



PHILOSOPHY ESSAY ADVICE

One: What ought to be the primary objective of your essay?

The primary objective of your essay is not simply to present information or arguments, but to put forward a cogent **argument** for your **thesis**.

You need to do more than just manifest your understanding of the subject-matter; you need to **defend** a position on plausible grounds.

Two: What is an argument?

An argument is a set of two or more propositions, one of which is the conclusion, the rest of which are premises.

Three: What is a cogent argument?

A good argument is both **valid** and **sound**.

The premises of a **valid** argument logically entail the conclusion – if the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true.

- In essence: if you accept A, B, and C, then you **must** accept D.

A **sound** argument is valid and has true premises.

- A, B, and C are true, therefore, so too is D.

Examples:

P1. Those who study always do well in their courses.

P2. Paul did well in his courses.

∴ C. Paul studied.

Invalid. The first premise says that studying is a guarantee to doing well in your courses; it does not say that not studying is a guarantee to not doing well in your courses. Maybe you are inordinately smart, or the courses are inordinately easy, and, therefore, you don't need to study to do well.

P1. Living things are rational.

P2. Steve Bland is a living thing.

∴ C. Steve Bland is rational.

Valid, but unsound. P1 is false: not all living things are rational, ex. trees, bacteria, earthworms.

P1. Human beings are rational.

P2. Steve Bland is a human being.

∴ C. Steve Bland is rational.

Sound. If you accept the premises, then you must accept the conclusion, the premises are true, so the conclusion must be accepted.

Four: Who is your intended audience?

You should assume that your audience, i.e. your grader, is **intelligent** but **uninformed** about the topic of your essay.

For instance, your reader knows who Aquinas is, but is not familiar with his arguments for God's existence.

Five: What is a thesis?

Your thesis is the position that you are **defending** in your essay.

You should be able to make your thesis clear in **one sentence**.

Don't waffle – pick one side and defend it.

Six: What are you supposed to be doing in the introduction?

The most important component of your introduction is your **thesis statement** – let your reader know the position that you are arguing for.

You can use personal pronouns – I, me, my, etc. – but avoid phrases such as: ‘I believe x’ and ‘my opinion is x’. Instead, you may say things like: ‘In this essay I will establish x on the basis of y’.

You also want to give your reader a general idea of the **reasons** that you have for believing your thesis.

This essay will be dedicated to establishing D on the basis of A, B, and C.

When stating the reasons for your thesis, do not simply restate your thesis

“Empiricism is more plausible than rationalism because all knowledge depends on experience.”

Empiricism: the position that all knowledge depends on experience

Do not begin your introduction with a general claim that gives the reader absolutely no **new** information, eg. For centuries philosophers have debated the existence of God.

Seven: What are you supposed to be doing in the body?

This is where you will present the arguments both **for** and **against** your position.

Start by presenting the very **best** argument(s) for the position that you are arguing **against**.

Why?

(a) If the position you are arguing against is obviously weak or ridiculous, then we don’t need very compelling reasons to reject it, making your essay superfluous.

(b) Your position will look much stronger if you are capable of discrediting your opponent’s very best argument, and much weaker if you fail to do so.

Next, show the reader why this argument **fails** – is it invalid? unsound?

Then put forward your own argument: identify the **reasons** that you have for believing your thesis, show that your reasons are **true** and that they **imply** your thesis

Don't be blind to obvious **counter-arguments**; explicitly consider them and make it clear to your audience why they do not undermine your thesis.

Eight: What are you supposed to be doing in the conclusion?

Reiterate your **thesis statement** and briefly summarize your **arguments** in its favour.

Nothing new should appear in the conclusion.

Again, no useless general statements.

Nine: Remember the three Cs:

- **Clear, Critical, and Concise**

Be Clear:

Do not assume that because your argument is clear in your mind, it is clear on paper.

If you cannot clearly convey your ideas to your audience, then you cannot present a compelling argument (regardless of how compelling your ideas actually are).

Have someone you trust (or, even better, many people) proofread your paper and get them to spell out your thesis and your argument.

Read your paper aloud to yourself.

Make use of Writing Services.

Use simple, straightforward language and don't use language that you don't understand.

Avoid run-on-sentences, i.e. sentences spanning four lines or more.

Your goal is to be persuasive, not poetic: **if you wouldn't say it, don't write it.**

Guard against **vagueness** and **ambiguity**.

Every sentence in your essay should have a **single, definite** meaning.

Ex. Gaunilo uses logic to undermine Anselm's ontological argument for God's existence.

Questions: **How** does he use logic? What exactly is his objection?

Ex. Locke's objection to the general assent argument is very strong.

Question: **Which** objection?

Be **explicit** about the structure of your argument: "The purpose of this paper is to establish that D is the case on the basis of A, B, and C."

Signpost your arguments, using words like 'First', 'Second', 'Finally', 'Consequently', 'However', 'On the other hand', 'For this reason' etc.

Be Critical:

The whole point of writing an essay is to put forward a persuasive, original set of arguments for your thesis.

Do not re-hash someone else's argument – make it your own.

Begin by writing an outline with your argument in premise-conclusion form – I will look it over if you like.

Before including a piece of information in your essay, ask yourself: how does this contribute to the argument I am making?

Don't talk past your opponents – seriously consider and respond to their arguments.

Avoid sweeping **generalizations**.

Generalizations are very difficult to defend.

"There are no good reasons for the doctrine of innate ideas."

In order to defend this claim, you would have to critically consider **every** possible argument for innate ideas

Instead: “The argument from general assent fails to establish the existence of innate ideas because it is invalid and unsound.”

Be Concise:

You don't have a lot of space, so get to the point.

Do not repeat yourself – trust that your reader will remember what you've said.

Do not include background information that has no bearing on your argument – this is often done in introductions.

Don't say anything that has nothing to do with your thesis.

Ten: What should be included in a citation?

Author's name, author's work, place of publication, publisher, date of publication, **page(s) being cited.**

Be sure that you reference only **academically legitimate** work.

If you have any questions about what is/is not an academically legitimate source, feel free to ask staff at Writing Services.