A Short Introduction to Reading and Writing Philosophical Texts

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Preface

Dear Students,

Below you find our guideline for reading and writing philosophical texts. It should give you a good idea of what we expect from you in the end term essay. If you have questions, please contact us.

This text is the English translation of "Kurze Einführung für Anfünger zum Lesen und Schreiben philosophischer Texte," which is available online under:

http://jkorbmacher.org/teaching.

We will continue to expand and update this guideline in the future, so make sure you have the current version.

Best wishes,

Johannes

Chapter 1

What Are Arguments and How Can They Be Criticized?

1.1 What Is an Argument?

An **argument** is a system of statements consisting of **premises** and a **conclusion**. The premises are what's argued **from**, the conclusion is what's argued **for**. The purpose of an argument is to present **reasons** for the conclusion.

Arguments come in many shapes and forms, but at any rate, they're usually given in running text. Sometimes it can be a bit difficult to understand the **argumentative structure** (what are the premises, what's the conclusion) of a given argument. To figure out the structure of an argument, look out for "buzzwords" indicating that what follows is a premise or that it's a conclusion drawn from what's been said before. Here is an (incomplete) list of such buzzwords:

Premises	Conclusion
"since"	"therefore"
"because"	"thus"
"for"	"hence"
"given that"	"we may infer"
"seeing that"	"it follows that"
⋮	⋮

If you've figured out the argumentative structure of an argument, then there are different ways of presenting it. Take the informal argument: Given that all humans are mortal, since Socrates is human, we may infer that Socrates is mortal. Here are three ways of presenting the argument making its argumentative structure explicit:

- as a vertical list:

$\mathbf{P}_1$	Socrates is human.
$\mathbf{P}_2$	All humans are mortal.
C	Socrates is mortal.

- as horizontal list:

Socrates is human, All humans are mortal $\therefore$ Socrates is mortal.[1]

- as an argument tree:

$$\frac{\text{Socrates is human} \quad \text{all humans are mortal}}{\text{Socrates is mortal}}$$

In a good argument, the premisses **support** the conclusion. There are different ways in which the premisses can support the conclusion. In logic and argumentation theory, we typically distinguish between two types of arguments: (i) **deductive** arguments and (ii) **inductive** arguments. In a deductive argument, the premisses are supposed to **logically** support the conclusion: an argument is deductively valid just in case it is, as a matter of logic, impossible for the premises to be true and the conclusion to be false. The argument involving Socrates we gave above is an example of a deductively valid argument.

In an inductive argument, in contrast, the premises are only required to make the conclusion **likely**: an argument is **inductively valid** just in case if the premises are true, then it is likely that the conclusion is true. There are many different kinds of inductive arguments. A classical example of inductive arguments is the so-called **enumerative induction**: Suppose that all swans that we've observed so far were white, we may conclude, according to enumerative induction, that all swans are white. Now this argument is not **deductively valid**, it is certainly logically possible that all observed swans were white, but somewhere there is an unobserved black swan. But if the sample of observed swans is large enough, given the sample, it's **likely** that all swans are white. Other kinds of inductive arguments include, for example, the so-called **inference to the best explanation**: the idea is that if it's the best explanation of all the facts that the gardener killed the lord, we may infer, according to the inference to the best explanation, that the gardener is indeed the murder. Also this argument is not deductively valid, but, or at least many people have argued, it is **inductively** valid.

But a good argument does not only need to be valid. If we're supposed to be convinced by an argument to believe in a thesis, then it had better have true premises. For example, if I tell you that since all humans can fly, and since Socrates is a human, therefore Socrates can fly, then I've given you a deductively valid argument for Socrates being able to fly: it's logically impossible that all humans can fly and Socrates is a human, and Socrates can't fly. But surely this doesn't show that Socrates can fly. The problem is that the argument rests on a false premise: all humans can fly. It is, as we call it, **unsound**. In contrast, an argument is **sound** just in case it is deductively valid **and** all its premises are true. The argument that given that all humans are mortal, since Socrates is human, we may infer that Socrates is mortal is a good (and in fact standard) example of a sound argument.

