equipoise to run a morally acceptable clinical trial? (Note: I owe this essay prompt to Joshua Brandt)

Even in this case, the structure of your essay is still the same: first, you must explain a philosopher's argument, then you must evaluate that argument. When an instructor places subcomponent questions in their essay prompts, it is not because she wants you to answer the questions like a series of short answer questions: they are usually intended as guideposts, points that you must mention, at some appropriate place in your essay. (You need not mention them in the order suggested by the prompt, either, if you can find a more effective order for them.) Your thesis statement does not have to mention each of the subcomponent questions, either. Keep the overall focus of the paper on the philosopher's argument and your evaluation of it.

In their explanation of the material on the slides, at worst a student might write the following:

> Hart criticizes the command theory of law because he thinks it is too simplistic. Austin analyzes the idea of law in terms of commands (or orders), sanctions and habits. Hart tries to create the best possible form of command theory. The first version is that law is an order (or command) backed by a threat. The problem with it is that laws must be general, which means that 'they indicate a general type of conduct and applies to a general class of persons who are expected to see that it applies to them and to comply with it'. (Hart, *The Concept of Law*, 21)

I hope it's clear that even though every sentence in this paragraph is technically correct, the grader will be left with the impression that the writer does not understand the material at all. And the same is true for articles or readings: if the writer were to just paraphrase the original article in a direct, sentence-by-sentence way, they would similarly fail to demonstrate any understanding of the material.

While most students do not make this mistake in the outrageous manner of the paragraph above, virtually every student's work manifests it to some degree, and as a result, their work is less interesting or insightful than it could be. The main lesson, in short, is that describing a philosophical view or argument is not just a mechanical process of copying down or paraphrasing what they have written. You have to make a number of value judgments and choices, leading you to ask questions like: what is most important in this piece? What is the main idea, and what points are merely asides or responses to objections that aren't important? How do these points work together to form an argument? What background details is the writer assuming that I might need to add to my own paper to make it truly self-sufficient?

More specifically, I suggest that you adopt the following procedure, or some close variation of it, when you begin writing the expository part of your paper:

1) Read the part of the article discussed in the prompt.
2) Read through your lecture notes.
3) C*lose both the article and your lecture notes.* Close your eyes, even, if that helps.
4) Ask yourself what you think the main point that the philosopher is trying to make, and how their argument for that point works. Imagine you were explaining it to a friend.
5) Write that down.
6) Then unpack this main point further by adding details to what you have written down. Pay special attention to the conclusion and arguments. What is the main conclusion or conclusions of the relevant sections of the article? How many logically separate arguments does the author present for those conclusion(s)? [3] Your exposition should reflect this logical structure. Once you have the one or more arguments explained, you can dig even deeper. Why do you think the author believes each of the premises in those arguments? Are they intended to be obvious or 'rock bottom' facts? Are they assumptions that the author grants might be controversial?[4] Or does the author also have arguments for those premises?

Once you have done that, *open the article again*. Double check that what you've written is consistent with the original article. Find passages that show that the author makes the argument you attribute to her. If the

[3] One way to do this, one that takes more time but is often very illuminating, is to formally recreate the argument in terms of premises and conclusions, like you would in an introductory logic course.

[4] Once you dig deeply enough, you may notice that it is actually unclear what a philosopher is saying, or that there are multiple ways of understanding what they've said. This is OK – in fact, this is much of why people can continue to find it worthwhile to write in philosophers who wrote hundreds or thousands of years ago. So you should mention this interesting discovery in your exposition!

passages are very short (i.e. one phrase or sentence) or it is important to reflect their exact wording, use a direct quote. If not, paraphrase it (but still give a citation to the text). See my discussion of citations below under ‘General Writing Tips’ for more details about when and how to make citations.

At this point, you have an exposition of the philosopher’s argument! This will prove very helpful for the next stage of your paper, in which you evaluate that argument.

