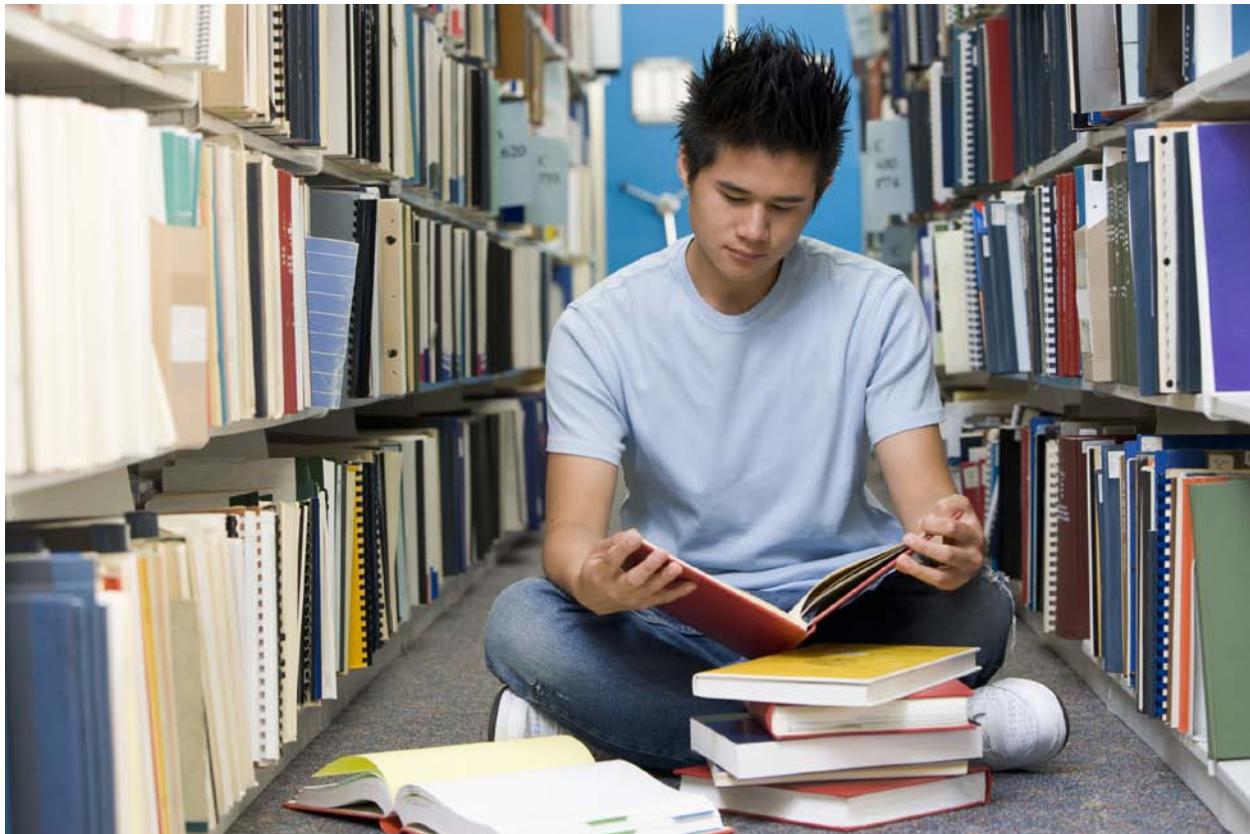




# **Reading & Writing Resources**

# Reading Philosophy

*By Dennis Weiss*



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## Reading Philosophy

*By Dennis Weiss*

The first stage in learning to write philosophy is learning to read philosophy. Reading philosophy well will help develop your appreciation for learning how to philosophize, understanding philosophical issues and the context of philosophical disputes, and identifying and reconstructing philosophical arguments, all skills that will aid you immensely as you begin to write your own philosophical essays. Writing in any discipline does not happen in a vacuum and presupposes some knowledge of the relevant context, problems, and issues of that discipline. You’ll gain this important background knowledge as you carefully and critically read the various selections included in each unit of this course.

Reading philosophy is not that different from reading in other areas such as literature, psychology, or history. It is important, then, that you remember what you might have learned in other courses you have taken such as Critical Thinking, English Composition, Introduction to Sociology, etc., and draw connections between reading this material and reading philosophy.

Philosophy, though, does present some unique challenges and the following guidelines should help you prepare to meet them.

### **Reading With the Right Attitude**

Reading philosophy requires the right kind of attitude. You must read with a philosophical attitude, that is, with an open and yet critical mind. Both the kinds of things we think and read about and the way we think and read in philosophy are different than in “everyday life”. We are generally not taught to think abstractly or deeply about too many things. We seem to be encouraged instead to use our intelligence to follow directions and orders and to function from day to day usually without questioning or being too critical. This type of thinking is promoted early in life when we tell our children after they ask “Why?” “Never mind asking why; just do as I say or follow my instructions.”

Philosophy, though, encourages us to question, to question especially those kinds of things we are not usually encouraged to question. In philosophy you have to question. Question everything. It is also important that you try to expand your thinking, to open your mind to new and different ideas without rejecting them out of hand because they seem too strange or too abstract for immediate use in everyday life. No idea or theory should be rejected as being unworthy until it has been considered in a careful and critical way.

You should also read empathetically. When you first read for understanding, just relax and try, as far as you can, to enter right into the thinking of the author. Try to go along with his or her point of view, to engage in it as though it were your own. We call this sort of reading empathetic (empathy is the identification with the feelings, beliefs, and point of view of another person; we empathize with someone when we understand, feel, and respond to something from his or her point of view.) Reading something empathetically does not imply that you are ultimately going to agree with it--after understanding, you may agree or disagree. What it means is going along, at least temporarily, with the thoughts and ideas of the writer, entering into his or her frame of reference and working through the flow of ideas and feelings. Doing this is an important device for understanding the work.

You must also approach the reading of philosophy with patience, knowing that you are going to have to read an essay at least twice perhaps three times, concentrating on some of the harder and key sections even more. Genuine understanding will almost always require more than one reading.

### **Reading for Understanding**

In a well composed essay you should be able to find the author’s thesis (chief point, major claim) and the reasons or justifications the author offers in support of the thesis. In reading for understanding you might begin by trying to state the main point in your own words. What is the author trying to say? What is his or her thesis? Can you state this thesis in your own words without looking back at the written work? Let’s assume that you have identified the thesis of the essay and can state it in your own words.

Essentially, X says that C.

