

## GUIDELINES FOR WRITING THE MONOGRAPHIC ESSAY

### 1. *Primary and secondary literature: what and how to read*

Already during the preliminary work of evaluation and selection of sources, it is necessary to adhere to the distinction between primary and secondary literature. In the case of a paper concerning a single author – or even several authors – the criterion of distinction is very simple: the first category includes the works of the authors who are the subject of the work, the second includes everything that has been written about their work by others. In the case of a thesis on a theme, on the other hand, the distinction is very blurred and the main criterion to be followed will be that of the greater or lesser congruence of the texts examined with the chosen theme. Of course, for the type of work you will have to do, this problem will have no reason to arise, since you will be working mainly on individual authors.

The thorniest difficulty you will have to face will consist rather in the breadth of critical literature on a particular author which, in the case of great names such as Plato, Descartes, Marx, Nietzsche, etc., is almost endless. Since complying with the requirement of the greatest possible completeness is an unattainable undertaking even for the most experienced scholars, it will be necessary to make a selection on the basis of general criteria that depend on the specific thematic perspective that one intends to imprint on one's work. In your case, the theme is already there and it is that of corporeality: you will therefore have to commit yourself to tracing the references to the theme in the titles and content of the works of secondary literature that you will find in your hands. Of course, this will also help you in selecting the texts of the primary literature and, within them, the salient passages for your work.

Other criteria you can use when selecting secondary literature are:

- temporal proximity: the most recent texts – if written by well-accredited authors – can prove to be valuable sources because they reflect the most up-to-date methodological and interpretative orientations and take into account the current state of the art; they are also extremely useful sources for the search for further bibliographic titles;
- the prestige of the author: obviously the criterion of temporal proximity takes a back seat when the author of the essay (whether article or monograph) is a well-known authority in his field: thus, Dan Zahavi and Timothy Mooney will be an essential reference for those who want to deal with Husserl or Merleau-Ponty;
- the number of times a contribution recurs in the bibliography and in the citations contained in other texts: this is a brutally quantitative criterion that can only give an approximate measure of the importance of a given title, and should therefore be taken with a grain of salt, since the happiest insights for one's own research work can often also come from sources that almost no one has taken into consideration. This, however, happens quite rarely: for the purposes of your work what has been said here will be more than sufficient.

Remember that, more than the more or less mechanical application of these criteria, what counts is your passion, your enthusiasm, your curiosity and your critical acumen. If you do not immerse yourself fully in the

author, it will not be enough to have sifted through all the bibliographies of this world to come to the bottom of his thought. Critical literature is at best an integrative aid and in no way replaces the direct reading of the author's texts. You may begin to read two or three critical essays for guidance before embarking on this task, but the bulk of the work should only be done after you have studied the primary reading.

And now a couple of tips on how to approach the reading of a philosophical text. Given the specificity of the language used and the argumentative structure that this kind of writing presents, reading the work of a philosopher requires time and patience. In other words, the aptitude for reading these texts is not improvised, but is exercised and refined in the course of experience. Here are some methods:

- *rapid reading*: it is unthinkable to apply it as it is to philosophical texts, for which an in-depth reading is indispensable. However, it can serve as a first orientation and an antidote against the temptation of a hyper-analytical approach that does not allow us to distinguish the essential from the inessential and to grasp the thesis, the problematic connections and the articulations of the text. Speed reading allows you to access the text in its entirety and is essential to find the sources you need for the execution of a research project in a reasonable time. It is not so much a matter of a quick reading, as of a selective reading, which "photographs" the page with a single glance, during which you will avoid pronouncing what you have read inwardly and proceed in jumps from one key term to another. In particular, it is useful to dwell on the index in order to identify the most interesting passages for one's purposes, the introduction and the conclusion: you will first of all have to dominate the overall structure and orientation of the work, and overcome the nagging of wanting to master all the contents in the shortest possible time, reserving the analytical examination of the text for a later phase;
- *In-depth reading*: at this point, you will delve into the text by soliciting maximum attention and concentration to highlight its theses, assumptions, and arguments. I remind you once again: proceed without haste! The purpose of in-depth reading is to adapt the reading to the explanation (see paragraph 3.), which is able to grasp the skeleton of the text;
- *mixed reading*: the two techniques can be combined, alternating between rapid and in-depth reading. The first will allow you to highlight the essential parts and gain an overview, while the second will help you to focus on the most important points. You can then return to the quick reading to recap and fix the results of your reconnaissance work.

## 2. Reading cards

A first, fundamental piece of advice: always take notes while reading. You can use special reading cards (paper or electronic) for secondary reading, in which you will report:

- the bibliographic data of the contribution;
- (if necessary) a brief summary;
- The main thesis supported by the author,
- keywords and definitions;
- excerpts from the text rephrased in their own words;
- Useful quotes.