1.2 How To Criticize Arguments

In philosophy, it's not enough to criticize an **argument** to claim or even show that it's conclusion is wrong. To simply claim that the conclusion is false would be to state an **opinion**, and philosophy is not about opinions. To **show** that the conclusion is false is, of course, an important contribution. A lot of philosophical work is conducted to establish

[1] The symbol "$\therefore$" means therefore.

the falsity of previously assumed theses. But this does not show what is wrong wrong with the **argument** itself, it only shows that there is **something** wrong with it. To criticize the argument itself you have to look beyond its conclusion and take the premises into account.

There are at least two ways of criticizing an argument:

1.2.1 First Way: Formal Criticism

You can criticize the **validity** of an argument by showing that its conclusion does not logically follow from its premises, i.e. you try to show that it's logically possible for the premises to be true and the conclusion to be false. In order to do this, you first have to figure out the **logical structure** of the argument. In the second step, you then produce an argument that has the same logical structure as the argument you're trying to criticize but its premises are clearly true while the conclusion is false. Here is an example:

Argument:

$\mathbf{P}_1$	Sometimes my senses deceive me.
C	Therefore, it's possible that my sense always deceive me.

Criticism:

The logical structure of the argument is as follows:

$\mathbf{P}_1$	X is sometimes F.
C	Therefore, it's possible that X is always F.

But if arguments of this logical form would be valid, then also the following argument would be valid:

$\mathbf{P}_1$	Some paintings are forgeries.
C	Therefore, it's possible that all paintings are forgeries.

The premise of this argument is clearly true, some paintings **are** forgeries. But the conclusion cannot be true. For a painting to be a forgery there has to be a corresponding original that it's a copy of. So the initial argument cannot be valid.

Watch Out: If you follow this strategy, watch out that the premises of your counterexample are **obviously true** and the conclusion **obviously false**. Otherwise, it will be hard to convince somebody who doesn't share your intuitions about the truth and falsity of the premises and conclusion.

1.2.2 Second Way: Substantial Criticism

You show that an argument is **unsound** by showing that (at least) one of its premises is false. So you'll argue against the relevant premises. It only makes sense to substantially criticize an argument once you've agreed that it's valid.

Argument:

$\mathbf{P}_1$	Murder is morally wrong.
$\mathbf{P}_2$	If abortion is murder, then abortion is morally wrong.
$\mathbf{P}_3$	Abortion is murder
C	Abortion is morally wrong.

This argument is **formally** (deductively) valid. But certainly, not everybody will share premise 3. So to criticize this argument it seems like a good idea to provide **another** argument to show that premise 3 is false. Simply stating your opinion will not do, at least not in philosophy: in philosophy, we care about arguments and reason and not about opinions.

1.2.3 Some Further Ways of Criticizing an Argument

Next to establishing that an argument is formally invalid or unsound, there are various other ways of criticizing arguments. Here we shall give you an (incomplete) list of some of the most important ways"

Third Way: Internal Inconsistency

Being internally inconsistent means to say one thing at some point while denying it at another point. Showing that an argument falls prey to an internal inconsistency is probably one of the strongest ways of criticizing an argument: from an inconsistent set of premises you can infer whatever you like (this principle is called **ex contradictione quodlibet**) and so an argument with inconsistent premises is certainly not convincing.

Here is an example to illustrate that from a contradiction everything follows:

Argument:

$\mathbf{P}_1$	Socrates exists.
$\mathbf{P}_2$	Socrates exists or the moon is made of cheese (follows from P_1).
$\mathbf{P}_3$	Socrates doesn't exist.
C	The moon is made of cheese (follows from P_2 and P_3)

Of course, now you can substitute any statement you like for "the moon is made of cheese".

Fourth Way: Equivocation

Somebody **equivocates** on an expression, if he uses it in different meanings in different parts of their argument. Here is an example:

Argument:

$\mathbf{P}_1$	Only men can speak rationally.
$\mathbf{P}_2$	No woman is a man.
C	No woman can speak rationally.

This argument appears to have the following form:

$\mathbf{P}_1$	Only As are Bs.
$\mathbf{P}_2$	No Cs are A.
C	Therefore, no Cs are Bs.

But it should be clear that this is not the case: the (chauvinist) proponent of this argument uses "man" (and it's plural "men") ambiguously: premise 1 is only true if we understand "man" as human, and premise 2 is only true if we understand "man" as male.
So the actual form of the argument is this one:

$\mathbf{P}_1$	Only As are Bs.
$\mathbf{P}_2$	No Cs are D.
C	Therefore, no Cs are Bs.

Clearly this argument is (formally) invalid.