But in a good essay, there is not only a thesis, there are reasons given in its support. The author does not just pull a central claim out of nowhere; he or she develops and defends the point. If you understand the essay, on the basis of careful empathetic reading, you will be able to state the major reasons for this central claim. You should be able to put in your own words a statement of the following form:

Essentially, X says that C, because R.

In this formula, X represents the author, C represents the thesis, and R represents the reasons for it. The word *essentially* is present to indicate that you are trying to capture the main points of the author; you are not including every strand of supporting argument or every detail. Keep in mind that in any sufficiently complex philosophical essay, there may be more than one main point.

What reading practices can help in identifying an author's thesis and supporting reasons? Here are a few suggestions that should help you read for understanding:

1. Make use of the tools provided by this textbook and by the authors of the included texts. Notice and make use of chapter and section headings printed in boldface type or italics. Make use of the introductory comments of a reading, referring to them after the first and even the second readings of the chapter. Use online glossaries that can give you special insights into the meanings of words, concepts and theories that you cannot ordinarily acquire from regular dictionaries.

Keep in mind that reading the philosophical selections is different than reading the introductions to those readings. Primary or original philosophical writings are difficult enough reading merely because they are philosophical in nature, but they are often made more complicated by the fact that they are translations from a foreign language (Greek, Latin, German, French) and also written in another time when even English was used somewhat differently from its usage today. Additionally, you may be reading a brief selection from a much larger work and so may lack some of the needed context. Reading this type of philosophy will require more patience and attention than will reading the introductory material written by the textbook editor.

2. Skimming the text can tell you a good deal, giving you a clear idea of the length and some idea of the difficulty of the piece. Read the first paragraph of an essay carefully, because it may announce the author's thesis, and it may give you some sense of how the argument will be conducted. Note the first and last sentences of each paragraph and each section within chapters, looking for key expressions that indicate the author's conclusions, such as "It follows, then, that..." Passages of this sort often occur as the first or last sentence in a paragraph. Look for words or expressions that have been italicized or otherwise highlighted by the author. Pay special attention to the last paragraph because it probably will offer a summary and a brief restatement of the writer's thesis.
3. Reading with the proper tools can aid in your comprehension. You should read with pen

or pencil in hand and paper nearby. As you read you should underline or highlight key passages and make annotations in the margins. Don't simply let your eyes rove across the page. You should have a good dictionary and get in the practice of looking up words that are unfamiliar to you.

4. Summarizing is useful in helping you to get the gist of the entire essay. After a first reading of an essay, reread it and simultaneously take notes on a sheet of paper, perhaps summarizing each paragraph in a sentence of two. Summarizing each paragraph, or each group of closely related paragraphs, will help you to follow the thread of the discussion, and, when you are finished, will provide you with a useful outline of the essay. For further help, turn your summary into an outline showing the connections between the main ideas.
5. Paraphrasing is a word-by-word or phrase-by-phrase rewording of a text, a sort of translation of the author's language into your own and can be useful in helping you to grasp difficult passages.
6. Look for and analyze any examples an author might give to illustrate an otherwise abstract and complex point. Kant is considered one of the most difficult philosophers to read and understand. His use of examples provides an immense aid to understanding his difficult points. Keep in mind that reading for comprehension is a back-and-forth process involving reading, summarizing and paraphrasing, and checking your summaries and paraphrases against the essay or article. Go back and ask yourself if you have correctly represented what an author said. As you read, keep asking yourself whether the author is really saying what you have understood him or her to be saying. Especially if you are inclined to disagree with the author and have found empathy in reading difficult to achieve, you should cross-check your statement of the author's position against the original to ensure you have not misrepresented him or her. Look for evidence that the author has indeed said what you have attributed to him or her.

### **Reading for Appraisal**

Reading for understanding is only the first step in reading philosophy. Once you feel that you understand what an author is saying, you set aside empathy and read the essay from the point of view of a critic. You have a statement of the main claim and the supporting reasons, and you keep these in mind. On the assumption that this is the claim the author is putting forward, and these are the sorts of reasons he or she is giving for it, you want to look at the essay critically to get a sense of how well the argument is expressed. You want, tentatively, to reach an evaluation of the essay. This is perhaps the hardest part of philosophy but again there are some basic tips you might keep in mind while critically evaluating an essay:

1. Carefully examine the supporting reasons an author has given. Do they in fact support the thesis or has the author committed an error of reasoning? Are the supporting reasons themselves generally acceptable?
2. Try to draw connections between what an author is saying and other things you might

have learned or thought about. John Stuart Mill, for instance, argues that human beings desire only one thing, namely pleasure. Compare this claim to things that you might have read about or discussed in a psychology class or another class.

3. Consider your own experience and intuitions when evaluating an author's claims. Is there a conflict between what an author says and what you yourself have experienced? For instance, on the basis of your own experience, does it seem true that people only desire pleasure? If not, how could you account for this difference of opinion? How could you establish who is right?
4. Compare and contrast a philosopher's claim to other claims made by other philosophers. Philosophers, as is the case in most disciplines, often disagree with one another on fundamental issues and most philosophy texts present competing answers to the same question. How would one philosopher you have read evaluate another? What, for instance, would Kant say about Mill's claim that human beings are motivated solely by the pursuit of pleasure?

Finally, keep in mind that evaluating an essay is part of the process of coming to understand what an author is saying. You may, in light of your efforts to evaluate an essay, decide that you didn't fully understand an author's thesis and supporting reasons. Reading is a circular process of reading, evaluating, and rereading.

For another online guide on reading philosophy, see Jim Pryor's [Guidelines on Reading Philosophy](#).

# Philosophy Now

a magazine of ideas

*Philosophy Now – Issue 103*

[https://philosophynow.org/issues/103/How\\_to\\_Read\\_Philosophy](https://philosophynow.org/issues/103/How_to_Read_Philosophy)

## How to Read Philosophy

What follows is an extract from a forthcoming book called *AQA AS Philosophy* by **Gerald Jones, Dan Cardinal & Jeremy Hayward** – an engaging, student-friendly textbook designed to help UK high school students embrace and enjoy philosophy at AS level. It seemed such a useful guide that we decided to print it here as well.

Introductory textbooks like this try to summarise and clarify some incredibly complex and significant ideas. But we cannot capture the depth and richness of the original texts and reading these gives you a chance to get your intellectual teeth into the ideas of Western philosophers in their own words.