When drafting the summary and excerpts, remember that conciseness is a must: try to convey the maximum content with the minimum of words, perhaps using personalized abbreviations. As with the selection of bibliographic material and reading, your search purposes also act as a selective filter here. Avoid following the author's course of thoughts in a more or less literal way: rather try to rework what you are reading in a personal way.

As for primary literature, start immediately to write preparatory notes aimed at writing your text (summary, explanation, commentary, draft: see the following paragraphs). Limit yourself to the essentials, i.e. the concepts and their articulations, also using abbreviations and other graphic artifices. Then pay attention to the breadth: let's set as an indication a percentage not exceeding 15/20% of the original text. The writing should be as telegraphic, concise and dense as possible.

### 3. Preliminary stages of writing: explanation and commentary

*Explanation* – In any research work, whether it focuses on an author or a theme, it is essential to reconstruct what the text says, that is, to subject it to the actual philosophical reading (*explanation*). First of all, it is necessary to clear the field of some misunderstandings. The explanation is not a pretext for one's own personal lucubrations; it is not a comment, that is to say that in drafting it one must disregard one's background knowledge and one's personal culture; it is not a paraphrase, in the sense that one must not give in to the temptation to replace the text with a reply of it written with other words, inevitably more verbose and worse than the original; finally, it is not a word-for-word dissection conducted without discernment and without the slightest attention to the veins of the text, which too often is confused with an informed analysis with a sense of scrupulousness. Explanation, on the other hand, consists in bringing to light what the text means, highlighting its implicit assumptions, key concepts, theme and argumentative structure. The explanation will therefore follow the following scheme:

- Highlight the *theme* (what the text deals with) and the *thesis* (the author's point of view), taking into account the *general problem* from which he starts and the *aims* he intends to achieve.
- Reconstruct the *general development* of the text, together with its *phases* and *articulations*, to highlight its *arguments*.
- Bringing out the concepts, even and above all the implicit and only presupposed ones.
- Assess the overall nature and scope of the text.

To deal with the text, it is necessary to restore an attitude of "naïve" receptivity, putting in parentheses the knowledge previously acquired and the prejudices, which are the limits of reading and do not replace it, as well as any interpretation that may come from other commentators. *It is the text that is authentic, and it alone.* We must start from the assumption that the text always and in any case has a meaning and that every difficulty of understanding has its solution in the text. Read and reread repeatedly and carefully. Underline to highlight concepts and articulations, keeping a continuous eye on the scheme outlined above, and question yourself by putting ideas and hypotheses on the table (to be taken up and modified if necessary), without taking sides in particular for any of them. Finally, go back to the starting point and start again. Identify the development of the text and render it according to its internal articulations, distinguishing the main points from the secondary ones, until you grasp it in its overall structure and in the balance of its parts, which will correspond to the content and not to the apparent order of the exposition. On the basis of the contents you have thus acquired, draw up a work plan for a detailed explanation, which can be fully included in the body of the manuscript to be written and you can carry out the following steps:

- highlight the most relevant philosophical terms and concepts, analyzing them according to their function in the development of the text, whether they are explicit or not: in this case, you will have to derive them by deduction;
- proceed in the same way with problems and questions, looking for possible answers within the text;
- identify and develop the articulations of the text by explaining what the author limits himself to alluding to and reconstruct the lines of argument.

*The commentary* – Establish an ideal dialogue with the author, situating the text in the overall context of his work and thought. Always try to conduct a personal reflection nourished by the specific knowledge you already have on the subject and on the author, perhaps referring to the interpretations of other commentators. This is where the reading sheets of the texts of critical literature come into play. Explanation and commentary should not be contained in two separate expositions put together at the least worst: in order to avoid unnecessary repetitions, work on two columns, one for the explanation and the other for the commentary, always referring to the order of the text.

The work plan will therefore be divided into the following phases:

- Spread the explanation and comment horizontally in several columns;
- when necessary, link each element of the explanation to the historical-philosophical context, possibly making a comparison with other authors, and accompany it with your personal reflections;
- highlight themes and motifs that can serve as common titles for the parts of the explanation and the correlative parts of the commentary, moving away from the linear order of the explanation, but without at the same time distorting the structure of the text;
- Draw up a single overall plan in which both explanation and comment find their place, constantly going from one to the other and vice versa.

