

GUIDES FOR WRITING IN SPECIFIC DISCIPLINES

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1 What is Philosophy?

Philosophy is both a discipline or area of knowledge and a practice that involves exercising critical thinking; in other words, questioning both the facts and an interpretation of the facts guided by common sense. This exercise begins with a close analysis of concepts and categories which, within the area of knowledge itself, although not exclusively, are taken for granted and accepted without being questioned. Questioning the unquestioned, or rather placing in question what is assumed to be known, whether in a practical or theoretical context, is the main task of philosophy.

The main tool for exercising critical thinking is the agent, which follows the precepts of classical logic. Classical logic establishes the linguistic operations that allow a philosophical question to be clearly formulated rigorously argued. In other words, it is developed in a series of connected propositions that not only explain the critical position adopted but also justify it. Philosophy is therefore a question of reasoning, of providing reasons to persuade, unlike what happens in advertising, for example, which appeals to people's emotions, or literature where the aesthetic or expressive function of language prevails over other functions.

Providing reasoning in order to persuade, argue and thereby achieve a critical position also means distinguishing among reasoning and opinion, reasoning and intuition, reasoning and supposition, reasoning and point of view. Reasoning involves the detailed examination of a fact or the interpretation of a fact, but also of concept or category. It must be explicit and precise; it must be possible to follow and therefore it must allow both the person presenting the argument and the person listening to or reading it to establish and take a critical position that can be discussed, objected to, challenged and even rejected by means of another argument. Reasoning is therefore critical dialogue. To reason is to discuss.

Philosophical practice is essential for dispelling confusion related to facts and interpretations of facts because philosophy is a discipline that is particularly committed to the truth. Philosophy is the discipline which, while not being an exact science, not only refuses to abandon the pursuit of truth but also, and more than any other discipline, actively seeks to uphold it: it seeks to articulate truth, preserve it and champion it. For that reason thinking critically as a practice does not only have a technical or procedural connotation, in the sense that it contributes to showing that that argument which seemed convincing are, in fact, incomplete, mistaken or false; thinking critically, as a practice, also has an ethical and moral connotation because it contributes, at the same time, to demonstrating whether there is a commitment to truth in the arguments put forward and, therefore, whether those arguments seek to establish the truth or, on the contrary, dismiss it.

2 General characteristics of writing in Philosophy

Philosophical writing is one of the forms that the exercise of critical thinking takes in its commitment to the truth. Unlike the form that scientific writing can take, based on theoretical demonstration as a result of empirical research, or the form that literary writing can take, based on fiction created from real or imagined lives or experiences, philosophical writing does not communicate data or invent worlds.

> [...] there is a method for philosophical writing, characterised by the rigorous formulation of questions; the construction and evaluation of arguments; the interpretation of facts and texts; and engagement with diverse traditions of thought.

The specificity of philosophical writing lies in seeking the truth in the analysis of concepts and in the strength of arguments by following a method. That means that the philosophical questions formulated in the search for the truth cannot be resolved through laboratory experiments or even by consulting documents in an archive unless the questions are related to the history of philosophy. In that case, while considering problems related to ideas, the working method seems more like that adopted in the area of history, since the history of philosophy studies philosophical thought and the ideas that make it up in their temporal context and using the sources available.

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3 Common written texts in Philosophy and the writing process

Philosophy is expressed though a wide variety of discursive genres, such as research articles, dialogue, aphorism, academic theses and popular texts. Each genre responds to specific formal requirements and different intentions or communication strategies.

However, the single most common form of writing philosophy as an exercise in critical thinking is the essay. In philosophical essays the search for the truth takes place without having to refer to an origin, a principle of fixed meaning, or even a final closure in which meaning becomes fixed again. The essay begins with a question that challenges the meaning that has been fixed, the assumption, and develops the relevant arguments to make that question explicit and to justify it, taking into account the way in which the fact

or the interpretation of the fact that has been questioned – its meaning – has been modified. If the essay were to set out from a position of fixed meaning there would be no place for the question. In this way the essay seeks the truth without the rigidity of the scientific method in the strict sense, but at the same time without the laxity with which it is developed in literature.

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In general terms, there are two styles of philosophical essay: analytical and creative. It is important to mention style here because these are ways of expressing thought and therefore the writer is also present.

On the one hand, there is what we might call the ***analytical essay.*** This type of essayistic expression prioritises conceptual clarity, precision in the arguments and rigour in the resolution of philosophical problems. It is a systematic practice of philosophical writing that aspires to demonstrating a truth, not in the way science does although it does mirror that method. Its main objective is to analyse a philosophical question or problem while avoiding ambiguities or poorly based interpretations. To achieve this it uses precise language, clearly defines the concepts that it uses and constructs arguments according to a logical structure. In addition, each affirmation is justified with reasons or evidence so that the reader can evaluate the validity of the conclusions.