As if you needed to be told, philosophy is hard. [...] It is hard because philosophical ideas and arguments themselves are so complex, so subtle and nuanced, and they rely on a web of understanding that reaches back more than two thousand years, past Hume and past Descartes, past Aquinas and Anselm all the way to Plato, Aristotle and Socrates. It is also hard because philosophers are not always the clearest of writers:

*Lord Macaulay once recorded in his diary a memorable attempt – his first and apparently his last – to read Kant’s Critique: “I received today a translation of Kant... I tried to read it, just as if it had been written in Sanskrit”.*

We can excuse the fact that many of the classics of philosophy were written before the Twentieth Century, when the fashion was for longer sentences, which can be hard to follow. Even if we set aside their long-winded style, such works aren’t always clear in their explanations, they often don’t refer to their source-material and sometimes introduce technical jargon to try to express their new ideas.

But there things you can do to help overcome some of the difficulties of reading them. First, don’t try to work it all out by yourself. Philosophy is a discursive subject; in other words it is about engaging with the thoughts and opinions and arguments of others, about debating arguments and clarifying concepts with others, and experimenting with these ideas to see where this takes you. So we recommend, when you read and analyse these texts that you compare your analysis with other people in your class and your teacher, as well as with the summary that we ourselves have made of the texts. Secondly, we have also developed an interpretative framework, some philosophical ‘lenses’, which can help clarify what’s being said, and which you can use to see beneath the surface of the text and start to understand what these philosophers are trying to say.

## Philosophical Lenses

Below are five lenses which will help you make sense of the original philosophical texts. Take each lens in

turn, and apply it to the text, then move onto the next one. If you use all five lenses, and end up with a short, structured summary of what you think the main ideas are then you are well on your way to understanding the extract.

**Context:** *When was this extract written, who wrote it, and why did they write it?*

- Talk to your teacher to find out more about the book that this extract is from.
- Go online to get a sense of the biography and stories behind the person who wrote it.
- Go online and search for the book at the Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (IEP) to get a summary of its overall argument.
- Find out what is happening in the book immediately before and after the extract.

**Vocabulary:** *What words appear to be used in a technical way?*

- Underline and make a note of those words that seem difficult to understand.
- Check in the glossary or index of this book to see if they're explained in this book.
- Talk to your teacher or classmates about the meaning of these words.
- Look up these words in a dictionary of philosophy (remember ordinary dictionaries may only record the ordinary meanings of these words, not the philosophical meanings).

**Concepts:** *What are the recurring ideas in this extract?*

- Once you've sorted out the vocabulary, what ideas are being examined in this extract?
- Check to see if you've encountered these ideas before (again look in the glossary or index).
- Write down a sentence summarising each idea in your own words.
- Talk to your classmates about how the ideas connect with one another in the extract.

**Argument:** *What indicators are there that this extract contains an argument?*

- Find signposts that a conclusion is being drawn (therefore, thus, and so, it follows, hence)
- Look for key words indicating whether reasons are being given (because, following, from what's been said)
- Identify the premises, evidence and assumptions on which the argument is being built
- Check for other signs of argument (however, but, if... then)
- Refer back to the bullet points at the end of the 'Arguments for the Existence of God' section for further questions you could ask, to help tease out the argument.
- If the extract is not an argument, then what is it: an explanation, or a criticism, or a conceptual analysis, or

something else?

**Structure:** *How could you break the extract down into separate, numbered, ‘chunks’?*

- Try numbering in the margins the main points that are being made.
- Use the signposts that you’ve identified to break down the extract into chunks
- Try drawing the ideas on a page, possibly as a ‘mind-map’.
- Write these chunks in your own words.
- Now try rewriting the paragraph as if you were a philosopher (which you are!) by writing down the chunks, in your own words, which flow in order 1, 2, 3, etc.

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# Interrogating Texts:

## 6 Reading Habits to Develop, by Susan Gilroy

Critical reading--active engagement and interaction with texts--is essential to your academic success and to your intellectual growth. Research has shown that students who read deliberately retain more information and retain it longer. Your college reading assignments will probably be more substantial and more sophisticated than those you are used to from high school. The amount of reading will almost certainly be greater. College students rarely have the luxury of successive re-readings of material, either, given the pace of life in and out of the classroom.

While the strategies below are (for the sake of clarity) listed sequentially, you can probably do most of them simultaneously. They may feel awkward at first, and you may have to deploy them very consciously, especially if you are not used to doing anything more than moving your eyes across the page. But they will quickly become habits, and you will notice the difference—in what you “see” in a reading, and in the confidence with which you approach your texts.

### 1. Previewing: Look “around” the text before you start reading.

You've probably engaged in one version of previewing in the past, when you've tried to determine how long an assigned reading is (and how much time and energy, as a result, it will demand from you). But you can learn a great deal more about the organization and purpose of a text by taking note of features other than its length.

Previewing enables you to develop a set of *expectations about the scope and aim* of the text. These very preliminary impressions offer you a way to focus your reading. For instance:

- What does the presence of *headnotes*, an *abstract*, or other *prefatory material* tell you?
- Is the *author* known to you already? If so, how does his (or her) *reputation* or *credentials* influence your perception of what you are about to read? If the author is unfamiliar or unknown, does an editor introduce him or her (by supplying brief biographical information, an assessment of the author's work, concerns, and importance)?
- How does the disposition or *layout of a text* prepare you for reading? Is the material broken into parts—subtopics, sections, or the like? Are there long and unbroken blocks of text or smaller paragraphs or “chunks” and what does this suggest? How might the parts of a text guide you toward understanding the line of inquiry or the arc of the argument that's being made?
- Does the text seem to be arranged according to *certain conventions of discourse*? Newspaper articles, for instance, have characteristics that you will recognize; textbooks and scholarly essays are organized quite differently. Texts demand different things of you as you read, so whenever you can, register the type of information you're presented with.