2 Evaluating an Argument

In addition to asking you to explain some philosopher’s argument, many essay prompts also ask you to evaluate that argument. (In what follows I will assume that you are *objecting* to the argument, but notice that the same lessons can be applied to *defending* the argument against *anticipated* criticisms, or *providing a further defense* of that argument.)

I’ll start with some objections that graders widely agree are not successful:

- *‘I truly believe that X is mistaken…’*: Remember that you are not *just* being asked to give your opinion about something. You must argue for it.
- *‘According to the Bible, Koran, other religious text, etc, X is mistaken.’ or ‘I think X is mistaken because I am a Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, etc.’*: Objections based on religion will generally fail to persuade people who do not share the religious view in question.
- *‘People have argued about X since the dawn of time about this issue, and it is impossible to tell which side is correct.*’” There are two significant problems with this objection. First, in the exposition you just presented an argument that one side was correct, so presumably you think it is possible to give arguments for or against a given philosophical position! Second, this kind of response fails to engage with the course material in a fruitful way: you could write this answer for *any* philosophy essay topic.
- *‘X is relative or a matter of opinion’*: This has the same problem as the above objection. It’s a little like answering a question on a mathematics exam, like “Find the derivative of x^2”, with an argument that numbers don’t exist.
- *‘The conclusion of the argument is mistaken because*…’: Remember that the goal of the essay is usually to evaluate an *argument* for some conclusion, not just the *conclusion* itself. Even if you present a lot of evidence against the conclusion, that still tells us little about whether the original argument works. To take a more concrete example from outside philosophy, suppose you were asked to evaluate a transit study that recommends the replacement of streetcars with buses on Spadina Avenue. Suppose the study examined a two-week trial period in which streetcars were replaced with buses, and observed that passenger travel times were shorter in the trial period. Some good points to make about that study might include: “Well, the trial period was done in December, and that’s not a representative sample of the whole year”, or “The study only took into account passengers travelling all the way from Spadina to Union and ignored short-distance passengers.” But it would be off-topic and outside the scope of your assignment to point out that “Streetcars pollute less than buses.” Or “Passengers are more comfortable on streetcars” - even if those are independently good reasons to choose streetcars.

Aside from these specific objections that are not successful, here are some more general problems with objections:

- Don't nitpick or focus on something too small. Ask yourself, "how many lines would the philosopher have to rewrite in order to address my objection?". If she would have to change only a couple of sentences, then your proposed objection is too nitpicky.[5]
- There are many cases where, for reasons of space, a philosopher does not expand on her point. For example, perhaps she presents an objection to someone else's view, but not a positive view of her own. Or perhaps she uses a concept but does not fully explain what she means. Or perhaps she doesn't mention how her theory would apply to a particular case. These observations tend to make for bad objections unless you can show that her original argument would be in trouble if she attempted to expand her point.
    - Bad objection: "Descartes presents an argument that God exists, but he never says what God is. Therefore his argument is invalid."
    - Better objection: "Descartes presents an argument that God exists, and he never says what God is. But there are only two senses of God that he could plausibly mean, and I will show that regardless of which sense he uses, his argument is invalid."
- Make sure you are *fair* to the philosopher in question. Do they really make the claim you are attributing to them? Do they attempt to address your objection somewhere in their article? Check the whole article briefly to be on the safe side.

So how do you avoid those pitfalls and come up with a strong objection to the argument you are evaluating in your paper?