On the other hand, there is what we can call the ***creative essay.*** The creative essay is not systematic but speculative; in other words it consists in presenting an argument without closing it, opening up possibilities for reasoning that the philosophical question offers. That does not mean that it is not argued through, nor that the type of reasoning it offers is arbitrary, but that it does not take either a deductive or an indictive form, because it is not geared towards a final demonstration. While the analytical essay has a certain affiliation with the scientific method, the creative essay is closer to literary writing and is characterised by an exploratory approach to the philosophical question it raises. For that reason the creative essay makes the reader a participant in the truth being explored within it.

The **writing process** is a key element when it comes to producing a philosophical essay. The philosophical essay demands writing that is **genuinely personal.** It must reflect observations at first hand and be an honest attempt to think about the problems raised. This means that it must formulate a question that is committed to the truth, a question that is of vital concern to the person that writes it. The essay must also be well-organised thematically: one specific question must be dealt with at a time and dispersion must be

avoided. For that reason the writing must be coherent. The reader must be able to follow the thread of the arguments and understand the logical connections between the different paragraphs. Finally, it should be **responsible** writing; in other words it must pay close attention to the subject it is addressing, the procedures employed, and the consequences it has in theory and in practice. Any evidence that questions the hypotheses must be respected and any objections that may undermine the thesis being defended should be taken into account. The sources and argumentation must be presented transparently in a way in which the reader can critically examine and evaluate them.

Any using of AI during the writing of a philosophical essay distorts the commitment to the truth and therefore also the demand for responsibility and honesty required to guarantee the specific rigour and originality of this discipline.

The first step before starting to write the first draft is to **choose the topic**. Often in the first version the topic is too broad, such as the problem of determinism, the relation between mind and body, or the meaning of Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*.

It is impossible to write an essay that meets all the requirements, in terms of both form and content, if the topic is not sufficiently defined. If it is too broad it is impossible to defend any specific position. The writer of an essay has to commit to a question and a thesis that they attempt to defend, and the whole essay will then be organised around that commitment.

There is no single way to **begin writing** a philosophical essay. In some cases the writer's thoughts are sufficiently well-organised to produce an initial scheme. In others the only thing they have clear is the proposition they want to defend and they must develop it progressively through a series of drafts. Finally, there are situations in which at the beginning the writer only has a set of imprecise ideas and therefore they must write them down directly without having subjected them to rigorous critical judgement at that stage.

The technique of **successive elaboration** is especially useful for improving writing. This technique consists, in the first phase, in formulating the thesis of the essay in a single sentence. At that initial moment there is no need to worry about prior knowledge of the reader or about the use of technical terminology. Both the contextual information and the explanation of the concepts are incorporated in later phases.

Often during this process **new problems and question** emerge. As the essay progresses, the writer should attempt to resolve these questions, either partially or fully. In that sense, writing philosophy is a progressive thought-clarification process.

With respect to the use of **bibliography**, a philosophical essay can start with what has already been said, but this often holds up the beginning of the writing and could give the impression that there is nothing new to contribute relating to the selected topic or the question posed. For that reason, the writer should first try to set down what they think

about the topic and the question so that they can adopt a critical position right from the start. However, they always have to be prepared to review and modify their opinion, either as a result of the writing process or after consulting secondary sources.

4 Common errors when writing a philosophical essay

One of the most common errors when writing a philosophical essay is to **restrict yourself to explaining the ideas of the historical legacy**, summarising the theories or describing the arguments found within it without going further, without questioning them and without questioning the positions that they present and the arguments on which they are based. While it is important to know about this legacy and make reference to it, philosophy does not consist only of repeating what others have said, but of thinking critically. The objective is to take advantage of this knowledge to analyse a problem, compare different positions and build an original argument. The historical legacy therefore constitutes a starting point or support for defending a personal thesis and should not become the exclusive content of the text.

Another common problem is **expressing personal opinions without providing arguments to support them**. In philosophy an affirmation only acquires weight when accompanied by reasons to justify it. For that reason, it is not enough to say "I think that..." or "In my opinion...". The reasons for that opinion need to be explained, examples given where they are useful, responses to possible objections anticipated and a demonstration that the conclusion is coherent with the premises should be offered. That way the text is no longer a simple subjective opinion and it becomes a solid philosophical argument.

It is also common to **propose excessively general or absolutist theses**, which are very difficult to defend with convincing arguments. Affirmation such as "science has no truth" or "freedom is the most important value in any situation" demand the presentation of a large number of cases and exceptions. It is better to formulate a precise, limited thesis that can be argued in depth and suppoorted with examples and justifications.