### 2. Annotating: Make your reading thinking-intensive from start to finish.

Annotating puts you actively and immediately in a “*dialogue*” with an *author* and the *issues and ideas* you encounter in a written text. It's also a way to have an ongoing conversation with yourself as you move through the text and to record what that encounter was like for you. Here's how:

- *Throw away your highlighter:* Highlighting can seem like an active reading strategy, but it can actually distract from the business of learning and dilute your comprehension. Those bright yellow lines you put on a printed page one day can seem strangely cryptic the next, unless you have a method for remembering why they were important to you at another moment in time. Pen or pencil will allow you to do more to a text you have to wrestle with.
- *Mark up the margins of your text with words and phrases:* ideas that occur to you, notes about things that seem important to you, reminders of how issues in a text may connect with class discussion or course themes. This kind of interaction keeps you conscious of the *reasons* you are reading as well as the *purposes* your instructor has in mind. Later in the term, when you are reviewing for a test or project, your marginalia will be useful memory triggers.
- *Develop your own symbol system:* asterisk (\*) a key idea, for example, or use an exclamation point (!) for the surprising, absurd, bizarre. Your personalized set of hieroglyphs allow you to capture the important -- and often fleeting -- insights that occur to you as you're reading. Like notes in your margins, they'll prove indispensable when you return to a text in search of that perfect passage to use in a paper, or are preparing for a big exam.
- *Get in the habit of hearing yourself ask questions:* “What does this mean?” “Why is the writer drawing that conclusion?” “Why am I being asked to read this text?” etc. Write the questions down (in your margins, at the beginning or end of the reading, in a notebook, or elsewhere. They are reminders of the unfinished business you still

have with a text: something to ask during class discussion, or to come to terms with on your own, once you've had a chance to digest the material further or have done other course reading.

### 3. Outline, summarize, analyze: Take the information apart, look at its parts, and then try to put it back together again in language that is meaningful to you.

The best way to determine that you've really gotten the point is to be able to state it in your own words.

**Outlining** the argument of a text is a version of annotating, and can be done quite informally in the margins of the text, unless you prefer the more formal Roman numeral model you may have learned in high school. **Outlining** enables you to see the skeleton of an argument: the thesis, the first point and evidence (and so on), through the conclusion. With weighty or difficult readings, that skeleton may not be obvious until you go looking for it.

**Summarizing** accomplishes something similar, but in sentence and paragraph form, and with the connections between ideas made explicit.

**Analyzing** adds an evaluative component to the summarizing process—it requires you not just to restate main ideas, but also to test the logic, credibility, and emotional impact of an argument. In analyzing a text, you reflect upon and decide how effectively (or poorly) its argument has been made. Questions to ask:

- What is the writer asserting?
- What am I being asked to believe or accept? Facts? Opinions? Some mixture?
- What reasons or evidence does the author supply to convince me? Where is the strongest or most effective evidence the author offers -- and why is it compelling?

### 4. Look for repetitions and patterns:

The way *language is chosen, used, positioned in a text* can be an important indication of what an author considers crucial and what he expects you to glean from his argument. It can also alert you to ideological positions, hidden agendas or biases. Be watching for:

- Recurring images
- Repeated words, phrases, types of examples, or illustrations
- Consistent ways of characterizing people, events, or issues

### 5. Contextualize: Once you've finished reading actively and annotating, *take stock for a moment and put it in perspective*.

When you contextualize, you essentially "re-view" a text you've encountered, framed by its historical, cultural, material, or intellectual circumstances.

- When was it written or where was it published? Do these factors change or otherwise influence how you view a piece?

Also view the reading through the lens of your own experience. Your understanding of the words on the page and their significance is always shaped by what you have come to know and value from living in a particular time and place.

### 6. Compare and Contrast: Set course readings against each other to determine their relationships (hidden or explicit).

- At what point in the term does this reading come? Why that point, do you imagine?
- How does it contribute to the main concepts and themes of the course?
- How does it compare (or contrast) to the ideas presented by texts that come before it? Does it continue a trend, shift direction, or expand the focus of previous readings?
- How has your thinking been altered by this reading? How has it affected your response to the issues and themes of the course?

# Writing a Philosophy Essay

*By Dennis Weiss*



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## Writing a Philosophy Essay

*By Dennis Weiss*

As a college student, you may have already done a fair amount of writing in your academic life, beginning in high school English classes and continuing in your college composition courses, general education courses, and courses in your major. Much of what you have learned about the writing process and what characterizes good writing in these other courses is applicable to this introductory philosophy course as well. You should rely on those skills in composing your essays for this course and remember that many of the skills learned in your general education courses are portable and applicable in other courses as well. In any general education course you are likely to encounter several different kinds of writing tasks and you should pay close attention to the details, instructions, and expectations for each of these different tasks.

In this course, you will be doing at least two kinds of writing (other kinds of writing assignments may be made by your instructor). With each reading, you will be asked to complete a forum post in which you are asked to respond to or react to specific issues raised in that reading. Oftentimes these forum posts will ask you to apply a particular philosophical theory developed in a reading to the writing assignment for that issue. For instance, in the unit on ethics you are asked to address the issue of whether it is morally appropriate for a husband to help his suffering wife die. In that unit, you will encounter various ethical theories that will help you think about the different dimensions of that scenario. In the forums included in that unit, you are asked to try and apply these different theories to the given scenario. This kind of writing is low stakes writing. You are not being evaluated on the correctness and quality of your writing. The goal of this writing is to encourage you to think about the readings, the philosophical theories they discuss, and how they might be applied to a specific issue. Low stakes writing plays an important role in helping you comprehend the material, formulate some initial hypotheses, and prepare for a class discussion. While you are not graded or evaluated on these low stakes writing assignments, if you fail to participate in the daily forums your instructor may take this into consideration in assigning a grade for the course.

In contrast to the low stakes writing of the daily forums, you will also be asked to write a formal philosophical essay at the end of each unit. You might think of these formal writing assignments as higher stakes writing which does involve summative evaluation. These philosophical essays are your opportunity to demonstrate your understanding of a complex issue and how you might employ a philosophical framework in responding to such an issue. These essays are thesis-driven argumentative philosophical essays and will be evaluated according to objective criteria defined in the grading rubric you will find included in this portfolio. The rest of this document will provide some guidelines for completing these writing assignments. But first, let's discuss some of the basics.

## Some Basic Matters

With any writing assignment, you want to make sure you understand the basic matters of when it is due, how you are to submit it, what the appropriate length is, etc. For the formal philosophical essays assigned in this course, the dates and times at which they are due are listed in the online course syllabus. Pay attention to these deadlines as you may lose points if your work is late. You will be uploading your essay through the online course website and so your essay should be prepared in a standard word processing program. Keep in mind the following basic guidelines:

- **FORMAT:** Your essay must be typed and double-spaced. Use only standard fonts, font sizes, and margins. Put your name at the top of the first page and do not include a cover.
- **TITLE:** Your instructor may request that you include a title for your essay. Follow his or her recommendations. You may wish to give your file an appropriate name (such as: John Smith mind final essay) prior to uploading it to the course web site.
- **LENGTH:** Essays length will vary with assignments.
- **STYLE:** Essays should be written following standard college-level academic prose. Many of you will have purchased a student style manual for your college composition courses. You might find it helpful to consult this if you have any questions regarding academic prose.

