

## Some comments on writing a tutorial essay in philosophy

### Tutorial essays

*Format:* Tutorial essays should be between 1500 and 2000 words; excluding long citations.

*Purpose:* The point of a tutorial essay is three-fold. On the one hand it is meant as a platform for the student to develop their own ideas about philosophical problems. On the other hand it is also intended as a way for students to deepen their understanding of those philosophical problems involved and so help prepare for examination. These two are intertwined; but there is a risk that they can come apart. So there is the risk that a student will explore topics too independently and not connect their arguments to the existing philosophical debate (which makes assessment of the essay much harder); or that students simply report on the pre-existing views and options, without setting forth their own views. The third aim is to allow the student to develop their research, argument, presentation, (etc.) skills.

(Note that developing one's own views is not the same as developing an original view. Students should not think their essays have to be "original", whatever that even means.)

A tutorial essay does not need to be a polished piece of work. It is written under time pressure, and the main aim is to allow you to develop your own views on a particular problem. If you are unsure about a conclusion or argument, don't hide this. To see clearly that you can't now see the answer is itself a kind of insight. The conclusion of a paper need not, therefore, be a firm opinion for or against some position. A good paper can conclude with the assertion that you do not know which position is correct, though it is best if you can say just why you are indecisive – just what specific points need resolution in order to resolve the larger issue.<sup>1</sup>

### General notes about writing a good paper in philosophy

*Purpose of a paper:* A paper should be seen as an opportunity to think through a significant but relatively delimited philosophical problem. You are not expected to give final answers nor to give new answers; your answers may have been already given by some philosopher (though you may not know it). It is, nevertheless, invaluable to struggle with a problem on your own. By so doing you may see why the problem is important, why philosophers have found it difficult, and you should appreciate more fully the force of the various answers that have been given. Moreover, you should increase your skill both in philosophical argument and in organization of your ideas.

*Thesis:* A paper should have a thesis to argue, that is, a specific main idea which you develop. You must not simply write down ideas; you should argue for or against something, stating clearly what you are arguing for or against. Ordinarily, a paper should begin with a paragraph stating the thesis and summarizing the argument for it. The thesis should be stated in one complete sentence; it will not do merely to state the general topic you are dealing with. The opening paragraph should be such that the reader will know exactly what your thesis is and how you propose to establish it.

*Writing:* Always proofread your final copy; it will eliminate a lot of silly mistakes. It is excellent practice to read a paper out loud before doing the final draft. That will help you avoid writing things you would never say.

Write so that intelligent laymen and not merely others who have heard the discussion can understand you. Students tend to assume too much in the way of unexplained technical terms and theories. The problem is that these terms and theories may mean different things to different people,

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<sup>1</sup> Note that in a polished piece of writing or an exam answer you should not change your mind half way through, or contradict yourself.

and hence they must be explained in the context of your paper.<sup>2</sup> But judgement is required here; you must not explain everything. If a term is not technical, if it comes from ordinary discourse, and if you are using it in the usual way, it need not be explained or defined. You should use such non-technical terms as much as possible.

*What makes a good paper:*

a) Clarity: This refers to those qualities necessary if the reader is to understand what you mean. These range from the correctness of your grammar to the clarity of your thought in general. Use expressions which are not awkward or confused but which read smoothly and say directly what you mean to say. (Remember that a reader must evaluate what you say and not what you *mean* to say.)

b) Organization: Too many papers wander all over the map, making no point in particular, and lacking coherent structure. A good paper must clearly state a main idea near the beginning, systematically develop it in unified, coherent paragraphs, and come to some conclusion. The test of a properly organized paper is that the reader will at all times know where you are going and where you have come from. This is true even at the level of the paragraph, and it requires that each paragraph have one central theme.

c) Analysis: This involves the ability to take positions apart, to restate them in your own words, to see what they involve when you get beneath the surface. Many positions say several things while seeming to say only one; analyse out these several things and evaluate each one separately. Others say only one thing while seeming to say several; this should also be indicated. You cannot evaluate a philosopher's point of view after having simply stated it; you must first dissect it.

d) Argument: Central to philosophy is argument. Go beyond exposition and interpretation to *critical evaluation*, that is, to argument for or against a position. To do this you must pay careful attention to the arguments the philosopher himself gives for his point of view, for you cannot understand a position until you see *why* someone holds it.

It is clear how to *attack* a position. You show why you think the position is untenable (for example, its implications are false) or why the arguments used to define it are not cogent, etc. Students are often puzzled on how to *defend* a position without simply repeating the philosophers and saying you agree with him. The best thing to do in this situation is to think of the strongest possible *objections* to the position and then show that the objections are unfounded.

#### Some notes about writing a paper in ancient philosophy

One problem with writing essays in ancient philosophy (and in the history of philosophy in general), is that there are, roughly, two different kinds of interests and approaches. One is a narrower approach, such as looking at the specific arguments given in a particular piece of text, for example, examining Trasymachus second argument in the *Republic* I, 343b-344d. The other is broader, for example, to consider the role of Book I in relation to the rest of the *Republic*, or Plato's account of pleasure in the *Republic*. Attempting to do both in a satisfactory manner is difficult; in the space of a tutorial essay it is impossible.

However, students should be alert to the fact these two approaches are related and can depend on each other. E.g. a narrow approach can be too narrow if it fails to consider other relevant passages, or the conclusion might not fit well with the general aims of a particular philosophical work. And the broader approach is of course dependant on specific arguments made in a philosophical work.

Much debate in ancient philosophy rests on how the original language ought to be translated and

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<sup>2</sup> This is a perennial complaint by examiners, it is thus a good practice to define shortly what one means with a term or philosophical position.

understood. You do not need to worry about other possible translations, but if you feel a certain passage is hard to understand it may be helpful to consult other translations than the set text.

Don't be worried about Greek (or Latin) terms in the secondary literature. It has become a standard to use Greek terms as technical terms in philosophical discussion. You can always search online if you are having difficulties understanding what a term might mean. Learning the Greek alphabet is a good idea, and allows you to consult Greek dictionaries for what terms might mean.

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