- To get an idea for an objection, you should start by looking at the exposition you have just written, especially in step 6. If you correctly followed this part of the procedure, your exposition should give you some sense of the premises of the argument and how its conclusion follows from its premises. This is exactly where you should look for an objection: either one of the premises of the argument is incorrect, or the conclusion does not follow from its premises. (Remember: avoid tackling the conclusion directly. Keep your focus on the *argument* that leads to that conclusion.)
- In general, most objections that avoid the problems mentioned so far can be turned into strong objections. In my experience, many students spend far too much time trying to think of the 'perfect objection', unnecessarily and unwisely leading them to postpone writing, and they wind up spending far too little time developing the perfectly good objection that they have.
- To develop your objection, try to imagine how the philosopher whose argument you are considering would try to reply to it, and then respond to their reply. Consider multiple replies, and with the space that you have, try to develop a long, back-and-forth chain of replies between the philosopher and you. The evaluative part of your paper is essentially a conversation, even if you are still expected to write it in the form of an essay:
    - Philosopher: "[X] and [Y], therefore [Z]!"
    - You: "Here's a reason to think X is false: [A]."
    - Philosopher: "Don't worry, I also have an argument against [A]: [B]."
    - You: "Well, I think [B] is mistaken because of reason [C]. But either way, let's move on, because I also found a problem with [Y], and want to know what you think of it….."[6]
    - [and so on!]
- Write as concisely as possible in the exposition (while still being clear) so you have even more room for developing your objection to (or defense of) the argument. Unless you have explicit instructions otherwise, the criticism of the argument should take up *at least* 30% of your essay, and ideally it will form between 40% and 50% of your essay. Even if you make a reasonably

[5] Credit to Andrew Sepielli for this test.
[6] Once you learn to apply this procedure, you should never find yourself with the dreaded problem of 'not having enough to say'. This is unfortunately replaced by a new problem of 'having too much to say'.

good point, a quick paragraph tacked onto the end of the essay is almost never enough to develop that point adequately, turning A papers into B papers, B papers into C papers, and so on.

- Leave yourself some time to think about your objection. Students frequently fail to address obvious replies to their objection. Often when you are first thinking of an objection you get ‘tunnel vision’ where obvious rebuttals to your argument do not occur to you, and only time and distance from your objection will help to solve this. Talking about your argument with other people is also helpful for figuring out what the obvious replies to it are.
- One last bit of advice: remember that your goal is to use arguments to *persuade* your reader of something they didn’t believe before they read your paper. I find it helpful to imagine that there is some amount of money at stake in persuading them, or that I am engaged in an actual high-school-style debate with the other side, which encourages me to *follow through* with my points.[7]

3 Clarity

At this stage, you have an exposition and evaluation of the argument. How do you arrange those thoughts into a clear, effective essay?

One general thought: being a *clear writer* is sort of like being a *defensive driver*. To even get a driver’s license, you have to know and follow the rules of the road. But if you really want to avoid accidents, you have to anticipate what other drivers are doing to do: does that red Audi look like they might unexpectedly merge into your lane, for example?[8] Writing is no different. As a university student, you are expected to already be able to write workable and (mostly) grammatically correct prose – writing that a reader can understand if they put enough time and effort into it.[9] You are now expected to be well on the way to writing *clearly* and *effectively* – writing prose that is not only possible to understand, but also easy to understand and even a pleasure to read, even when you are expressing logically or conceptually complex ideas. And this means anticipating some of the ways that the reader might misunderstand your argument, and preventing those misunderstandings in advance.

A Clear Essay

- The ‘introduction, three body paragraphs, conclusion’ format that you may have learned in high school is a highly artificial form of writing that is almost never used in real life.
- There is no standard format for a university-level philosophy essay. Instead, you need to think about how to effectively structure your essay to explain and defend your thesis.
- To accomplish task (1), you will likely begin with an introduction (see below). After the introduction, there will be some general ‘big picture’ explanation of the main ideas and concepts of the debate, then some more detailed *exposition* of the argument that you are evaluating (from

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[7] Credit to Andrew Sepielli for this test, too.

[8] The answer is yes, the red Audi is always going to unexpectedly merge into your lane.

[9] If you are worried that you are not at this level yet, you should take some time as soon as possible to get up to speed. Most universities, including the University of Toronto, have writing centres and classes to assist in writing skills. There are also many online resources (especially featuring quizzes or tests) that are helpful for fine-tuning your grammar skills.