Fifth Way: Circularity

An argument is **circular** just in case it assumes what it purports to show. So an argument is circular if either it contains the conclusion as one of its premises or we can show that the truth of one of its premises assumes the truth of the conclusion (i.e. it is established by means of an argument that uses the conclusion of the initial argument as a premise).

– "What a brain! And you know how to prove things, like the big shots?
– Yeah, I have a special method for that. Ask me to prove something for you, something real hard.
– All right, prove to me that giraffes go up in elevators.
– Let's see. Giraffes go up in elevators... because they go up in elevators!
– Good, that was great! Suppose I asked you to prove giraffes don't go up in elevators.
– That's easy. I just prove the same thing, but the other way around."

Example 1:

$\mathbf{P}_1$	Only men should be allowed to drive.
C	Therefore, women should not be allowed to drive.

Here the circularity is quite obvious. Things get more interesting when the circularity is buried deeper in the argumentative structure. Here is an example where at least one of the premises assumes the conclusion in a non-trivial way:

Example 2:

$\mathbf{P}_1$	The Bible contains the word of God.
$\mathbf{P}_2$	God is all-knowing and doesn't lie.
$\mathbf{P}_2$	The Bible says God exists.
C	Therefore, God exists.

Circular arguments are, of course, valid. But they are not convincing, since an argument can only convince someone who believes in its premises, and in a circular argument this means that they have to believe the conclusion to begin with.

Watch Out: An argument is **not** circular just because the premises **implicitly** contain the conclusion: every deductively valid argument is such that if the premises cannot be true without the conclusion being true. In deductively valid argument, however, the conclusion is not **explicitly** among the premises.

Sixth Way: Infinite Regress

We're dealing with an **infinite regress** if a formulated condition is itself something that requires a condition to obtain, which again requires a condition to obtain and so on **without end**. In philosophy, we typically describe "incompletable" acts as infinite regresses, such as justification acts, explanation acts, etc. Since in an infinite regress the explanation or justification will never come to an end, the justification will never be completed. Hence, this is a harsh form of criticism of an argument.

Thesis: An act is free iff it is caused by an act of will.

Objection: That's not enough! An act that was cause by an act of will is only free if the act of will is itself free.

Reply: We can use the same definition for acts of will: an act of will is free iff it is cause by another act of will. For an act of will to be free it has to be caused by a free act of will which again is caused by a free act of will etc.

Objection: But this leads to an infinite regress: according to your definition I can **never** perform a free act, since I first need to perform another free act of will, which requires me to perform another free act of will etc.

Chapter 2

Reading Philosophical Texts

We've been doing philosophy for (way) over 2000 years and this is, of course, reflected in the selection of texts you will have to read as part of a standard philosophy curriculum. Poems, myths, and collections of aphorisms are as much represented as texts using modern logic or requiring a basic understanding of science. Since, unfortunately, not all philosophers are also good writers, you will occasionally have to deal with texts that are difficult to read and sometimes feel "boring." In this context, people often mention Hegel and Heidegger. Have a look at their texts and you will see what we mean. But sometimes you will also be positively surprised by how seemingly effortlessly a philosopher describes complex ideas and argument—sometimes a good philosopher is (or was) also a good writer.

In the following, we shall make a few suggestions for how you should go about approaching a (difficult) philosophical text for the first time. These recommendations rests on personal experience and primarily concern texts in the tradition of analytic philosophy. You will have to judge for yourself if these methods also work for other texts.

2.1 Two Guiding Questions

In philosophy, we think, one of the main tasks is to analyze and evaluate arguments. Based on this understanding, we can formulate two guiding questions you should ask yourself when approaching a new text:

1. What is the main thesis the author defend, discusses, or criticizes?
2. What arguments does the author give and how does she respond possible objections?

If you found the answers to these two questions, you can move on to assess the claims and arguments of the author with regard to their plausibility and validity. And finally, you can form your own (justified) opinion about the text.

2.1.1 How Often Should You Read a Text?

How often you have to read a text depends on the complexity of the text, your previous knowledge of the issues discussed, and your general experience in dealing with philosophical texts. For beginners, we recommend that you read a new text at least **three times**. On the first pass, you should simply scan the text, look out for buzzwords, and try to get a general idea of what the text is about. On the second pass, you should try to find the main thesis and arguments, while ignoring side-notes and remarks. On the third pass, you carefully read the text again, paying attention to detail, and consolidate your previous understanding of the text by looking at side-notes, possible objections, explanations, etc.

