

# Essay Writing Workshop

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## 1. Some Things You Might Do in a Philosophy Essay<sup>1</sup>

### (a) Develop an objection to a view in the literature:

- Present a counterexample.

Example: Many people have thought that knowledge is justified true belief, but Gettier's counterexamples show that this cannot be what knowledge is.

- Show that a view has an implausible consequence.

Example: A dominant view is that we can only have knowledge of things that we have perceptual experience of. An implausible consequence of this view is that we cannot have knowledge of mathematics.

- Argue that the view is under-motivated.

Example: Some people have claimed that free will is incompatible with determinism. One motivation for this view is that if determinism is true then all our actions are predictable, and if our actions are predictable then they cannot be free. I will argue that predictability of actions does not entail that they are not free.

### (b) Develop an objection to an argument in the literature:

Example argument:

P1: If an action is free, then it is an action for which the agent is responsible.

P2: If an agent is responsible for their action, then that is something they wanted to do.

C: Therefore, if an action of mine is something that I wanted to do, then I have acted freely.

- Argue that one of the premises is false.

Example: counterexample to P2.

Jo did the washing up after dinner, even though he really hates doing the washing up, because he felt he promised his house-mate that he would. Nevertheless, Jo was responsible for doing the washing up.

- Argue that the argument is invalid.

Example: Point out that even if P1 and P2 are both true, it does not follow that C is true. What follows instead is that: If an action of mine is free, then it is something that I wanted to do.

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<sup>1</sup> These are most applicable to non-historical essays. The focus of this workshop is on non-historical essay-writing. There will be a workshop for history of philosophy essay-writing in the second half of term in History of Philosophy I.

**(c) Defend a view in the literature from some objection(s):**

- Argue that the objection fails to target the view.

Example: In response to the washing-up counterexample to P2 above, it can be pointed out that Jo did in fact want to do the washing up, because he wanted to do the thing that he had promised he would do.

- Amend an argument for the view, or the view itself, so that the objection no longer applies.

Example: In light of the Gettier counterexamples to the justified true belief account of knowledge, we can amend the account by specifying that the justification cannot be based on any false beliefs.

## 2. Essay Structure

### • Introduction:

- State what your response will be to the main question of the essay.
- Indicate what you will do in the various parts of the essay.

Example: I will begin by laying out the account of \_\_\_\_\_ that I am challenging, according to which \_\_\_\_\_. I call this account: \_\_\_\_\_. After outlining \_\_\_\_\_, including the motivations behind this account, I present a counterexample to \_\_\_\_\_. I then consider how one might defend an amended version of \_\_\_\_\_ in the face of this counterexample. I indicate, however, that a more sophisticated counter-example can be put to this amended version, suggesting that a satisfactory account of \_\_\_\_\_ will be altogether very different from \_\_\_\_\_.

### • Main Body:

- Here is where you argue for the answer to the question you have stated in the introduction.
- In general, the appropriate structure of the main body of your essay would be: presentation of the view/argument that you will be criticising/defending, with clarification of certain key terms, followed by your particular assessment of the view/argument.
- It should be clear how each paragraph lines up with a stage in your argument (where each stage has been identified in the introduction).
- You should consider possible responses to your criticism/defence that your opposition could raise, and offer a counter-response.
- You should avoid proceeding by considering all the various pros and cons for the view/argument that have been discussed in class.
- Begin paragraphs with a clear topic sentence:

'One possible objection to the above proposal is that...'

'We can challenge the above argument by questioning the inference from...'

'It will be helpful at this stage to distinguish two senses of the term \_\_\_\_\_.'

'The foregoing objection presupposes a particular view of the nature of \_\_\_\_\_.'

### • Conclusion:

- A brief conclusion should be included, reiterating your response to the question.

Example: I have argued here that \_\_\_\_\_. I presented a counterexample to \_\_\_\_\_. I then considered an amended version of this view that avoids this counterexample, but indicated how it fails to avoid a more sophisticated counterexample. Finally, I suggested that we might accommodate the basic motivations for \_\_\_\_\_ even on quite a different account of \_\_\_\_\_.