But some good news: while philosophy graders often correct grammar errors in their comments, they are generally encouraged to be (somewhat) forgiving of those errors when they assess your grade on a paper, as long as those errors don’t prevent them from understanding what you are saying. A paper with scattered punctuation, verb-subject agreement, and proposition errors, for example, is usually still readable. If you are losing a lot of marks for your grammar, it is likely because your grammar is really preventing the reader from understanding what you are saying, and the grader will mention this in the final overall comment on the paper.

section 1 of this guide). But keep the earlier point about audience in mind. Your paper needs to explain the argument in a way so that it is understandable to someone who has never taken the course.

- An introduction is a special paragraph because it is the one paragraph you can be certain a reader will keep firmly in their memory as they read through your paper. You should have an introduction, and it should contain your thesis. Use short labels or descriptors to give the reader a little more information, and make sure that your reader understands how the different points are connected together.
  - Bad introduction: "In this paper, I will explain Berlin's argument, then Taylor's argument. Then I will argue my own view."
  - Improved version: "In this paper, I will explain Berlin's argument that governments should protect negative liberty over positive liberty. I will then consider Taylor's 'traffic light' argument against Berlin, which is intended to show that negative liberty is incomplete and not valuable on its own. At the end of the paper I present a new argument to show that Taylor's argument against Berlin is not successful: without negative liberty, positive liberty is not valuable."
- To accomplish task (2), you will need to find a sensible way to arrange the different points you have made in the *evaluation* section (from section 2 of this guide), referring back to the expository section of your paper as necessary.
- There is no firm rule for how to divide your essay into paragraphs, so you will need to use your own judgment. As a rough guide, think of a paragraph as an instruction to the reader to keep everything in that paragraph in their very short-term memory. (Likewise, think of a shift to a new paragraph as giving the reader permission to dump out their sentence-by-sentence memory of what just happened in the previous paragraph.) For this reason, a one-page paragraph is almost always too long – it is asking the reader to simultaneously juggle a ton of different things in their memory, and they're going to lose track of the really important ones. The readings in the textbook are good examples of how to effectively divide text into paragraphs. In general, the slogan "One point per paragraph" is a good guide here.
- Section headings are often helpful for organizing your essay into manageable chunks, though you should check with your TA or instructor to make sure you can use them, because they can be a bit of a crutch and are not allowed in many forms of writing (e.g. newspaper articles very rarely have headings).

Clear Paragraphs

- Arrange the sentences in your paragraphs with care. There should always be a good reason for including a sentence in a paragraph, and there should also be a good reason why that sentence follows from the previous sentence. If you place a sentence in the middle of a paragraph so that it is not connected to the previous or next sentence, this will greatly confuse your reader.
- To help make those connections between sentences clear to the reader, use *transition words* or *phrases* frequently. These are generally found at the beginning of a sentence, and explain how the present sentence is related to the previous sentence. (Transition words sometimes also appear inside a sentence to explain the relationship between two sentence clauses.) Here are some examples of transition words or phrases:
  - Logical consequence: 'therefore', 'consequently', 'for this reason', 'so'
  - Temporal sequence: 'before', 'then', 'afterwards'
  - Mentioning again: 'as I mentioned earlier', 'once again'
  - An entirely new point: 'in addition', 'moreover'
  - Emphasis: 'in particular', 'especially'
  - Illustration: 'for example', 'to illustrate what I mean'

