

## Diana Sofronieva's philosophy essay writing tips.

Or: Don't forget to answer the essay question!

These tips are grouped in three sections: content, structure, and style. For the latest version of this document go to [sofronieva.com](http://sofronieva.com).

### **Content**

- **A philosophy essay is an argument.** The essay question might or might not directly invite you to argue about a position, using prompt words such as 'argue' or 'evaluate'. Irrespective of the exact wording of the question, a philosophy essay should be an argument. If you include within your essay a separate descriptive section, keep it shorter than the argument, which should **always** be your main focus. You usually get a chance to demonstrate your knowledge of the literature as you go along advancing your argument.
- **Don't forget to answer the essay question!** It is surprising how often people forget this. Give us a **direct, explicit, clear answer to the essay question**. Think about how your answer is summarised in a single sentence, and put this answer at the very beginning of the essay, for example like this:

*'In this essay I will argue that blahblahism is a plausible view.'*

In this case **the main claim** you are defending – the **thesis** of the essay – is:

*'Blahblahism is a plausible view.'*

- **The essay is your argument, not just a description of your opinion. Think of the essay as the proof of a hypothesis.** The claim you are defending (the 'thesis', e.g. *'Blahblahism is a plausible theory.'*) is your hypothesis. The rest of the essay is the proof of that hypothesis. You should show awareness that the claim you are making is just one hypothesis among many, rather than it being the only plausible option. A reader who initially disagrees with your hypothesis should be able, by the end of the essay, to find it at least somewhat plausible **because of your argument**. Your argument should be what convinces the reader in the plausibility of your thesis.
- You are not supposed to just narrate what other people have already said; you are not producing a piece of journalism. Only discuss others' arguments insofar as they are relevant to **your line of argument**. Don't go off tangents; structure and frame their input **around the line of argument** in your essay.
- In your writing, it is great if you produce original arguments, however it is overwhelmingly likely that the arguments you make will have already been used by someone else. And here you might struggle with the following question about the purpose of the philosophy essay, which I call the **'originality paradox'**. On the one hand you are expected to tell us what your own views are. On the other hand you are expected to show awareness of the fact that other people have already argued for that view. If you are not making a truly novel, original contribution to the philosophical debate, how can it be your argument? What we don't expect you to do is to just parrot an already existing view. We don't expect you to try to pass an already existing view as your own without

giving it due credit either. Then what do we expect?

The answer is that we don't expect the individual arguments within your writing to be original.

**What is your own argument is your entire essay.**

For example, if your essay question asks you to argue for a view about the shape of the Earth, you might argue that it is a globe because of the shape of the shadow it casts over the Moon, and because when ships disappear over the horizon, the ships disappear from bottom to top, with the sails disappearing after the rest of the ship. Both of these arguments are well-known and can be credited to ancient thinkers, so you are not producing anything original. You should reference these thinkers when introducing both of these arguments. However, the essay is overall still your argument, **in the sense that you are producing a piece of writing in order to argue for the thesis.**

You are backing the thesis ('The Earth is a globe') with reasons, and **you** are pointing the reader in the direction of the existing arguments for the shape of the Earth.

- **Always give credit where it is due.** If you don't you will be marked for plagiarism.
- **We assess critical thinking skills.** We want to see that you can think for yourself, and think clearly. This involves being aware of **why** you think what you think, i.e., being aware of the reasons, or at least a set of reasons, behind the claims that you find convincing. Demonstrate your awareness in the essay. **Always back your claims with reasons.** Beware of fallacies, especially appeal to authority. If you agree with someone's view, tell the reader the reasons you agree with it. Just because a famous philosopher held a certain view doesn't validate that view.

## **Structure**

- **Structure the essay clearly.** Here is a standard sample structure:

Introduction: statement of the thesis and a brief outline of how you are going to go about arguing for the thesis. E.g.:

*In this essay I will argue that blahblahism is a plausible view. I will do this by first arguing that... Then I will consider why someone might want to adopt yadayadaism instead, and will argue that despite the initial plausibility of yadayadaism, blahblahism is a better theory.*

Body: begin with a paragraph answering the descriptive part of the question, describing in some detail what the thing you are discussing is. Keep it short, as the main emphasis of your essay should be the argument:

*§0: Blahblahism holds that nonsensical arguments are great... To blahblahism we can contrast yadayadaism which is...*

The entire rest of the essay should be dedicated to your argument for the thesis. Try to separate different points in different paragraphs:

*§1: I will now argue that blahblahism is plausible on its own terms. One of the main aspects of blahblahism is alabala. Alabala is plausible, because ...*

*§2: However, to my argument that alabala is plausible, it can be objected that ...*

*§3: I would reply to this objection by ...*

§4: *Now I have shown that blahblahism is plausible on its own, I will argue that it is superior to yadayadaism, because ... &c.*

Conclusion: it is good to have a clear and short conclusion, stating what you have done in the essay. Don't feel like you need to summarise your entire argument, but point to it in a sentence or two and remind the reader of your answer to the essay question.

