

How to write an essay?

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EPFL

Philosophical perspectives on the exact sciences I

What is expected from you?

- Address philosophical questions about the topic of your choice.
- Write in your own words.
- Use appropriate references and correct citations.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the philosophical questions and arguments.
- Original results are great but not expected.

Types of essays

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Remark

It's about **arguments**, not just opinions.

What should the essay look like?

- Title
- Names of the authors
- Date of last update
- Abstract (150 words)
- Word count
- Main text
- Bibliography

Download the cover page on Moodle.

Abstract and the introduction

The **abstract** is a very short summary of the content and main results (approx. 100-150 words)

In the **introduction**, make sure you state:

- What is the subject?
- What are the main questions/problems/controversies?
- What is the goal of your paper?
- Brief structure of your paper.

The maximum word count depends on the number of authors contributing to your essay:

- 1 author: 4000–5000 words,
- 2 authors: 5000–6000 words,
- 3 authors: 6000–7500 words.
- 4/5 authors: 8000 words.

- By Wed **26 Oct**: Definite fixing of the groups essay subjects
- Presentation dates will be fixed by **November 1st**. The dates will be randomly assigned to the groups.
- Presentations start on Wed **30 Nov**: Submit essay plan to supervising assistant at latest one week before your presentation.
- May 1: First complete draft.
- June 1: Final submission

We will grade your essay based on the following criteria:

- Did you develop clear/interesting/compelling arguments?
- Did you consider relevant literature?
- Does your essay satisfy the formal requirements (e.g., correct citation)?
- Is your essay written in a good style and correct language?
- Is your essay written concisely?

Remark

Your paper will **not** be graded by whether or not the lecturer agrees with your conclusion. Professional academic philosophers do not even agree amongst themselves about what the correct conclusion is to most issues. But they generally have no trouble agreeing about whether or not someone has done a good job arguing for a conclusion.

How to cite? Indirect citations

Use **Author –Year** citation format (e.g. Chicago, APA)

Examples

- Einstein (1905, p. 892) presupposes that light has a constant velocity.
- That light has a constant velocity is an axiom of Special Relativity (Einstein, 1905).
- Einstein (1905) postulates a constant speed of light in all reference frames.

This one is redundant: Einstein postulates a constant speed of light in all reference frames (Einstein, 1905).

This one is not used in philosophy papers: That light has a constant velocity is an axiom of Special Relativity [7].

Direct citations

- If the direct citation is in the middle of the sentence, put it between quotation marks "...".

Examples

Bell (1992, p. 1209) wrote: "Niels Bohr [...] made immense contributions to the development of quantum theory."

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- If the direct citation is outside of your paragraph, no need to put it between quotation marks.

The question of whether an ontology of fields, rather than of Newtonian point particles, has any implications for the substantialist–relationist debate is one that commands little consensus. In his *World Enough and Space-time*, Earman endorses the following argument of Hartry Field:

From the platonistic point of view, a field is usually described as an assignment of some property, or some number or tensor, to each point of space-time; obviously this assumes that there are space-time points, so a relationist is going to have to either avoid postulating fields (a hard road to take in modern physics, I believe) or else come up with some very different way of describing them. (Field 1980, 35)

Earman claims that “in postrelativity theory, it seems that the electromagnetic field, and indeed all physical fields, must be construed as states of M [the spacetime manifold]” (1989, 155). The standard characterization of a field in spacetime

Using someone else's text or ideas without proper citation is **plagiarism**.

- Please make it clear which thoughts are yours and which are not.

Example

"It seems to me that..." OR "According to Maudlin (2010)..."

- **All** and **only** the references mentioned or quoted in the text go into the bibliography.
- Different Bibliography styles are possible: (APA, Chicago...). Just be consistent.
- It is useful to use Zotero for example to facilitate the citation process (It is supported by the EPFL)

How to collaborate?

- It is up to you: You either split the chapter among the group members or share one document online and write together.
- What is required is : One coherent final essay, and that all members contribute in the essay writing.
- We strongly recommend that you frequently discuss the topic and plan the essay together.

What is the structure of a philosophy paper?

- State the proposition to be proved.
- Give the arguments for that proposition.
- Show that the arguments are valid.
- Consider an objection to your arguments and respond to that objection.
- State the upshot of what has been proven

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Remark

Many professional philosophers get bad marks for this, but they are famous despite writing obscurely, not because of it. You are not famous yet, so be precise!

Tips to achieve clarity in your writing

- Assume the reader is **stupid** (I need things explained simply), **lazy** (I won't read things twice if they're not clear, I won't try to figure out your argument if it's not obvious) and **mean** (if you're ambiguous or confusing, I'll assume you're wrong or you don't understand).

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 - Help you fully develop each and every point that you want to make.
 - Allow you to better see and assess the argumentative structure of your paper as a whole.
 - Prevent you from wandering off point.

Tips on the language usage

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Example

"In its positivity, mentation or the psychological inner moves not just what is in its sphere, but also that without. Subjectivity supports footprints chemical."

What is the problem with this paragraph ?

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Let's try to write this paragraph in a clear language.

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Mental states cause other **mental states**. **For example**, smelling laundry detergent can remind one of one's grandmother. But **mental states** can also cause physical events. **For example**, thirst can cause me to drink.

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Mental states cause other **mental states**. **For example**, smelling laundry detergent can remind one of one's grandmother. But **mental states** can also cause physical events. **For example**, thirst can cause me to drink.

The most difficult word in this paragraph is detergent! If you are writing a philosophy paper and the most sophisticated word in your paper is detergent, you are doing a great job !

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"This is just my opinion, so who knows?"
"No matter what we say here, the debate will rage on to eternity."
I don't want the debate to rage to eternity! I want you to make strong claims, and convince me of something. I want the debate to end. You may not achieve that, but at least try to do it.

Resources to help you improve your writing

- If you want a quick guideline on how to write a philosophy paper, check the link on Moodle.
- If you are not sure how to link your sentences and paragraphs, check the signposting document on Moodle.
- To improve your English writing style: Read "**The Elements of Style**" By William Strunk Jr. (Find the pdf version on Moodle)
- To improve your philosophical writing: Check the book by A.P. Martinich "**Philosophical writing**" (Find the pdf version on Moodle)

When you are stuck and don't have ideas, discuss with your friends.

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If your friends are not interested in philosophy or if you don't have friends, I can be one, just send me an email.