

Outline

Writing a philosophical essay

Formal requirements

Finding and using sources

Tips on essay writing

Brainstorm

Procedure

- ▶ Today: instruction, first ideas
- ▶ Tuesday, October 16: research question and outline ready
peer feedback & brainstorm session
- ▶ Monday, October 31: first version ready
Tuesday, November 1: peer feedback session
- ▶ Friday, November 9, 22:00: final version ready

Formal requirements

- ▶ 3000-4000 words (excl. bibliography)
- ▶ in English
- ▶ philosophical paper, that argues for a certain thesis related to any of the topics of the course
- ▶ includes a critical discussion of relevant literature
- ▶ proper reference to all sources used
- ▶ the assessment form is on Blackboard

Finding sources

- ▶ use the suggestions from Blackboard
- ▶ use the suggestions from your fellow students (presentations; peer feedback)
- ▶ search on `philpapers.org`
- ▶ search (cleverly) on `scholar.google.com`
- ▶ ask the lecturers

Using sources

- ▶ don't just tell your own opinion, but build your argument on existing discussions and ideas
- ▶ always refer to the sources you have used
- ▶ refer in some consistent way (APA, Chicago, ...)
- ▶ keep quotations to a minimum
- ▶ using other people's text without proper reference is considered plagiarism

What a philosophical paper is not (1)

- ▶ a literary confession,
in which you express your feelings, opinions, intuitions:

"I believe that people have a free will and that our actions are not predetermined. I think it's simply crazy to deny this. In fact, most people agree with me on this. I also believe . . ."

- ▶ a list of other people's opinions and positions,
also not of the "big philosophers":

"Descartes claimed that there are two kinds of substances, that animals have no emotions, that he proved the existence of God . . ."

What a philosophical paper is not (2)

- ▶ an opportunity to display your impressive knowledge of the literature:

“Davidson said that we can’t justify our beliefs from other beliefs. Sellars claims something similar. Also certain passages in Hegel seem to point in this direction, and already Aristotle knew that . . .”

- ▶ a collection of quotes and passages from other people’s work:

“Descartes discussed in the first meditation the reasons for why we can doubt the existence of all things. Later he says: “Everything that I hold to be true, I’ve encountered via my senses. But now I found out that my senses sometimes deceive me, and it’s a matter of prudence never to trust someone completely, who even deceives you only once”. He continues saying . . .”

What is a good philosophy paper? (1)

- ▶ a reasoned and structured defense of some claim (so not *just* a formulation of your private opinion)
- ▶ keep it small: don't argue that computers can (or cannot) think, but choose a more modest claim
- ▶ broaden the scope both in the introduction and the conclusion, and zoom in to defending your specific narrow claim in the middle part
- ▶ be original, i.e. show independent thinking and respond critically to existing literature

What is a good philosophy paper? (2)

Examples of the general aim of a philosophical paper:

- ▶ defending a claim or an argument
- ▶ criticizing a claim or an argument
- ▶ evaluating the strength and weaknesses of opposing positions
- ▶ discussing the consequences of a thesis, i.e. making the commitments of certain views explicit
- ▶ giving a new formulation or interpretation of an argument or thesis to avoid common criticisms
- ▶ developing or discussing counterexamples to a commonly accepted thesis
- ▶ developing or discussing examples to explain or reinforce commonly accepted claims

Do's and don'ts

- ▶ Rule of thumb: never just say 'I think / believe that p' without explaining why

If there is no space for explaining a presupposition, be explicit about that.

- ▶ Make sure you yourself understand what you write
- ▶ Don't make excessive use of jargon, or of colloquialisms
- ▶ Avoid category mistakes

Example: 'One of the presuppositions of functionalism is the concept of causality'

- ▶ Anticipate counterarguments
- ▶ Avoid platitudes

Structuring the paper

- ▶ **Title**: choose a catchy and representative title
- ▶ **Introduction**: formulate the question you are going to address, specify context and motivation, and give an overview of the rest of the paper
- ▶ **Development**: give a critical exposition of relevant literature, and your arguments leading to your answer to the research question
- ▶ **Conclusion**: recap of the arguments given; explicit answer to research question
- ▶ **List of sources**: consistent, precise, and complete

Writing an outline

- ▶ write a draft version of your introduction: research question, context, motivation
- ▶ specify the subsections
- ▶ give some indication of what will be written in each subsection, preferably by stating a question, your answer, and some indication of the arguments underlying your answer
- ▶ include a (preliminary) list of sources

Please post your outline on Blackboard, before the next seminar session.

Further tips

- ▶ How to read and write philosophical texts, by Michael Pohl and Johannes Korbmacher
- ▶ Guidelines on Writing a Philosophical Essay, by Menno Lievers
- ▶ Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper, by Jim Pryor
- ▶ A sample philosophy paper, by Angela Mendelovici

(links are on Blackboard)

Brainstorm

Please form groups of two or three students, and talk about your first ideas for your final paper.