

On Writing a Philosophical Essay: A critical philosophy essay involves much more than simply presenting your own opinions and the views of relevant philosophers on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. Instead, you question and become intellectually involved with your subject matter, taking little for granted.

Four Key Rules:

1. Clarify key ideas;
2. Test the soundness of the arguments for or against the theories in question,
i.e. are the premises true and the inferences valid?
3. Evaluate the theories; determine its assumptions and ask how plausible they
are;
4. Support what you assert with reasons and arguments.

And these four rules are really contained in the following "rule":
whereas in a reportive essay you organize and pass on others' thoughts, in a critical philosophical essay you think for yourself.

Here are 5 no-no's that are often used by students to support their claims:

1. Labeling the case your own;
2. Asserting (as opposed to arguing for) the case's superiority over the competition;
3. Mistaking a rhetorical question for an argument;
4. Citing an authority (as opposed to reiterating or embellishing the arguments of an authority) whether philosophical or scientific;
5. Definition/Exemplification of a position (or its key terms) being passed off

as evidence that the position is true.

The following passage, which contains no arguments (no conclusions derived from premises), illustrates these 5 problems:

This is my support for the ethical view known as ethical relativism and other people may have different views (1). The truth of ethical relativism is shown by the fact that two persons might disagree over the moral rightness of a certain act and, if they are from different cultures or backgrounds, both may be correct (5). Now anyone who denies this is authoritarian. Besides who are they to condemn the Eskimos for leaving their aged relatives on the ice to die? (3). Moreover, anthropologists have been telling us for a long time that ethical relativism is true (4). Finally, the only alternative to ethical relativism is ethical absolutism, and we all know absolutism is false (2).

Five Organizational Strategies: (1) formulating the problem, (2) deciding on a format, (3) incorporating other philosopher's views, (4) presenting a good introduction, and (5) achieving coherence.

(1) Always keep in mind that you are solving, or trying to solve, a problem. Get as clear on the problem as you can before you worry about answering it. Begin by clarifying the key terms and consider and reconsider the assumptions implied in your initial formulation of the problem you are trying to solve.

(2) For our purposes, the format is pretty much a function of the questions you attempt to answer. Choose a question that fits your liking, e.g. critical or expository or comparative or creative, etc.

(3) Although the goal of the essay questions is to get you to think for yourself this does not rule out bringing in other philosopher's theories and arguments. For example, you might defend Plato's ideas against unsound criticism with your own arguments, or restate Plato's arguments in a clearer or more forceful way or extend the ideas of Descartes to areas not originally considered by him or attempt to bolster Hume's views in places you think need bolstering.

(4) Although there is no exact format for a good introduction it should set out the following as clearly and concisely as possible: (a) the problem to which you will address yourself (in our case, this may be clear from the essay question; if so don't bother to repeat the question); (b) what you intend to show or do in the essay; (c) how you propose to do this. The following is a very nice example of an introduction:

I propose to demonstrate in this paper that Skinner's reasons for denying human freedom are not persuasive. After presenting his view in detail, I shall argue that his case rests on faulty assumptions concerning the nature of freedom and the purpose of science. A science of psychology, it will be shown, is quite compatible with human freedom.

(5) The best way to achieve coherence is to write, read it, rewrite it, read it, rewrite it, . . . , well, you get the picture. When re-reading, ask yourself whether every sentence is relevant or clear or essential to the argument. Also, try putting yourself in the position of someone who knows nothing about the subject of your essay and determine whether they would find your essay clear and useful. Good philosophy is the result of a sustained and honest effort to make your ideas clear to others. The sooner you start the process of writing and rewriting the sooner you begin to see a chaotic and crude essay being transformed into something that speaks to others.