Essay Guidelines

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Introduction

Your introduction should be as clear and concise as possible. In the introduction you should:

• State which question you are addressing.
• Clearly state the aim of your essay:
  – Make it obvious to the reader what your main thesis is.
  – Make it obvious to the reader what strategy you will employ to argue for that thesis.

Exposition

Most of the essay questions will ask you to explain a particular theory on a particular topic, sometimes as expressed in a particular paper. In order to address this aspect of the question, you should:

• Present other philosophers’ theories accurately and charitably.
• Focus on the aspects of the theory relevant to the argument you will be developing.
• Explain any terms or concepts that someone who does not know any philosophy would not understand.
• Provide textual evidence for your interpretation of the theory, especially if it is potentially contestable.
• Present the theory as a coherent whole rather than a list of theses. That is, show how the parts of the theory fit together.
• If you will be arguing against the theory or proposing an improvement to the theory, clearly outline the relevant arguments for those aspects of the theory that you will be criticising or amending.

*I received excellent advice on these guidelines from Bill Rowley.
Evaluation

The essay questions all ask you to evaluate a particular theory or argument. This means considering the reasons for and against the theory, or considering the reasons for and against the premises in the argument. When doing this you should:

• Illustrate your claims with good examples. It is better to use your own example than an example from the text, if you can think of one.
• Provide arguments for your claims.
• Formulate your arguments in as clear and well organised a manner as possible. If you prefer and are capable of doing so, you may formalise your arguments.

General Guidelines

Here are some additional guidelines on writing your essay:

• Make the structure of your paper clear. It should be clear to the reader what parts of your paper are expository, and what parts are your own positive contribution. Signposts recapping what you have done so far and what you will now do are very helpful aids here.
• Use block-quotation as a last resort. When you do use quotation, justify it by demonstrating how it is relevant, or by using it to argue for an interpretation. Generally speaking, paraphrase is a much better way to show that you have understood the material under discussion.
• Your prose should be simple, concise, easy to read, and easy to understand. The best way to achieve this is by revising your essay with this in mind—it is rare that you will express yourself most clearly on your first try.
• Finally, the litmus test for your paper is that it should be capable of being completely understood by your intelligent friends. Give them your paper, have them read it once, and then quiz them to see if they have learned anything. If they haven’t, then we will find it hard to assess whether you have.

Research

• You will be greatly helped by reading both the primary and optional readings associated with your question.
• Any further research is encouraged but not mandatory. There are very good *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entries on just about every philosophical topic. For help with research, see below.

**Help**

• If you would like help finding useful additional resources, or with planning your paper, or with anything else, ask me! My office hours are available here: [http://bweslake.org/](http://bweslake.org/)

• I am always prepared to read and provide feedback on drafts. When I have a teaching assistant, they are also available to do so.