- **Try to produce a dialectical argument.** Don't only present positive arguments for the claim you are defending but also write about why someone might disagree with you. Consider the reasons why someone might think you are wrong. You could both consider objections to your particular argumentative steps, (*'Someone might find my argument that alabala is plausible unconvincing because...'*) and consider the alternative view (*'Despite the strengths of blahblahism, someone might prefer yadayadaism because...'*). **Imagine that you are trying to convince someone intelligent who has good (!) reasons to hold a view different from your own.**
- Carefully select the claims you will defend and the arguments you are going to use. You have limited space, so only choose that which is most relevant. Given the word limit, you probably won't be able to produce an argument refuting an entire theory, but you might be able to show that one aspect of it is particularly (im)plausible. Keep the scope of the essay appropriate to its length. Be as succinct as possible with descriptions and claims that are not directly related to your argument. Expand on the claims that would help your reader understand what your line of reasoning is, or why they should believe a certain argument. You might concentrate on one particular case, or specific claim, and argue against that claim. (*'For the purposes of this essay, I will limit myself to... / argue that...'*) **Better to argue well for a narrow claim, than to try to defend a broader claim and fail to produce a convincing argument.** Including more arguments is not always better: instead of giving us 5 reasons that P it might be better to give us 1 or 2 reasons, and then go deeper into the argument by considering and replying to objections to these reasons. Planning your essay in advance of writing it might help you stick to the argument and to figure out what to include and what to leave out.
- **Signposting is key.** This cannot be overemphasised. Keep telling the reader throughout the body of the essay **why** you are discussing what you are discussing, and how it relates to the thesis you are arguing for. Make it as clear as day where your essay is going. If you just argued for a claim, and are now turning to discussing an objection to this claim – **tell us what you are doing.** Say, for example, that *'Now I am going to discuss a potential objection to this view.'* It is as simple as that, but immensely important. At least once every one or two paragraphs, tell us what you are doing and why. A reader should ideally be able to tell what the structure of your argument is by merely skimming over your essay and finding the signposts.
- **Link your discussion to the main claim throughout the essay.** This is signposting again. In the beginning of each paragraph say explicitly how what you are about to discuss now relates to the claim. If you are going to discuss a particular claim, tell us **why** discussing this claim is **relevant** to defending the thesis.
- For each claim you are making, you have to make it crystal-clear whether it is:
  - 1) something we can assume as a common knowledge; or
  - 2) the view of another person, or a piece of evidence; or
  - 3) a claim which you are making.

Don't leave it to the reader to guess where this claim comes from, whether it is an instance of (1), (2), or (3). For example, consider the sentence '*Yadayadaism is a demanding theory*'. Is this claim just something which is common knowledge, and can be taken for granted, like 'the sky is blue' (not many claims are of this sort)? If so make it clear. ('*For the purposes of the present essay I will assume that it is uncontroversial to hold that...*') Or is it something which is believed in some academic circles, and something you have read in a lecture, or an academic journal, or a book? In this case you should put the reference there explicitly. ('*As argued by Aveinorfos...*') Or is it something that you believe and are going to argue for? ('*As I will now argue...*') You should always make it clear which of 1), 2), and 3) it is.

## **Style**

- **Write in the first person.** The purpose of the philosophy essay is not merely showcasing knowledge; you are arguing for and evaluating claims. It is expected that some of the claims will be your own. It is not set in stone that blahblahism is a plausible theory; it is you who are evaluating blahblahism as a plausible theory.
- **Philosophy is not beautiful prose.** Don't be afraid to repeat words and entire phrases. In fact it is better to beware synonyms – in philosophy different words are usually used to mean different things. If your essay is about happiness, don't just go ahead speaking about contentment in the next sentence in order to avoid repetition. If you want to do this, you have to explicitly state that you are going to use 'happiness' and 'contentment' interchangeably. It is often much easier to just repeat. Signposting ('*I just argued that alabala is plausible. Now I will turn to consider some objections to alabala...*') might again seem cumbersome, but don't be put off from signposting just because it sounds repetitive. Beautiful prose doesn't matter here. The priority in philosophy writing is to avoid ambiguity and misunderstanding at all costs.
- **Limit your use of direct quotations.** It is better to retell the content with your own words, rather than directly quote a section of the other's writing. Using too many direct quotations risks leaving the impression that you haven't really digested the information and cannot really understand the argument.
- When referencing, put the brackets / footnote immediately after the reference, or in a place where it is not going to break the flow of thought. A rule of thumb to find this place: it is where the next punctuation sign (comma, full stop) can be put.
- **Use simple language.** One of the things that marks good philosophy is making complex ideas understandable. Write in such a way that a reader not familiar with the topic would be able to understand you. A helpful tip is to imagine that you are writing a letter to that intellectually curious friend of yours who has not had previous exposure to this particular topic. Because of word limit, you can usually assume some subject specific knowledge, but you should explain technical terms and keep the language simple.
- It might be helpful to leave your essay to rest for a few days after you have written it. Try to forget about your essay as much as possible. Come back to it a couple of days later, and you will be able to see much more easily if your writing is clear enough, if the arguments are explained well enough, and if they are good.