A final common error is to **think that an example constitutes sufficient evidence**. Examples are useful because they help to illustrate an idea or make an abstract concept easier to understand, but on their own they do not demonstrate that an affirmation is true. An argument requires a process of reasoning in which the premises lead logically to a conclusion. Therefore examples must accompany the arguments to strengthen or clarify them, but never to substitute them. The strength of a philosophical text depends above all on the quality of its reasoning and not on the number of examples it contains.

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5 Terminology and conventions when writing Philosophy

In some philosophical specialisations the writing may require a command of the formal language of logic, which allows the structure of arguments to be expressed precisely and the relations between propositions to be made explicit, avoiding the ambiguities of natural language.

It is also a good idea to think about the relation of philosophy with certain languages, such as Greek, Latin and German, and more recently, English, from where many of the concepts and technical terms come.

As in other disciplines, philosophy has a specialised vocabulary in which certain terms acquire a precise meaning that is not always the same as its meaning in ordinary language. Writing with precision involves paying attention to the meaning of these terms and their translations. At the end of this guide there are resources that may be useful in this respect.

Philosophical writing follows some citation conventions that are specific to the discipline. In particular, the classical works are cited according to conventional numerical systems, such as the Stephanus pagination for Plato, based on the page numbering of a sixteenth-century reference edition, or the Bekker numbering for Aristotle, based on a nineteenth-century edition, which allow the passages to be localised independently of the edition consulted.

Apart from these specific conventions, in academic works on philosophy the citation system may vary according to the type of text, the institution, the journal or the publisher. For university essays and projects Chicago and APA are the most frequently used referencing styles, while philosophy journals may have their own systems. In all cases you should use the system indicated by your lecturer, the institution, journal or publisher and apply it coherently.

6 Works and websites of interest for writing Philosophy

1. MARTINICH, A. P. (2024). *Philosophical Writing: An Introduction* (5th ed.).

   This book aims to help those with little or no experience of philosophy to write competently, improving students' capacity for presenting their knowledge and ideas clearly and helping them to gain confidence in their essay-writing skills.

2. VAUGHN, L. (2022). *Writing Philosophy: A Student's Guide to Writing Philosophy Essays*.

   A handbook with all the basic aspects related to argumentative essay-writing which encourages students to acquire the basic writing skills. It offers step-by-step instructions for each stage of the writing process. It contains the rules that summarise the basic principles of good writing and examples of well-written essays, outlines, introductions and conclusions.

3. Biblioteca Terminològica. Filosofia. Religió. Mitologia [on line]. Barcelona: TERMCAT, Centre de Terminologia. [https://biblioteca.termcat.cat/cgi-bin/koha/opac-shelves.pl?op=view&shelfnumber=40]

   A catalogue with dictionaries, vocabularies, lexicons and information materials compiled by TERMCAT which contain terminology in Catalan in the areas mentioned above.

4. Cercaterm [on line]. Barcelona: TERMCAT, Centre de Terminologia. [https://www.termcat.cat/ca/cercaterm]

   A search engine with a series of terminological entries that TERMCAT has made available to the public. It offers the standardised definitions of the terms in Catalan and their exact equivalents in Spanish, English and French.

5. BUNGE, M. (2003). *Philosophical dictionary*. Prometheus Books.

   Conceived as a compendium of philosophical terminology and worldview, written in a precise, analytical style.

6. L'Òliba [on line]. Societat Catalana de Filosofia (SCF). [https://loliba.cat/]

   Online archive of texts, out-of-print books and free resources on philosophy in Catalan, curated by the SCF, an affiliated society of the Institut d'Estudis Catalans dedicated to promoting research.

7. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP) [on line]. [https://plato.stanford.edu/]

   Encyclopedia of philosophy with in-depth articles written and constantly revised by specialists.

8. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (IEP) [on line]. [https://iep.utm.edu/]

   A free, academic, peer-reviewed encyclopedia. Its introductory definitions are often more concise and pedagogical than Stanford's.

9. A Dictionary of Philosophical Terms and Names [on line]. [https://www.philosophypages.com/dy/]

   A particularly practical dictionary when you need a brief but exact definition of a specific technical term.

10. L'encyclopédie philosophique [on line]. [https://encyclo-philo.fr/]

    The first open-access French-language philosophical encyclopedia, with articles reviewed by specialists. Its articles are divided into two levels: "grand public" (more accessible) and "académique" (advanced).

11. Dicophilo [on line]. [https://dicophilo.fr/]

    A website with concise definitions of key concepts in French.

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