#### 4. *Preparation of the drafting*

Let's start with a preliminary consideration: there is no a priori method for drafting a philosophical text: first of all, each theme allows itself to be attacked starting from a multiplicity of approaches; secondly, it is only after the fact that it is possible to highlight defects, gaps and approximations in the text and correct them. In this regard, a brief catalogue of what we might call the "beginner's mistakes" and their remedies may be enlightening:

- Tendency to paraphrase, mostly attributable to mental laziness: think for yourself, move away from the letter of the text once you have mastered it and trust your memory (but not too much!). List key points and thematic cores and build your speech around them in concentric circles. At first, write down everything that comes to mind, then rework the material into shape, order, and connection. Let yourself be carried away by the flow of your personal considerations, without fear of writing nonsense: force your mental blocks.
- Excessive pedantry and hyper-analytical spirit, prolixity, difficulty in synthesizing, in isolating the relevant theoretical points in order to connect them in the order of your discourse. As a remedy, the above applies. In addition, don't be afraid to think big, to be bold in proposing keys to

reading or interpretative ideas, establish a basic idea that acts as a lintel for your work, and do it from the beginning;

- Lack of coordination between the various parts of the paper, causing gaps and inconsistencies: read and reread your text continuously following a path of comings and goings, always with reference to the key words and main concepts;
- Tendency to repetition, to the use of stereotyped phases and rhetorical automatisms. Avoid them with all your might: they generate a distressing impression of clumsiness. Instead, launch yourself with your personal style, liven up the aside, shake off the useless expressive refinements and the unsuccessful imitations of academic jargon.

Let's not hide the difficulties: writing is a difficult job that requires extreme attention. However, as in any craft work, it is possible to achieve high levels of excellence in this sector as well, once the task has been tackled with due commitment and due care, which must also be directed towards the details of expression and graphic form. An essay can and should be written well, and thus show the writer's ability to handle language. Do not forget, however, that its main purpose is to convince the reader of the validity of the theses supported in it. If you don't have a thesis to support – which in your specific case consists of a critical re-reading of the chosen topic – it's not even worth writing an essay. A badly written text is an inconclusive text, in which it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify a precise argumentative thread, and all the more indisposing the more the author strives to show off his presumed literary skills.

And now let's try to recap what has been said in the previous paragraphs in the form of useful rules for the preparation of the draft:

- read in depth what is useful for you to master the subject;
- submit to philosophical texts and adjust to their argumentative progress;
- patiently analyze each point and avoid giving in to hasty conclusions;
- abolish any prejudice about the apparent simplicity of the text (do not take anything for granted);
- what matters is what you actually remember and not what you think you remember;
- stay true to the theme of the text without arbitrarily transforming it;
- work on definitions, developing them on your behalf and making them understandable;
- explain the meaning of key concepts and highlight the relationships they have with others, being attentive to the variation of their particular meanings from author to author or from context to context;
- creatively reconcile the two opposites of unbridled imagination and thoughtful judgment: in other words, move from *brainstorming* to careful selection and vice versa;
- give examples, using your personal experience if necessary;
- constantly ask questions to break down the topic into its elements and isolate the problematic nuclei. Some types of questions are: definition, distinction, context, principle of reason, conditions of possibility, origin, process of formation, causes, purposes, effects...
- As for the reference to the theses supported by your authors, avoid hiding behind the *ipse dixit*, keeping your critical sense equidistant from both uncritical identification and a priori rejection. Textual references must be short, precise and motivated: what matters is not the summary of an author's theories, but a reasoned synthesis of his arguments.

## 5. *The realization of the drafting*

To begin with, clarify your ideas about what *you yourself* think on the subject, without worrying too much about *who* will read your essay, and in any case assuming that those who read you will not be willing to agree with you in any case and will assume a critical attitude towards your arguments. To this end, it is necessary to selectively review the literature on the subject, trying to identify the most significant authors and works, in order to collect a good bibliography. Although a good knowledge of secondary literature is recommended, it is not everything: what is important above all are the arguments supporting your thesis. During the writing of the essay, a well-defined space must be dedicated to the discussion of secondary literature, without exceeding in detail.

First, decide what you want to support. In other words: define your thesis. To start writing, you don't have to wait until you have completely clear ideas, because during the writing process new ones can always come to mind. Explaining your reasons in an orderly manner is helpful in clarifying to yourself how you intend to articulate your thesis.

Follow an order in the exposition, carefully distinguishing what comes before and what comes after, premises and conclusions. Determine from the outset which of your beliefs can serve as assumptions for the arguments to be developed and make sure that your theses are the conclusions you intend to defend. It is not necessary that the thesis you want to support is absolutely original. Originality can also consist in the way of formulating the argument, as well as in the thesis proposed. A new argument in favour of an interpretative cue already supported by others is also a useful contribution to research.

Once you have chosen the thesis to support, you must formulate it clearly and precisely, taking care to define the meaning of the key terms used as carefully as possible: it is a good idea never to use a term before defining it. Once this is done, begin to arrange the arguments put forward in support of your thesis in an orderly manner, helping yourself if necessary with notes and diagrams. Whatever thesis you want to defend, you need a complex and articulated argument to support it, made up of multiple steps and intermediate conclusions.