2.2 How Should You Proceed?

2.2.1 First Step

Take your time and read the text, in a similar fashion as you would read a newspaper article or a blogpost. Mark all technical terms you don't understand, as well as theses, theories, names, and explicitly mentioned works of other people, for which you're not quite sure what they say. In this manner, you get a good understanding of the structure and complexity of the text, as well as the style of the author. Additionally, you can get an estimate how much time you'll need to **properly** understand the text.

> **Rule of Thumb**: For a philosophical text of around 30 pages, you should take at least a whole work-day to properly appreciate it.

2.2.2 Second Step

After you've read the text for the first time, you should try to figure out all the things you marked in the first step. Make use of an encyclopedia, such as The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Write down the definitions, translations, and explanations you find into your notes on the text. Make sure you deal with all linguistic misunderstandings first: only then can you properly appreciate the text.

Watch Out: If you don't know the content of a theses or theory, or you're unfamiliar with a certain philosopher, it's usually enough to have a quick look at Wikipedia or the Internet Encyclopedia. Don't read for too long. It's easy to get lost in the details.

2.2.3 Third Step

After you've cleared up the terminology, it's time to approach the main two guiding questions we posed in the beginning. Read the text again and try to figure out what is the **main thesis** of the author (or against which claim they argue). Often, you'll find

this already on the first page of the text. Look out for buzzwords indicating a claim: "I will argue that . . . ," "I intend to show that . . . ," etc.

Here is an example:

> "Modern empiricism has been conditioned in large part by two dogmas. One is a belief in some fundamental cleavage between truths which are analytic, or grounded in meanings independently of matters of fact and truths which are synthetic, or grounded in fact. The other dogma is reductionism: the belief that each meaningful statement is equivalent to some logical construct upon terms which refer to immediate experience. Both dogmas, I shall argue, are ill founded." (Quine, Two Dogmas)

Often it's also useful to pay particularly close attention to the last paragraphs of the text. Often authors summarize their claims and results in the last passages of the their text.

Watch Out: Beginners often make the mistake of not distinguishing between the views of the author and the views that the author mentions, or even criticizes. If you find a claim explicitly mentioned always ask yourself if this is the view of the author or not. Expressions like "it's often claimed" or "XYZ has claimed that" are clear indications that you're not dealing with the views of the author, but views of other people that the author refers.

2.2.4 Fourth Step

If you're fairly certain that you've spotted the main thesis of the text, then ask yourself next **what main argument does the author brings for the claim**. In other words, you're looking for the premises and the reasoning that the author presents for the conclusion. This is often not so easy, since not all authors clearly mark their assumptions, discuss them, or illustrate them by examples. If you encounter digressions, ignore them for now. The point is to find out the **main** argument of the author. Look out for the buzzwords indicating conclusions again.

2.2.5 Fifth Step

When you think that you've found the author's main claim and argument, then you should be able to refer the claim and argument briefly (!) in your own words. You can best do this by means of an schematic representation of the argument. Ideally, you can even give references from the text supporting your reading.

Here's an example:

References (freely translated from Descartes "Meditations")

- "In the first mediation, discussed the reasons for why we can doubt the existence of all things, especially material things, . . . "
- "Everything that I hold to be true, I've encountered via my senses. But now I found out that my sense sometimes deceive me, and it's a matter of prudence never to trust someone completely, who even deceives you only once."

Your Notes

- **Thesis**: I can't justify my beliefs about the material world by reference to my senses.
- **Argument**:

$\mathbf{P}_1$	Sometimes my senses deceive me.
$\mathbf{P}_1$	Therefore, it's possible that my sense always deceive me.
C	I can't justify my beliefs about the material world by reference to my senses.

It's important that you really understand the argument you write down and not simply copy what the author says. Copying is only useful if the author himself presents the argument in a particularly clear manner and presents his argument in such a way that you can easily understand it. But this is usually not the case and you have to do a lot of interpretative work to figure out what the author is trying to say. Think about how you would say **in your own words** what the author is trying to say.

2.2.6 Sixth Step

Now you should read the text for the final time and look out for what the author's got to say about the individual claims, premises, and conclusions of his argument. Does he say how he's using specific terms? Does he discuss possible objects and does he perhaps react to them? Does he give alternative formulations of his thesis and argument? Take your scheme from step 5 as the starting point.