- WRITING PROCESS: For each essay assignment, you will be required to write at least one initial draft. This draft should be a complete draft and not a mere outline, a few sentences, or a paragraph. It should have an introduction, a well developed body, and a conclusion. More about the writing process is included below.
- LATE ESSAYS: Late essays will be subject to a penalty. See the grading rubric and your instructor for further information on this matter.

**WRITING TIP:** If your instructor doesn't take some class time to review the Grading Rubric and Quickmarks, you should take some time to familiarize yourself with these documents as they will help you understand how your writing is being evaluated. You'll want to keep these standards in mind throughout the writing process.

### **What kind of formal writing will I be doing in this course?**

This course is divided up into a number of units each of which revolves around a complex issue that raises a philosophical matter. Each unit includes a series of readings drawn from classical and contemporary philosophers as well as the news media to better help you understand that complex issue. At the end of each unit, you will be asked to compose an essay in which you address that issue. Here are some examples of the kinds of issues you may be asked to address:

- In the unit on mind and consciousness, you will be asked to address the issue of whether a machine can be so like a human being in relevant respects that it ought to be treated like a human being.
- In the unit on justice, you will be asked whether a woman with Down's syndrome who is in need of a life-saving organ transplant should be given the same opportunities as any other human being in need of such a transplant.
- In the unit on ethics, you will be asked whether a man who helps his ailing wife die did the morally right act.

Each of these issues is drawn from specific scenarios involving narrowly tailored disputes and you are being asked to formulate your position on each issue. Each unit includes a variety of news articles that provide helpful background on the core issue being considered as well as a series of philosophical readings that articulate different frameworks or lenses through which the issue can be analyzed. After considering all the background information, reviewing the various philosophical frameworks for thinking about the issues, discussing and debating the issue in class, you will be asked to formulate your own position on the matter, taking all this material into consideration.

Notice that these issues are fairly narrowly tailored. You are not being asked to directly address the nature of consciousness or justice or ethics. These are very broad and complex matters and as far as writing assignments are concerned are better left for more advanced philosophy courses. Our writing tasks in this course will be more narrowly defined and revolve around specific scenarios involving concrete details. Obviously you will want to familiarize yourself with those details and the specific writing scenario.

**WRITING TIP:** Be sure you understand exactly what is expected of you in each writing assignment. Most essay assignments will ask you to analyze and critically evaluate a

specific philosophical issue. Make sure that you understand the issue that you are to analyze and that you focus on the right issue. A common mistake students make is to write an essay on a related but ultimately different issue.

The writing assignments accompanying each unit of this course are designed to elicit your judgment on a controversial matter. Each of the formal essays you will be writing for this course requires that you formulate a thesis statement addressing the assigned issue and develop an argument in support of your thesis. What do you think? How can you defend your thesis? In a thesis defense essay, you make a claim, almost always clearly articulated in the introductory paragraph of your essay, and in the body of the essay you provide reasonable grounds that support your claim. Your essay provides evidence that a reasonable and unbiased person would accept for establishing the acceptability of your thesis. You have likely written these kinds of argumentative or persuasive essays for other college courses, particularly college composition courses. You want to demonstrate that you have thought carefully and critically about the issues presented in this course and in the readings included in each unit and that you are capable of crafting an argument that pertains to these issues.

As each issue has been relatively narrowly defined, your thesis should be directly responsive to the issue. Generally you will find that each issue admits of only a small number of appropriate theses. A thesis is a statement that makes some clear, definite assertion about the subject matter under discussion. For example, if the issue of your paper is whether abortion is moral, here are some of the many theses you might choose to defend:

- Abortion is morally wrong under all circumstances.
- A woman has an absolute right to decide whether to have an abortion.
- Abortion is morally right only to save the life of the mother.

Each of these is a clear, definite statement that takes a position on the morality of abortion, a position that the rest of the paper will attempt to defend. A statement such as “Abortion, pro and con” would not be an appropriate thesis for it doesn’t assert anything. Nor would the statements “Why I believe in a woman’s right to choose” or “I personally believe abortion is wrong” be appropriate. A philosophy paper is not a personal report of how you feel or what you believe. It is an argument for a thesis. Also, try to avoid picking a wishy-washy thesis that hedges your bets, like “There is much to be said on both sides of the abortion question,” or “There are good arguments for and against abortion.” The object of a philosophical essay is to move beyond merely reporting on the various perspectives on an issue. You should take a stand, plant your feet squarely on the ground, and argue for your thesis as well as you can.

**WRITING TIP:** Your essay as a whole should be clear, coherent, well-organized, and concise. Make sure both you and the reader know at every stage what you are doing, where you are going, and how what you are writing is relevant to the central task of defending your thesis. Know what you want to say; you should have a very sound notion of the point you wish to argue or the position you wish to support. Don’t wander from the issue that you are to analyze and don’t mix together materials that belong in different parts of the paper. Set forth your argument in logical order, supporting your thesis with

arguments. Leave out anything that does not advance your argument or further your point. Don't be afraid to edit your own work, deleting passages that do not advance your argument.

There are many excellent resources available on the Internet which provide guidance on writing a thesis defense essay and in this portfolio of writing resources you will find links to four online "How to Write Philosophy" guides that provide additional insights into writing philosophy essays. In particular, I recommend Douglas Portmore's "Tips on Writing Philosophy Papers." If you are encountering problems with the formal writing assignments in this course, I encourage you to review one or more of these writing guides.

## **Developing arguments**

The heart of a persuasive essay is the arguments that support the thesis. You have to come up with arguments that are designed to persuade your reader that your thesis is an acceptable one. What is an argument? To put it as simply as possible, an argument for a thesis is a reason for believing that the thesis is acceptable. When you are putting forward an argument in support of your thesis, ask yourself, "If I didn't already believe my thesis, would this convince me that the thesis is acceptable? Would it tend to convince a reasonable reader who is open-minded enough so that he or she is willing to listen to reasons?" If the answer is yes, then you have your hands on a genuine argument. If the answer is no, then leave it out of the paper and look for a better argument.

**WRITING TIP:** Do not introduce assumptions or speculations into your essay unless you can adequately defend them as reasonable and they are consistent with everything else we know. Don't leave any important claims unsupported. If you argue that abortion is immoral because the fetus is a person with a right to life you need to support your claims that the fetus is a person and has a right to life. Any claims that may be controversial and not accepted by most reasonable people should be supported. Any claims or arguments that have already been discussed and criticized in class must be supported if you introduce them into your essay.

