

PHI 202 | How to do well in your first writing assignment

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1. Get straight to the point. Bernard Williams can get away with 5.5 pages of introduction, but that's only because he is writing a paper that has 75 pages. In an essay of no more than 1,000 words, you want to get straight to the point. You can start by explaining the relevant concepts, by telling the reading what claim you will be defending, or introducing an example that you will be referring to in your discussion.

2. Focus on one issue. In a short essay, it is wise to focus on just one issue and explore it in depth, instead of offering a shallow treatment of many loosely connected matters. It's best to consider just one objection to [act utilitarianism's commitment to maximizing] and just one possible response to this objection.

3. Defend your claims

(i) Do not just *assert* things. *Argue* for them. Philosophers are not really interested in *what* you think. They are interested in *why* you think that or, indeed, why we should all think that.

(ii) Suppose that you want to argue that some theory is false. Don't just show that this theory *has* some feature. You also need to argue that this theory *should not have* this feature. For example, showing that [utilitarianism is indifferent between bringing about an equal and an unequal distribution of well-being as long as the total well-being is the same] is not sufficient. You also need to argue that an adequate moral theory should favour the equal distribution.

4. Structure your essay. Divide your essay into sections. For instance, your first section might be an introduction, your second section might explain the view under consideration, your third section might present an objection to this view, your fourth section might present a response to this objection, etc. A section can be a single paragraph or multiple paragraphs. It won't hurt to give your sections simple headings.

5. Don't worry about originality too much.

(i) This is an introduction-level course. We are primarily interested in teaching you how to approach certain questions, how to scrutinise various answers that one might give to these questions, and how to write good philosophical arguments. You don't need to come up with a novel view or objection to get a top grade.

(ii) There is a subtle difference between (a) using arguments of other philosophers to make a case of your own, and (b) merely summarizing what other philosophers have said. Do the former, not the latter. If you find some view, objection, or response compelling, tell me why.

6. Be charitable. When you attack some view or some argument, it is important to consider what its proponent could say in response. However, considering *a response* is not enough. It must be *a reasonably good response*. Think about it this way. It's not very impressive to defeat an opponent in an athletic event when they are injured. You want to beat them when they are in good shape.