Now we come to the structure of the essay, to be developed already in the design phase. Don't start with the introduction: it's better to write it at the end, since in it you will have to formulate the thesis to be defended as clearly as possible and inform the reader in a timely manner about what he will read in the essay, even without explicitly detailing how the individual points and arguments will be developed in support. After the introduction, divide the essay into sections and these into paragraphs. Each section and each paragraph has the function of supporting one and only one point (one idea per paragraph, one paragraph per idea); At the beginning of each individual section, it is advisable to specify which point it is about. Keep in mind that you can (and often must) modify your work plan during the work, in view of the objective of an organic and logically congruent structuring of the essay.

Let's now analyze the parts of your text in detail.

*The introduction* – It fulfills a dual function, methodological and philosophical, since it announces the problem and the questions it raises. Always establish a uniform correlation between what the introduction promises and the way in which themes and problems are actually treated. Here is a possible way of articulating:

- definition of the field of questions in which the problem is inscribed;

- exposition of the main topic;
- formulation of questions (two or three, no more);

As for breadth, you should be able to find an optimal balance between the extremes of conciseness and verbosity: do not give in to the temptation to say everything immediately, but rather leave the reader with a sense of *suspense*.

*The procedure*: the division into sections and/or paragraphs must follow a progression marked by argumentative passages. Start with the questions, formulate hypotheses as possible answers and expose the reasons that can be adduced for or against. If possible, make your own choice. Always remember to meet the dual requirement of continuity of exposition and order in composition. Go from analytical to synthetic, from elementary to compound, following a gradual course and retrace the path backwards. A proposal for articulation – not necessarily binding – is the following:

- a first part concerning the explanation of the terms of the topic (examples, conceptual analysis, clarification...);
- second (third, fourth...) part dedicated to the exposition of the arguments and the critical discussion of the theories of the individual authors, which must not be presented in random order, but according to the order required by the argumentative structure of the paper;
- Conclusion: Take stock of what you have already written, in the form of a summary and explicit answers to the questions asked in the introduction. Pay attention to which the introduction and conclusion correspond harmoniously,

Be very frugal in your use of quotations. Those that fit perfectly into the context of the writing are very rare, since each author follows the thread of *his own* reasoning and not ours: this explains why it is so difficult and tiring to adapt a quote to one's own argument. Texts full of quotations are illegible, not to mention the fact that quoting widely is completely useless. More effective – and simpler – is to expose the thoughts of others in a condensed and clear form, documenting in a footnote the passages to which reference has been made and which confirm one's own interpretative line. It is always necessary to document in the footnotes the relevant passages of a text that is being discussed, even if it is not quoted verbatim in the text, while the actual quotations should be reserved only and exclusively for those cases in which one not only wants to present the content of the text to the reader, but also to give him an idea of the way in which its author expresses himself (for example, if it is particularly clear or bright).

Once you have filled out a first draft, let some time pass before picking up the essay again and forget about it completely. This contributes to the maturation of a self-critical attitude when you take it back in hand. Take the point of view of an outside reader, who is reluctant to be easily persuaded by your arguments and determined to counter them by any means. Once you have re-read what you have written, it will be easier to realize that many aspects that appeared clear and many arguments that seemed convincing are not really convincing. This is not surprising: it is a completely normal and productive experience, which gives you the opportunity to incorporate into your arguments the objections and critical observations that you may make against yourself, together with the corresponding answers. If necessary, move on to a second draft, always preceded by a pause.

In conclusion, some tips on form and style and a fundamental warning:

- write clearly: clarity is never enough, and we must not assume that what appears clear to us is equally clear to those who read us;
- respect grammar, syntax and punctuation;
- avoid long and tiring periods, full of asides and secondary ones, the use of which denounces the concern to demonstrate at all costs that one is aware of the complexity of the subject on which one writes and to pass as naïve if one uses short and concise sentences;
- use language appropriately and choose terms carefully, without fear of repetition;
- avoid dwelling on the obvious and irrelevant points, such as historical background notations and biographical details;
- Do not overlook the details of an argument with the intention of condensing them, taking the competence of the audience for granted. A good rule of thumb is that everything that can be found in a textbook or in a general exposition on the subject can be recalled quickly and in broad strokes, the rest must be explained in sufficient detail, as if you were addressing your theses to a beginner with average intelligence. Define the technical terms and illustrate each argumentative step;
- use the first person, instead of the impersonal forms;
- If during the writing work you realize that it is necessary to change the main thesis, or even overturn it completely, rewrite the essay from the beginning – it happens even and especially to the most intelligent! – without claiming to recycle at all costs and in its entirety the material drawn up up to that moment.

Good luck with your work!

*To learn more*

- Andy Gillet et al., *Inside Tracks. Successful Academic Writing*, Harlow, Pearson 2009.