Your arguments should be well developed and thought out. The number of arguments in an essay is not necessarily as important as the quality of the arguments. It is often better to develop one strong, persuasive argument in support of your thesis than several weak and unrelated arguments.

**WRITING TIP:** Don't mistake common forms of discourse for arguments. Some examples:

- Merely citing an example is not an argument.
- Supporting a claim with trite or stock phrases or with clichés is not arguing.
- Simply stating your feelings or beliefs does not constitute an argument.
- Avoid merely reporting, summarizing, or describing other people's views. Don't confuse describing your views with arguing for them. Merely describing or explaining what you believe is not sufficient to justify your belief and wouldn't persuade someone who didn't already agree with you

For the purposes of the philosophy writing assignments you will be doing for this course, it is important to keep in mind *what these writing assignments are not*:

**Philosophical essays are not a matter of your feelings or mere opinions**

These writing assignments are not simply an opportunity for you to express your opinion or feelings. Philosophy is not generally about feelings or opinions but rationally defensible beliefs. Students often believe that philosophy is simply about the art of bullshit and that any opinion is as good as any other, but this is not true. Some opinions are more defensible than others and you are being called on to present evidence in support of your claims. As you grapple with the complex issues addressed in this course, your opinions are a good starting point—but they are just that, the starting point. Through further reflection, debate and discussion, and critical reading, you should refine your opinions and begin to develop an argument in support of your belief. As you do so, you move from mere opinion to supported belief.

**WRITING TIP:** Asking a question without answering it is not an appropriate way to give an argument. For example: “What would happen if every woman who wanted an abortion got one?” is not an argument. “If every woman who wanted an abortion got one, millions of innocent lives would be lost” is the beginning of an argument. Don’t resort to rhetorical questions as a strategy for arguing for a claim.

**Philosophical essays are generally not solely about factual or empirical matters**

Many of the disciplines you are likely to encounter in your general education courses are interested in descriptive matters and conducting experiments in order to resolve empirical matters. Consider the case of Sandra Jensen, the woman with Down’s syndrome who needs a double organ transplant. Sociologists may be interested in people’s attitudes toward those with Down’s syndrome. Medical doctors may want to know the state of her physical health. The general populace is surely interested in how many organs are available and how many are in need. Many people may believe that organs are simply distributed on the basis of who has the most money or influence. These are important matters but they are not philosophical matters. The student of philosophy is interested in the issue of whether it would be fair to deny Sandra Jensen her request for an organ transplant. The empirical matters may be relevant here but they are never sufficient for making the case regarding what is fair. Your paper ultimately has to wrestle with more than simply the facts and descriptive matters regarding what people do. You must address the prescriptive issue of what is fair in this situation. This goes beyond the facts and what people do and requires that you also wrestle with philosophical theories of justice.

**WRITING TIP:** Merely citing or repeating known facts seldom constitutes an argument. If you are opposed to abortions and wish to argue that abortions are immoral, merely citing the fact that thousands of abortions are performed weekly does not in itself constitute adequate support for your thesis. Facts need to be interpreted. They require a philosophical framework in which the reader is made to understand their significance.

**Philosophical essays are not simply reports or research papers**

The essays that you will be writing for this course do not require that you do any additional research, other than critically reading the assigned selections and the material providing background information. In your forum posts you will be asked to discuss what you think this or

that philosopher might say in addressing a particular issue or how you might apply a particular philosophical theory to an issue. The final writing assignment for each unit asks you to develop your own response to a particular issue. These assignments are not designed for you to simply report on what some great philosophical figure said but to articulate and defend your own view on the matter. Let's return to the case of Sandra Jensen for a moment. In addressing this case in your essay for this unit, it would be a mistake to write an essay in which you explain what John Stuart Mill would say or what John Rawls would say. In such a case you would no longer be addressing the issue of whether you think it would be fair to deny her request for an organ transplant. You would be addressing the topic of what Mill thinks or what Rawls thinks. And while it may be worthwhile to address these topics as part of your preparation for writing an essay about Sandra Jensen, this should not be the focus of your writing.

**WRITING TIP:** Remember that there is a difference between mere expository writing, where you are explaining or summarizing or describing, and persuasive writing where your goal is to persuasively support a thesis with appropriate arguments.

### **Philosophical theories as tools**

Many introductory philosophy students are confused when confronted with the task of articulating and defending their own philosophical views. They are more comfortable with simply reporting what other philosophers have said. Furthermore, students are unsure of how to use a philosophical theory and what it could mean to analyze a case from the perspective of a particular framework. The various philosophical readings included in each unit of this course will introduce you to a series of frameworks for examining the central issue of that unit. For instance, in the unit on justice you will be introduced to a variety of different philosophical accounts of justice, each of which highlights a different way of thinking about justice, including merit, natural rights, utility, fairness, and capability. Each of these frameworks highlights different aspects of the case of Sandra Jensen and each has their strengths and weaknesses. You might think of these various theories as different tools in the philosophical tool box. They each do slightly different things and give us a slightly different perspective on our problem.

**WRITING TIP:** Using examples and counterexamples can often be a good strategy in explaining your points and offering some support for your thesis. Be careful, however, not to rely too heavily on isolated examples. The mere fact that one person you know died from complications due to an abortion does not mean that abortions are unsafe nor does it adequately support such a thesis.

After considering the variety of approaches to justice, you are then asked to take a stance on Sandra Jensen's request. Having worked with and critically thought about these various theories/tools, you now have to decide which tool you think is best for this particular job. Let's imagine that you have been impressed by John Stuart Mill's utilitarian account of justice and you believe that Sandra Jensen's case ought to be determined on the basis of utility. You're then going to write an essay in which you address the issue of whether it is fair to deny Sandra Jensen her request from the standpoint of utility. Your essay is not going to be about how Mill would assess the case of Sandra Jensen. Rather, you will be writing as a utilitarian yourself and defending how you, as a utilitarian, think this matter ought to be resolved. In your essay, you are going to make

the best case you can for a utilitarian analysis of this matter. You are using this theory as a tool to analyze this case. Make good use of the tool and your essay will be a success. But you don't need to reinvent the tool or even address the matter of who first invented it. You just need to pick up the tool and use it properly.