**3. Relevance, Accuracy, Clarity, and Criticality** are the four key features of a good philosophy essay.

(a) **Relevance:**

- You must offer a direct and specific answer to the essay question.
- You should state your answer in the introduction, argue for it in the main body of the essay, and in the conclusion you should remind the reader of the answer that you have argued for.
- Every point in the main body of the essay should be shown to be directly relevant to your argument for your answer.
- There is no need to show general knowledge on the topic of the essay question, and so stage-setting in the introduction should be minimal, at most.

(b) **Accuracy:**

- When reproducing ideas/arguments from the literature this must be fair and accurate, demonstrating understanding of them.
- You often don't need to quote, and, in fact, quoting in itself does not demonstrate understanding, so where you do quote make sure you also explain the key idea.

Example: Langton proposed that “\_\_\_\_\_”. In this proposal she seems to be putting forward the idea that \_\_\_\_\_.

- You should make sure that all philosophical terms are being used appropriately. E.g. ‘valid’, ‘argument’, ‘subjective’, ‘objective’.
- Include a ‘works cited’ at the end of your paper (this does not count towards the word count).
- Plagiarism from any source (including using ideas from publications without citing them) is not tolerated.

(c) **Clarity:**

- Your language should be simple and straightforward. No need to use a variety of synonyms.
- Sentences should be short, and uncomplicated.

Example: ‘One might object to the above claim by saying that \_\_\_\_\_. However, this objection is not convincing, for three reasons. First, \_\_\_\_\_. Secondly, \_\_\_\_\_. Finally, \_\_\_\_\_.’

Rather than: ‘One might object to the above claim by saying \_\_\_\_\_, although this is not convincing because \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ and also \_\_\_\_\_.’

- Philosophical terms/ideas from the relevant literature that are referred to should generally be explained (briefly) when first mentioned.

Example: ‘By, “determinism”, I mean the thesis that given the exact description of the state of the world at a given time  $t$ , and the laws of nature, there is exactly one possible total history of the world before and after  $t$ .’

Rather than: ‘By “determinism” I mean the idea that the universe is determined by laws of nature.’ (This isn't helpful!)

- Using your own simple examples to illustrate an idea can really help clarify a point.

- You should be totally explicit about what you are doing at each stage in the essay (this is called ‘signposting’).

Example: I have so far considered one way of responding to counterexample X. In this paragraph, I will address a challenge that has been put to this way of responding to the counterexample.

- Formatting can help make the structure of the essay more obvious. I.e. double-spaced, justified text, with spaces between paragraphs, and section-headings. **No silly fonts!**

(d) **Criticality:**

- In defending your particular assessment of an idea/argument you should address, and offer responses to, possible challenges.
- You should show careful, independent, thinking about the issues discussed.
- You should think very carefully about what really follows from a claim that you are defending, or challenging.

Example: The claim ‘if an action is free then it is something that the agent wanted to do’ is distinct from, and does not follow from, the claim ‘if an action of mine is something that I wanted to do then it was a free action’.

- It is much more important to show thorough consideration of one issue, than to show superficial consideration of several issues.
- You should avoid referring to authors in the literature as absolute authorities.

Example: Avoid simply asserting: ‘As Appiah pointed out, ‘\_\_\_\_\_’’. Instead, one can state: ‘Appiah suggested that ‘\_\_\_\_\_’, which seems plausible, since \_\_\_\_\_’.

#### 4. Ways to Boost Your Essay

- **Originality:** Answering the question in a novel way, and offering original insight, if done effectively, will boost marks. But one can write a very good first class essay just by demonstrating the four features above. Originality without the above four features will not result in a good essay.
- **Wider Reading:** It is often possible to get an excellent mark in the exam while only explicitly engaging with the required reading. But you would need to show excellent understanding and expression, and independent critical reasoning. Explicitly showing sensitivity to the wider literature, primarily that in the recommended further reading, is always a good way to boost marks however. Additionally, it can be a good way of developing a reply to a possible objection. All referenced material must be clearly relevant to the essay topic (you should check with your module leader, if you're not sure), and accurately explained.
- **Presenting Arguments:** Presenting an author's reasoning as an argument with labelled premises can be an effective way of being clear, and concise. And it can be helpful for remembering the line of reasoning, and referring back to various parts of the reasoning later in the essay. Always check that the presentation is fair, and valid.