2.2.7 Ideal Result

Ideally, after having completed these steps, you've created a kind of "mindmap," which makes it clear to you (!): (i) what's the author's thesis, (ii) what's the author's main argument for the thesis, (iii) what are the author's main examples and justifications for the premises of his argument, which objections does he consider, etc.

2.3 What If?

Often, even after repeatedly having read a certain text, you will still not be able to fully understand what the author's trying to say or you will still be unsure what the argument is, why he discusses a certain other author or what a given example is supposed to illustrate. This can even happen if you perfectly understand the concepts used by the author and it really sometimes simply depends on the bad writing of the author.

What you should do then is first to mark the problematic passages and leave the text alone for a bit, while you're working on the rest of the text. Afterwards, look at the problematic passages again. Often you'll find the "solution" simply based on what you read afterwards.

If that's not the case, then try to figure out the different possible readings of what the author actually says in the problematic passages. Try to figure out which reading best fits with what the author says otherwise. Think about where in the text the problematic passage occurs, what's the author's main claim etc. It should be your working assumption that the author is not saying anything meaningless, absurd, or trivial. Instead you should assume that what the author's saying plays a role in his argument. If you figured out the role of the passage in his argumentation (e.g. explaining a premise), then you can at least make your problems with the passage precise: "I see that the example is supposed to support the second premise of the main argument, but I don't understand how it does that?"

If even then you haven't achieved a satisfactory solution, then you have two possibilities: Either you try to obtain **secondary literature**—if available—and you see if the problematic passage is explained there, **or** you ask your teacher to help you out. In the end, it's your teacher's job and the point of seminars to assist you with difficulties reading texts. In any case, you should try to formulate your problems as precisely as possible to facilitate finding a solution.

Let's close this chapter on a remark: Sometimes the reason why you don't understand a certain text is that the author made a mistake or that he uses an bad example to illustrate his premisses. Then you're in luck, you don't have to worry anymore about finding a topic/question for your essay. But unfortunately, this will very likely not be the case. In 99% of the cases it's not that the author made a mistake but uses unclear language. So when in doubt, don't assume that you've just discovered a gaping hole in the author's argument, but rather that there's something you didn't fully understand.

Chapter 3

Writing A Philosophical Essay

Let us begin with a very important remark: Literally everybody can learn how to write good (philosophical) prose. It's simply a question of training. When people talk about writing, they often say that it's a question of talent whether somebody can write well. But that's wrong (at least in our opinion). Writing well can be learned, it's just that somebody who's naturally gifted will make faster progress than somebody who isn't. If you regularly exercise your skills and write as often as you can, then, with time, you'll become a good writer, or at least a good writer of philosophical prose. The following advice is supposed to give you a kick-start.

3.1 What A Philosophical Essay Is Not

Writing a philosophical essay is not primarily about voicing an opinion or rejecting it. Instead, it's about presenting and discussing **arguments** for or against philosophical positions, to analyze them, and to evaluate them. To avoid misunderstandings, let's explicitly state what a philosophical essay is **not**:

1. It's not a **literary confession**, in which you express your feelings, opinions, intuitions, etc.

   Counterexample:

   "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 ..."

2. It's not a **list of other peoples opinions and position**, also not of "the big philosophers":

   Counterexample:

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

3. An **opportunity to display your impressive knowledge** of the literature:

> **Counterexample**:
>
> "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 ..."

4. A **collection of quotes and passages** from other people's work:

> **Counterexample**:
>
> "Descartes says: "In the first mediation, discussed the reasons for why we can doubt the existence of all things, especially material things [...]." Later he says: "Everything that I hold to be true, I've encountered via my senses. But now I found out that my sense sometimes deceive me, and it's a matter of prudence never to trust someone completely, who even deceives you only once." He continues saying: ..."

3.2 So What's A Philosophical Essay, Then?

A philosophical essay is the systematic defense of a thesis. An essay should have at least one thing that it purports to show—the thesis—and it should contain considerations that purport to support that claim—the systematic defense.

Here are a few examples of what can be the general aim of a philosophical essay:

- defending a claim or an argument
- criticizing a claim or an argument
- evaluating the strength and weaknesses of opposing positions
- discuss 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
- develop or discussing examples to explain or reinforce commonly accepted claims

Rule of Thumb: Never say "I believe that p" or "X believes that p" without saying afterwards why you or X believes that p.