In drawing on a particular philosophical framework you may find it useful to briefly and concisely mention a specific point that a philosopher makes in articulating that framework. Let's stick with case of Mill and Sandra Jensen for a moment. In his utilitarian account of justice, Mill argues that all persons have a right to equality of treatment "except when social expediency requires the reverse." You might find it useful in your own analysis of the case of Sandra Jensen to make use of this point and you should be free to do so. But again, your goal in citing this point is not to discuss how Mill would analyze the case of Sandra Jensen but to make use of one of the tools that Mill has included in his framework.

**WRITING TIP:** It is perfectly all right to use an argument from a lecture you have heard or an essay or book that you have read, including this textbook. When you adopt an argument as your own, you take responsibility for it. By including it in your paper, you are saying that you believe it is a convincing argument. If you are aware of criticisms of the argument, you should attempt to address these criticisms when you adopt the argument. If you are paraphrasing or quoting remember to supply the necessary documentation.

### **Can I mix and match philosophical frameworks?**

It is only natural for beginning philosophy students to be attracted to different elements in different philosophical theories and want to combine the best elements from a variety of theories. But you should resist doing so. Philosophers value consistency and clarity above all else and it is often the case that when you combine elements from different philosophical frameworks you risk combining elements that are ultimately inconsistent. This is especially the case when you realize that philosophers expect their frameworks to apply at a fairly general level, precisely where they are likely to run into inconsistencies with other theories.

Let's take a look at a common mistake in this regard. When exposed to different ethical theories, it is not uncommon for beginning philosophy students to find both John Stuart Mill's emphasis on consequences and happiness and Immanuel Kant's emphasis on duty attractive. When confronted with a complex moral case such as the one presented in the unit on ethics, Bertram Harper's aiding his wife Virginia to die, students sometimes want to combine Mill's emphasis on happiness and Kant's emphasis on duty, and support their thesis using both theories. Mill and Kant are a bit like oil and water, however, and their theories pull us in very different directions. Mill says look only at the consequences when making a moral decision and Kant says never take the consequences into consideration when making a moral decision. How am I to both look and not look at the consequences when making a moral decision? This is impossible and the inconsistency in the advice is indicative of why it is more generally not possible to combine distinct philosophical frameworks. The readings included in each unit of this text have been selected to highlight distinct and divergent philosophical frameworks and as such it is generally not possible to take elements from one framework and combine them with elements from another framework. If you are motivated to do so, you should exercise extreme caution and perhaps seek

the input of your instructor.

### **Who is my audience?**

Knowing your audience for a particular writing assignment is very important for couching your comments appropriately. For many of the writing assignments included in this course, you are given fairly specific directions regarding the writing scenario and its context. Some of the writing assignments ask you to imagine that you are a judge, or a member of a transplant committee, or are writing a letter to the editor, or even that you have been transported into a television show. You should feel free to make use of these contexts to structure your essay, but you need not. In either case, you should assume that your audience is a reasonable and unbiased individual already familiar with the details of the writing assignment and generally familiar with the philosophical frameworks you will be employing. Your essay should not devote much space to summarizing the details of the case or summarizing your given philosophical theory. You should instead focus on the task of articulating your thesis and the good grounds that provide support for it. If you are asked to write an essay about Sandra Jensen, for instance, you don't want to include a lengthy paragraph rehearsing the details of her case. Assume that your reader is already familiar with these details, as the writing scenario suggests. And were you to offer a utilitarian analysis of her case, you shouldn't include a paragraph in which you summarize the utilitarian theory of justice. Instead, simply use the theory in your analysis. Make use of the tool, don't describe it. Assume that your reader is already familiar with the details of the case and the outlines of the philosophical framework you will be employing. Get directly to the task of supporting your thesis.

**WRITING TIP:** Do not beg the question when arguing. Begging the question is a form of reasoning in which the conclusion of an argument merely restates the premise. Such an argument assumes or takes for granted precisely what it is supposed to establish.

Consider the following:

I believe abortion is wrong. It is not right for people to have abortions. I think it is terrible that so many innocent children are being murdered.

This passage does not present any arguments. It is circular and repetitious, merely repeating the first statement with slightly different words. In other words, this passage begs the question and should convince no one that abortion is wrong.

### **A process approach to writing**

This course has been designed to insure that you adopt a process approach to writing. Writing and revising drafts are important parts of the writing process. In your college composition courses you have likely learned about the importance of writing a draft, having it reviewed, and revising it before submitting a final draft. We will employ a similar process in this course. Part of learning to be a good writer and a good student of philosophy is learning how to draft your comments, share them with others so that they can be reviewed, and then replying to those reviews and improving your writing and your thinking.

Your instructor may employ a peer-review process as part of writing process. If so, you will be asked to read and comment on one of your peer's essays, possibly completing the Peer

Evaluation Form included in these writing resources. Take this as an opportunity to learn about how one of your peers is approaching the writing assignment and help one another to clarify and strengthen your ideas.

Following this peer evaluation, you will be asked to revise your essay as necessary and then upload a draft to mydigitaltext where it be evaluated and commented upon using the Quickmarks discussed elsewhere in these writing resources. Once your essay has been evaluated, you will be given an opportunity to revise it once more before uploading your final draft. Take this time to review the comments and Quickmarks and perhaps meet with your instructor to review any areas of your essay where you have concerns. You might also find it helpful to visit your college's writing center if they have one and get the help from a trained writing tutor.

**WRITING TIP:** End your paper with a summary and a conclusion that briefly reviews your main argument and leaves the reader with the essay's most important points. It is seldom appropriate to introduce new points, material, or arguments in the conclusion.

Be sure to proof read your final draft prior to uploading. While our focus in these writing assignments is on the quality of your philosophical arguments, mistakes in grammar, punctuation, spelling, and sentence structure detract from your making your point clearly. Use your word processor's spell and grammar checking programs but do not rely exclusively on them as they will not catch all your mistakes. Take care to avoid common punctuation problems, fused sentences, sentence fragments, pronoun errors, etc.

**WRITING TIP:** Try to use language as precisely as possible. Vague words like "stuff" or "thing" are evidence of a sloppy mind. Your prose should be proper to the subject—not forced or stilted, not full of words you would never use except in a philosophy paper, but nevertheless carefully chosen.

# Resources for How to Write a Philosophy Essay

By Dennis Weiss



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## Resources for How to Write a Philosophy Essay

By Dennis Weiss

The beginning writer can often use multiple resources in order to improve upon their writing. Fortunately, as college students you likely have many resources available to you. First, of course, there is your instructor. If you are struggling with any assignments, make an appointment with your instructor to receive additional help during his or her office hours. Additionally, many colleges and universities have writing centers where students can get individualized attention on some of the fundamentals of writing. You should take advantage of this help.