#### 5. Writing Your Essay

- **Planning:** Before you start writing, it is essential that you write out a plan for what you will say in the essay, and how you will organise it. Think about, and note down, the purpose of each paragraph, and how what you are saying in it relates to your overall argumentative aim.
- **Writing:** As you write, imagine that your audience is someone who is not acquainted with philosophy or the particular texts you are discussing.
- **Proofreading:** This can make a difference to your grade of a whole classification. Print out your essay and read it through to yourself out loud. Ask yourself if any sentences are unclear or difficult to read, and whether your essay would make sense to someone who hasn't read it before and doesn't know the topic

## **Essay Feedback:**

Your examiners will provide comments corresponding to the following categories. These are things you should bear in mind when writing your essay, but they are not marking-criteria.

(1) Use of primary sources.

In this section you will receive feedback on your engagement with the required reading on the relevant topic.

(2) Use of secondary sources.

In this section you will receive feedback on your engagement with the further reading on the relevant topic.

(3) Argumentation.

In this section you will receive feedback on the structure of your argument, and the extent to which it succeeds in establishing its conclusion. The features listed above under 'criticality' and 'relevance' are most relevant here.

(4) Quality of writing.

In this section you will receive feedback on your language, in particular with regard to how clearly and accurately your ideas are expressed. The features listed above under 'clarity' and 'accuracy' are most relevant here.

(5) Engagement with the question.

In this section you will receive feedback on the extent to which you provide a direct and sustained answer to the question, and avoid irrelevant details. The features listed above under 'relevance' are most relevant here.

## Grade Descriptors:

**First (70-80):** Characteristics: exceptional thoroughness and clarity; exceptional insight or critical ability; originality; clarity and rigour of argument; extensive reading; demonstrated ability to formulate responses to questions in novel and relevant ways. Answers which address the question directly and proceed lucidly from one paragraph to the next throughout the essay. Answers need not be 'perfect': first class marks may be awarded either to work which, though not faultless, exhibits exceptional intellectual qualities (sophistication; originality; judiciousness), or, conversely, to work which, though not exhibiting any truly exceptional intellectual qualities, possesses virtues of composition and clarity to a markedly high degree. A mark of 75% or above is reserved for work which shows an obviously superior understanding of the complexities of the issues involved and which the examiner considers distinctive in its excellence.

**Upper Second (60-69):** Characteristics: well organised, clearly expressed; direct and relevant response to the question; evidence of good analytical skills, critical thinking and wider reading; effective grasp of concepts; relevant use of illustrative material. Answers which show a good command of the subject and use this knowledge to construct a soundly structured and argued piece of work, though which may also display some faults (missing certain aspects of the question, containing patches of weaker material, or holding back from giving voice to the writer's own views).

**Lower Second (50-59):** Characteristics: shows a general understanding of the question; relevant but limited reading and use of examples; competent reproduction of ideas and concepts from lectures and textbooks with little evidence of independent, critical appraisal, or of wider reading; illustrative material of general relevance but not fully integrated with the text. Answers which show a sound knowledge of basic facts and arguments, but which present facts outside an analytical framework, fail to cover some key aspects of the topic, and/or make insufficient reference to the question.

**Third (40-49):** Characteristics: shows an understanding of the question and the broader subject area, but little evidence of detailed knowledge or reading; contains serious mistakes or misunderstandings, unsupported assertion, and/or irrelevant material; failure to cover many key aspects of the topic; poor organisation; poor expression; wholly uncritical approach; unsupported assertion. Answers where there is some grasp of the topic and some evidence of basic knowledge – of taking notes and reading basic textbooks – but little beyond that.

**Fail (39 and below; 38-40 Candidate for referred assessment):** Characteristics: fails to provide an answer to the question set; shows no more than a very general acquaintance with the field; absence, or near absence, of organisation; complete, or almost complete, lack of relevance; errors or incoherence revealing failure to absorb basic material taught on the course; consists only of notes making isolated points.