

Writing Clear and Effective Philosophical Essays

(Adapted from notes by Dr. Glenn Rawson)

Philosophical essays generally require no special skills beyond those necessary for any effective essay that supports a specific thesis. The following are just reminders of the most important strategies for the task. For more detailed discussion of principles of clear writing, I cannot recommend highly enough *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White.

1. State your thesis clearly and support it well.

As an argument must have a specific conclusion that follows from specific premises, an essay must have a specific thesis that is supported by specific evidence. It is best to **make your thesis clear at the beginning** of your paper, and to indicate there, in brief, the **evidence** that you will consider. Evidence includes explanations, arguments, and definitions as well as facts.

2. Keep your priorities straight.

Every essay is limited by considerations of space. Therefore good judgment is necessary about what to include. All information that is **necessary** for establishing the thesis must be **included**, and all **irrelevant** information must be **excluded**. Everything else will be more or less important, and your task is to judge which information is more important, and include as much of it as limitations of space allow.

3. Make the paragraph the unit of composition.

Each main point in your essay deserves its **own paragraph**, and each paragraph must have **one clear main point**. Each paragraph must add something new and significant to the establishment of the thesis. The relation of each paragraph to what precedes it or to the whole should be clear. Paragraphs must be composed entirely of complete sentences, each of which contributes to the main point of the paragraph.

4. Concision promotes clarity.

Always **state** your **points** as **concisely** as you can without sacrificing necessary information. This requires stating your points simply and directly; using the active voice; omitting all needless words; and avoiding vague and flowery language. Concision almost invariably makes writing more clear, because it demands that you keep your priorities straight at all times, even within each sentence.

5. Use statements, not questions.

Questions are seldom appropriate in an essay. Avoid the temptation to include rhetorical questions: they assume that the answer is obvious, whereas your essay is supposed to explain what is not obvious. In general, questions add little to an essay, because arguments and explanations must be composed of declarative statements.

6. Draft and revise thoroughly.

Every essay will always benefit from a thorough revision for clarity and concision. The first way of stating a point that comes to mind is seldom the best way to state it. When revising, keep in mind **the purpose of the essay as a whole** and the role of each of the parts. Don't just tinker with the sentences and paragraphs that are present in the draft; serious revision requires reorganization as well as rewording.

7. Non-obvious ways to check for quality.

Revision for clarity and concision will be helped by the following techniques. Use as many of them as you can: (1) have a *smart friend* or roommate **read** your paper over *before* you write a final draft. If your paper is on the right track, they should be able to understand your main point easily, summarize your argument in brief, and not be confused at any point in the paper. Encourage them to be brutally honest about your paper. (2) **Read your paper aloud** to catch errors; if possible, read it aloud to a friend. Don't underestimate how useful this can be! (3) Always **spell-check** your paper.