There are a number of books available that focus specifically on writing philosophy and three of the best guides are:

1. Hugo Bedau: Thinking and Writing About Philosophy, Bedford/St. Martins
2. Brian David Mogck: Writing to Reason: a Companion for Philosophy Students and Instructors, Blackwell Publishing
3. Zachary Seech: Writing Philosophy Papers, Wadsworth

In addition to these guidelines, there are a number of excellent online resources for writing a philosophy paper. These include:

- Douglas Portmore: [Tips on Writing a Philosophy Paper](#)
- James Pryor: [Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper](#)
- William O. Stephens: [How to Write Philosophy Papers](#)
- Evan Thompson and Duff Waring: [Essay Writing Handbook for Philosophy Students](#)

For students who might want some help on developing persuasive arguments, there are several web sites that provide good background on the fundamentals of arguments. These include:

- [Arguments and Their Evaluation](#)
- Garth Kemerling: [Arguments and Inferences](#)
- Hong Kong University's Critical Thinking Web Site: [Argument Analysis](#)

# Improving Your Writing

*By Dennis Weiss*



“Power to the Pencil” © Nikolai Sorokin | Dreamstime.com

## Improving Your Writing

*By Dennis Weiss*

While this course concentrates on philosophical writing, your writing will still be judged according to the standards of college academic prose. This means that matters of writing style, organization, grammar, spelling, and sentence structure will play a role in the overall evaluation of your writing. If you are not confident in your writing skills, there are several places you may seek help. Your college may have a writing center where you can go and receive individual attention and help crafting a better written essay. Most professors are happy to have their students visit the writing center and will often encourage students to use these indispensable service. Many college writing centers also offer extensive help through their web sites. Here are a couple of recommended links to online writing centers where you can get help on writing strategies, adopting a process approach to writing, grammar and style issues, and other matters.

- [The Purdue Online Writing Lab](#)
- [Colorado State University: Writing@CSU](#)
- [Guide to Grammar and Writing: Capital Community College](#)

- [HyperGrammar: The University of Ottawa](#)

Additionally, there are many fine online sites with helpful guidelines on grammar and writing style, including:

[The Elements of Style](#) by William Strunk

From the website Bartleby.com: Asserting that one must first know the rules to break them, this classic reference book is a must-have for any student and conscientious writer. Intended for use in which the practice of composition is combined with the study of literature, it gives in brief space the principal requirements of plain English style and concentrates attention on the rules of usage and principles of composition most commonly violated.

[Guide to Grammar and Style](#) by Jack Lynch

# Fallacies

*By Dennis Weiss*



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## Fallacies

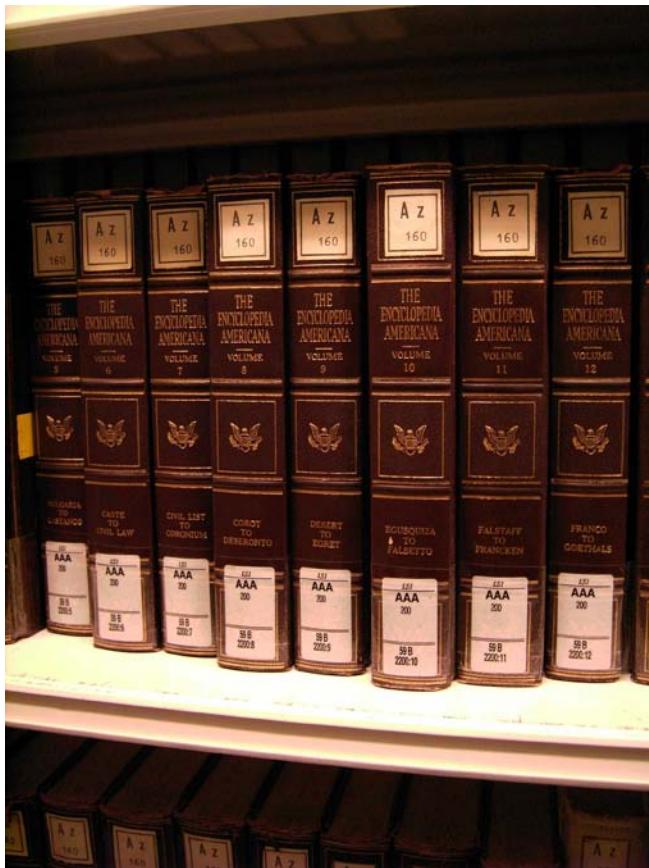
*By Dennis Weiss*

A fallacy is a kind of error in reasoning and many beginning philosophy writers will occasionally encounter fallacies in their writing, which an evaluator may point out and which will then need to be addressed. Many fallacies are very common and while easily identifiable and diagnosed, also easily find their way into writing. You will find some fallacies explicitly identified in the Quickmarks, such as begging the question or employing emotionally charged language. Your instructor may also alert you to fallacies that appear in your writing or you may find comments on your essays identifying fallacious reasoning. There are many excellent online resources that define and provide examples of fallacies, helping you to identify fallacies and avoid them in your own writing. Five of the better online resources for fallacies are:

- [The Fallacy Files](#)
- [Logical Fallacies: An Encyclopedia of Errors of Reasoning](#)
- [Fallacies: The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)
- [Fallacies: The Nizkor Project](#)
- [Stephen’s Guide to the Logical Fallacies](#)

# Philosophy Dictionaries and Encyclopedias

By Dennis Weiss



"Encyclopedia Americana" Thangmar | Wikimedia Commons

## Philosophy Dictionaries and Encyclopedias

By Dennis Weiss

For students interested in learning more about a particular philosopher or philosophical theory or simply in clarifying the meaning of a key philosophical concept, there are a number of excellent dictionaries and encyclopedias of philosophy, many of them available online or through your college library's database subscription service. Here we include a list of the more widely recognized authoritative resources widely available to students.

Online Dictionaries of Philosophy:

- [A Dictionary of Philosophical Terms and Names](#)
- [Dictionary of Philosophy](#)

Dictionaries of Philosophy (that may be available through your college library):

- [The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy](#)
- [A Dictionary of Philosophy](#)
- [The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy](#)

Online Encyclopedias of Philosophy:

- [The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)
- [The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)

Encyclopedias of Philosophy (that may be available through your college library):

- [The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)
- [The Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)