  - Clarification: ‘that is’, ‘in other words’, ‘in short’
  - Contrast: ‘however’, ‘rather’, ‘despite this’, ‘nevertheless’[10]
- Punctuation sometimes also serves as a ‘transition word’. Two sentences can be separated by a period, a semi-colon, or a colon, and these imply different relationships between those sentences.
- Other prefacing phrases, even though they are not technically transitions, can give helpful information to the reader. For example,
  - “Of course” or “Obviously” show that you think that something in your argument is obvious, and can prevent the reader from overthinking what you’re saying. “Surprisingly,” has the opposite effect and braces the reader for something that they *should* think carefully about.
  - “Roughly” tells the reader that you are not intending to be precise (perhaps because you are quickly explaining something that will be discussed in more detail later). “To be more precise,” has the opposite effect.
  - “As I noted earlier,” acknowledges to the reader that you’ve raised this point before, and are repeating it again (probably to remind the reader of the point, since it’s once again relevant)
- To help your reader remember more of what you’ve said in a paragraph, use symmetry and amalgamate similar kinds of things into lists:
  - ‘On the one hand, X. But on the other hand, Y…’
  - ‘There are three problems with this argument. First… Second… Third..’

Clear Sentences

- Keep your language simple. Do not pad your sentences with extra words.
- Where possible, use carefully-chosen nouns instead of strings of adjectives.
- Use the same word to refer to a single concept. (For example, if you are describing someone as ‘responsible’, keep using that word, and do not switch to ‘accountable’.) This helps the reader to understand that you are using the same concept rather than trying to draw a distinction between two different concepts. It may sound a little boring, but the improved precision is worth it in a philosophy paper.
- Avoid complex verb tenses, especially the passive tense, unless they are absolutely necessary to make your point.
- Be careful about the verbs you use to describe paraphrase someone else’s argument, because some of those verbs are *factive* – that is, they imply the truth of what follows. For example, if you say that “Dworkin *points out* that..” you imply that what he is pointing out is true. More neutral words include “says”, “According to” (as a preface to a sentence), ‘states’, “claims”, and ‘argues’. By describing a person’s argument or view using these terms, you do not imply that you are taking a stance on whether what they are saying is true or false.
- Feel free to use first-personal language (e.g. “I” and “me”) to distinguish between when you are explaining someone else’s point (“Descartes thinks..”) and when you are making your own point (“I will show that” or “I think that Descartes is mistaken because..’)

General Writing Tips

- If the assignment instructions ask for a particular citation format, you should use that citation format, but otherwise, assume that you are required to give some citation format with *page number citations* to the text you are discussing. Here are some rules for giving citations:

[10] I owe a large part of this list to Willie Costello.

    - You must give a citation immediately after *every* direct, word-for-word citation. (Note: you should only give direct word-for-word citations where the precise wording matters like in a definition. Otherwise, you should paraphrase.)
    - You do not need to give a citation after every sentence paraphrasing someone's view, and it makes a paragraph almost unreadable if you do so after every sentence, but you must do so often enough to show the reader where to look for the material you are paraphrasing. As a rough guide, use the "one minute test". If you were to dig up your essay five years from now, you should be able to find any sentence or claim you attribute to someone else, using only the citations you provide, within one minute.
    - Make sure your citations are accurate, because there is a good chance that your grader will actually use or refer to them. I always have the article being discussed in the essay in front of me while I am grading the essay.
- In most classes (including mine), you will lose marks if you go over the word limit, and in some classes, a paper that is too long may not be accepted at all. (This is partly out of fairness to your classmates – if you have extra space to work with, this gives you an unfair advantage over them.) Focus on quality, not quantity.
- Don't be afraid to delete points that distract from your main point, no matter how clever they are. Instead, talk about those points in office hours with your TA or raise them in tutorial or lecture.
- The most important thing in philosophical writing is to be clear, but once you have a handle on that, try your best to write in an interesting way. Philosophical writing does not have to be stilted and formal, and many articles are written in informal, snappy prose that makes thoughtful use of analogies, witticisms and the like. (That said, casual slang or text-speak is generally best avoided.) Also feel free to give your paper an interesting title.
- Your essay will likely be more readable if you vary the length of sentences. (Length of sentences is also a valuable way of communicating tone to the reader.)
- In general, very few graders care much about a handful of scattered typos. When graders correct them, this is mostly just to show you that we're paying attention, not because they affected your grade.