Exceptions: You will never be able to justify all (!) premises and claims that you or X make. So at some point, you will have to assume some things. The important point is to make these assumptions explicit.

Example: "In the following, I will assume that materialism is true and thus I will not discuss possible dualist objections to my position."

3.3 Exegetical Essay

Especially during your BA, you will often be asked to write a primarily exegetical essay. In such an essay, you don't defend your own view, but rather discuss some thesis of a philosopher whose text you read in class. But an exegetical essay still requires you to do your some work. First, you will have to properly represent the claims and arguments of the author. Second, you can discuss possible flaws in the claims and arguments of the author. You will have to present textual and historical arguments for your interpretation and criticism. You might even propose ways of fixing the flaws. From such a truly exegetical essay, we can distinguish a pure summary, in which you simply undertandibly (!) sum up, in your own words (!), what an author claims and argues. It will usually be quite clear whether you have to do a truly exegetical essay or a text summary.

3.4 Preparation Phase

1. Determine your question/topic.
   (a) Try to find a question/topic that is **as specific as possible**, and which you can realistically complete within the time you have. Very broad quesions, like "Is Kripke's Theory of Proper Names True?" or "Do Meanings Exist?" are not really suitable for an essay.
   (b) It's advisable that you figure out the relevant literature you will have to work with as **soon as possible**. It won't really work to have a look at it a few days before the deadline.
   (c) It helps if, at the beginning of your work, you already have an idea of what kind of position you wish to take on your question, which position you wish to defend or attack. The sooner you have this figured out, the more you can concentrate on shaping the argumentative structure of your essay. (You can even defend a position with which you **don't** agree—that's a particularly good exercise.)
   (d) In any case, **clear your question/topic with your teacher**! Ideally, you present an outline of your essay to him/her.
2. Figure out which literature you want to use.

(a) Watch out not to use **too much** literature. Working on difficult philosophical texts can be a daunting task, especially for beginners.

(b) Decide which text will be the **basis** for your essay and which texts you will simply use to better understand certain individual points. Usually, one or two texts are enough to form the basis of an essay.

3.5 The Structure of an Essay

An essay typically has three parts: introduction, main part, an conclusion. Usually it makes sense to further divide the main part into sub-sections.

3.5.1 Introduction

In the introduction, you should first make clear which question/topic you will be discussing in your essay. Many authors will already indicate which **answer** they will give to their question and if they will defend or attack the thesis in question. We think that this is a very useful practice, because it allows the reader to better understand the text. You should also give a rough sketch of **how you intend to answer/address the question/topic of your essay**. And you should indicate in which part of the essay you will do what. This might seem like it makes for a boring read, but again, it makes it easier for the reader to understand the structure and ideas of your text. As an add-on, this will give you a structure for your essay which you can follow while writing it. The introduction should make for about 10% of the main text.

In the case of an exegetical essay, you should correspondingly make clear, which question or which topic the author you're going to discuss is addressing, what his answer is, and how he proceeds argumentatively.

> **Schematic Example**: "In this essay, I will argue that p. In the first part of the essay, I will show that there are at least three reasons to believe that p: (1) ..., (2) ..., (3) .... In the second part of the essay, I will discuss the most common objections to p. ... In the third part, I will show that these objections aren't very good objections. The essay closes with an outlook on further possible objections against the view that p ..."

3.5.2 Main Part

In this part of the essay you will have to do the lion's share of the work and actually do what you promised to do in the introduction. It's important that you have a clear **argumentative structure** in mind, which you came up with while reading and analyzing the texts in question or, at the latest, when you wrote the introduction. Don't just start writing in the hope that you'll figure something out while writing! Look at your notes for orientation (the "mind map") and divide the main part into sub-sections.

Example Of A Structure:

1. Part Exposition of the argument of the author and explanation of relevant concepts.
2. Part Possible criticism of the argument as discussed by the author.
3. Part Replies of the author.

To give your text more structure and to make it clear to both you and the reader at which point of your argumentation you are, it is useful to conclude the sub-sections with their individual conclusions.

Schematic Example: "In the last section, we've seen that there are three good reasons to believe that p ... In the following section, I will discuss the most common objections to the view that p."

3.5.3 Conclusion

In the conclusion of your essay, you **sum up the main argument in a few (!) words** and discuss how your main thesis relates to the topic/question of your paper. It's often useful to point out questions which you could not address or to give a brief outlook on what could still be done.

