A Guide to Writing a Strong Philosophy Essay

Note: This guide is by no means comprehensive. You may find it helpful to consult other guides on writing a philosophy paper (i.e. Jim Pryor's, university philosophy departments). One of our personal favourites is Shelly Kagan's guide from the Yale Philosophy Department.

A Brief Introduction to Logic

A strong philosophy paper states and defends a specific argument. An argument is **not** an opinion. An opinion is purely subjective and does not require supporting evidence, i.e., 'the Beatles are the best band in history". However, once reasons are offered in defence of one's opinion, i.e., "The Beatles are the best band in history because of X, Y, and Z" then this now becomes an argument.

An argument consists of premises which provide support for a conclusion. An argument can be supported both deductively (internal logic of your argument) and inductively (the empirical support for your argument).

You're aiming for a sound argument. Soundness has two components: validity and truth. A *valid* argument ensures that the premises, when taken together, necessarily lead to the conclusion. For example, the following argument is valid:
- If P occurs, then Q occurs
- P occurs

- Therefore Q occurs

What makes this argument structure valid is that if the premises were true, then the conclusion would have to be true. **Notice: an argument with a clearly false conclusion can still be valid:**
- If Socrates is a philosopher, then he is German
- Socrates is a philosopher

- Therefore Socrates is German

This argument is valid but the conclusion is false. As mentioned, validity concerns the structure of an argument, but not its content. For example, the following argument is not valid even though its conclusion is true:

- If Socrates is Greek, then he is a philosopher
- Socrates is a philosopher

Therefore Socrates is Greek

This argument is invalid despite having a true conclusion. If you don't know which fallacy this argument commits, then make sure to **register for one of our logic tutorials.**

For your argument to be strong, however, it needs to be sound. We already covered one aspect of soundness, namely, validity. The other component to a sound argument is truth. For instance, the two arguments outlined above both contain false premises (i) if Socrates is a philosopher, then he is German and (ii) if Socrates is Greek, then he is a philosopher. Being a philosopher is not sufficient for being German and being Greek is not sufficient for being a philosopher. Here is an example of a sound argument:

- If I score over 50% on the test, then I passed the test
- I scored over 50% on the test

- -
  Therefore I passed the test

Of course, because soundness requires true premises, and because truth is such a contentious matter, it follows that the soundness of one's argument is always up for debate. If you found any of this information puzzling, then we highly encourage you to **attend one of our logic tutorials.**

Ways to Approach Your Philosophy Essay

There are many ways you can approach an essay, and MIT provides a useful list:

- Criticize that argument or thesis
- Offer counterexamples to the thesis
- Defend the argument or thesis against someone else's criticism
- Offer reasons to believe the thesis
- Give examples which help explain the thesis, or which help to make the thesis more plausible
- Argue that certain philosophers are committed to the thesis by their other views, though they do not come out and explicitly endorse the thesis
- Discuss what consequences the thesis would have, if it were true
- Revise the thesis in the light of some objection

So, where do you begin?

Brainstorming Ideas For The Prompt You've Chosen

Since our prompts are focused on hot topics in current events, we encourage you to read widely around the topic. For example, if you chose the Covid-19 prompt, you may want to read op-eds in major newspapers such as the Economist, the New York Times, Al Jazeera, and philosophy journals. The goal is to familiarize yourself with the issue and to generate ideas on what you can argue in your essay. Try to read diverse perspectives and viewpoints. However, we do not want your essay to rehash prior ideas; we encourage unique and creative approaches to the prompt.

Writing Your Essay

The first step is to clearly state the thesis that you are defending. Your essay should not be a series of jumbled reflections on the prompt or various pros and cons, but should consistently defend a central thesis. Present 1-3 robust arguments rather than a string of weak arguments that you do not spend a lot of time developing. To accomplish this, we recommend creating an outline before you begin your draft. Include your thesis statement, various lines of reasoning, examples and thought experiments, and the counterargument you will rebut.

The real test of your paper is how well it can **rebut counterarguments**. Any paper can make an argument in isolation, but the best papers anticipate and respond to views contrary to their own. Pick the strongest objections to your argument and avoid strawmanning them. Are the premises of the claim false? Is the argument invalid? Breaking arguments into standard form (this will be discussed during the logic tutorials) makes it easier to identify fallacious forms of reasoning.

Your essay should be **concise** and **clear**. Avoid pretentious jargon and choose fewer words when possible. Use logic and evidence to support your conclusion. For tips on grammar, we recommend Grammarly's site. You may wish to refer to the 'clarity and organization' part of our rubric. In constructing an argument, map out <u>every</u> logical step explicitly. Think of it as walking the judge up a set of stairs; do not skip steps … or you may inadvertently break their leg!

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