Schematic Example: "We've seen that there are three good reasons to believe that p. We've also seen that the common objection to the view that p because q is not really a good objection to the view that p. Unfortunately, for reasons of space, we could not discuss the objection to p because r, this would be an interesting topic for further work."

Advise for very short essays (less than 4 pages): Especially when you're writing a very short essay, its not always necessary to separate the individual parts by means of headers and section titles. But that doesn't mean that the fundamental structure of the essay changes: you will still have an introduction, a main part, and a conclusion.

3.6 Writing An Essay

3.6.1 The Non-Specialist Reader

When you're writing a philosophical essay, then you're doing this not only for its own sake, but to address some reader. Therefore, the aim should always be that the reader understands what you're trying to say, which thesis you're defending, which arguments you're trying to make, etc. Moreover, it should be possible for the reader to easily follow your text without having to re-read it, think a lot, etc. The question arises, who is the

reader of your text? To get the best results when writing a philosophical text, we suggest that you're writing for the interested but **non-specialist** reader. Imagine someone with the following profile:

- He has the educational background of a good high-school graduate
- She's interested in philosophy, but has no or very little prior knowledge of philosophy
- He is willing to carefully read a complicated text, but doesn't want to read other texts just to be able to understand yours
- She doesn't know many words of foreign origin, technical jargon, etc.
- He speaks English (Dutch), but no French, German, Latin, Ancient Greek, etc. and he's not willing to try to figure out what sentences in these languages mean[1]
- Luckily, she knows the basics of philosophical logic (propositional, predicate, and modal logic)

When you're writing your essay, always try to imagine the non-specialist reader: would he be able to understand what you're trying to say? What information would you have to supply so that she'd be able to follow? At which point would examples help to illustrate?

When you've completed your essay, you should try to find a real-world interested but non-specialist reader, such as a colleague or a family member. Give your essay to a co-student who doesn't study philosophy but is interested in what you're doing. If they understand the text, then you can be sure that we will as well. When you submit an essay, we'll always read it as if we were non-specialist reader.

3.6.2 Some General Advice on Language

Make sure that your essay has a **clear structure**, which can also be grasped by a non-specialist reader (see above). Follow the following schema:

1. Write down the thesis in one sentence
2. Explain the thesis (explain concepts, give examples)
3. Give arguments for or against the thesis
4. Explain and evaluate these arguments (explain concepts, give examples)

[1] Of course, this only holds when you're not writing an essay in ancient philosophy etc.

1. My thesis is: determinism and freedom are compatible
2. Under "determinism" I understand the view that every even has a preceding cause, which completely determines the event. Under "freedom" I shall understand the freedom to do whatever you want. If, for example, I wish to raise my arm and this leads to me actually raising my arm, then this is a free act.
3. An act is free, if it completely determined by my will. According to determinism that every event is completely determined by a prior event. Both claims don't contradict each other. In the case of a free actions, the act is determined by my will.
4. If you understand freedom as freedom to act, then freedom and determinism don't contradict each other. But the situation is different if you consider freedom to be freedom of will, i.e. the freedom to choose your own will and change it according to your preferences In the following section, I will discuss whether determinism and freedom of will are compatible.

Try to write in a very clear and simple language! Avoid long and complicated sentences, don't use unnecessary words of foreign origin or technical jargon, avoid metaphors and ambiguous expressions, etc. **Only use technical terms if they make what you're saying more precise.**

Example: Instead of "We can reconstruct Hume's epistemological theory by saying that all knowledge ultimately derives from experience" it's better to write "According to Hume, all knowledge derives from experience."

When you're using technical terms (e.g. "extension," "intension," "epistemology," etc.) **make absolutely sure that you know what you're saying**. When you're using a technical term for the first time, you should give a definition to make sure that you and the reader understand the term in the same way.

Avoid the use of colloquialisms and "weasel words", such as "somehow," "more or less," "almost," "round about," "so and so."

Make ABSOLUTELY sure that you know what you're saying: If you claim that something follows from something else, then it had better follow and not only be reasonable to assume or the like. For example, if you say that "all philosophers claim that p" then what you're saying is false as soon as there is only *one* philosopher who claims the opposite. To stay on the safe side, better say something like "most philosophers claim." In any case, when you make claims about what other people are saying, you should **always give references**.

Make reasonable use of paragraphs to give your text a reasonable structure. The purpose of paragraphs is to separate individual thoughts from each other. They should (usually) be longer than one sentence, but not span over multiple pages.

Don't give the biography of the author, unless there is a reason for it (this will likely not be the case). In philosophy, we ultimately don't care about the psychology and private motives of authors, but about what they say and how they argue for it. The

quality of an argument does ultimately not depend on the motive, historical context, etc., but on it's argumentative force.

3.6.3 Common "Beginner's Mistakes"

Watch out that you don't make category mistakes. Especially beginners often make so-called *category mistakes*. A category mistake occurs when you're using a term in such a way that different logical categories get inappropriately mixed up. For example, when you're ascribing a property to an object that it can't have for conceptual reasons. To avoid category mistakes, always make sure that subject and predicate of your sentence go together, i.e. the subject is the kind of object that can have the kind of property expressed by the predicate.

Examples of Category Mistakes:

- "Assumptions of ethics, like the concept of freedom" (a concept is not an assumption, but, well, a concept)
- "The car thought, let's drive into a wall." (cars don't think, at best driver's do)
- "Munich wants to be the most beautiful city of Europe" (OK in everyday language, but strictly speaking Munich is a city and cities don't want things, their citizens do)

Don't be too creative when coining new words. It can in fact sometimes be useful to coin a new term. But often, this results in (involuntarily) comedic or contradictory results: e.g. "final truth."

Watch out not to assume anything the reader can't know. Always presuppose the non-specialist reader (see above) and don't refer to examples, chapters, theories, or arguments, which may be known to you, but not the reader.

3.7 Formalities

In the end, it's up to you how you design and layout your text. But you should be aware that layout and design can make a text either easy or difficult to read. E.g. it's way more difficult to read a text without margins than it is to read one with generous margins. If you don't want to worry about your layout, simply use the following standards.

3.7.1 Font and Layout

Font: Use a standard font like Times New Roman, Garamond, Helvetica, or the like.

Font Size: Maximally 12 (for quotes and footnotes font size 10)

Justification: Always use justified text.

Margins: Left and right at least 2,5 cm. It makes sense to have a slightly bigger margin on the right side, say 3,5 cm.

Page Numbers: Should be there, but you can put them wherever you want.

Spacing: Your line spacing should not be more than 1,5.

3.7.2 References and Bibliography

Clearly mark all your references: All (!) your quotes need to be clearly marked as such, e.g. by means of quotation marks, special layout, etc. (important: be consistent). Also, you should introduce quotes in such a way that the reader knows from the beginning who you're quoting: "On the matter Quine remarks in *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*: "..." (Quine 1951, p. 21)."

Making references: Quotes are typically referred to using the American Author-Year system. After a quote, you simply write the last name of the author followed by the year of publication of the text you're citing and then the page number separated by a comma. E.g. (Quine 1951, p. 21). You can also put this in a footnote if you prefer this aesthetically, as long as you stay consistent.

Bibliography: In the bibliography, you have to include all (!) texts that you've used in writing the essay. An entry in the bibliography always has to include the following information: First and last name of the author, title of the text (with subtitles), place and year of publication. For papers in journals, edited volumes, etc. you should also include the page numbers, the name of the journal, and in the case of edited volumes, the names of the editors. (Important: be consistent)

Internet Sources: When you're using internet resources, like The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, make sure that you include the last date of when you visited the site. This is important, since entries on the internet can quickly change. Make also sure that you're using only reliable internet sources.

3.7.3 Title Page

A proper essay needs to have a title page, which includes the following information:

1. Name of the university
2. Name of the department
3. Name of the seminar
4. Name(s) of the lecturer(s)
5. Semester/Block of the Course
6. Title of the Essay
7. Your name
8. Your study program

9. Your year in the study program
10. Contact Info
11. Date
12. Student Id (Studienummer)

3.8 Useful References

3.8.1 Books

- Rosenberg, Jay F. 1996. *The Practice of Philosophy: Handbook for Beginners*. 3rd Edition. Prentice-Hall: Upper Saddle River, NJ. (the manual is loosely based on this book, highly recommended).

3.8.2 Internet Resources

- *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: http://www.iep.utm.edu/ (useful and quoteable (!) internet encyclopedia for undergrads).
- *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: plato.stanford.edu/ (useful and quoteable (!) internet encyclopedia for grad students).
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