

# Guide for Writing in Philosophy

## About Writing in Philosophy

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In philosophy essays you are expected to take a position (which could be seen as a thesis) or ask a question (about the meaning of a text or an idea suggested by a text). For example, you could frame your essay by stating: “This essay explores how, in Plato’s *Phaedo*, the split between body and soul is put into question rather than affirmed” or “What is the relationship between individual agency and social identities in chapter four of Alcott’s *Visible Identities*?” These kinds of positions or questions direct the rest of the discussion in your essay.

Often, the most difficult part of writing a philosophy essay is the development of these positions or questions, because you have to make sure that they allow you to express original and relevant interpretations of the texts you are working with. A bad position or question would stay at a surface level, pointing to aspects of a text that are obvious to any reader. “Originality” in this context means that your work is the result of your own critical thinking, rather than being unique among all secondary sources (though this could also happen as a result of your own critical thinking). This distinction is important to make since in philosophy you often work with texts that have long traditions of interpretation.

This first step may be challenging at first because you may not be used to developing your own positions or questions; you may have no experience interpreting texts in depth; or you may have not been exposed to texts that have the level of complexity found in philosophical texts. However, writing in philosophy is a skill at which you will improve with practice.

## About this guide

This guide contains the following sections:

- About Writing in Philosophy
- Evidence in Philosophy
- Types of Writing in Philosophy
- Conventions of Writing in Philosophy
- Citations & Formatting
- Common Errors to Avoid in Philosophical Writing

## Evidence in Philosophical Writing

Generally, there are three kinds of evidence in philosophical writing: textual **analysis**, textual and lived **examples**, and reasoned **argumentation**.

*The Disciplinary Writing Guides are designed to provide an introduction to the conventions, or rules, of writing in different subjects. These guides have been designed by Southwestern professors to help you understand what will be expected of you in your classes.*

**Textual analysis constitutes evidence only if you provide a convincing reason for interpreting the text as you do.** You are expected to quote the text you are interpreting extensively and follow quotations with your own analysis of what you have quoted. This is the main way in which you will defend your position or answer your framing question.

**Textual and lived examples constitute evidence when they support the main claims you make about a text in relation to your position or question.** A textual example often involves quoting a text from an author who is usually overlooked or misinterpreted. A lived example is an experience (yours or someone else's) that sheds light on your interpretation of a text. For example, you could say: "The experience of being bi-racial in the U.S. supports Schutte's point in the sense that..."

**Reasoned argumentation constitutes evidence if you show that the point you are making is coherent and supported either by the use of critical reasoning or by the use of textual analysis.** Simply put, you are expected to provide reasons for your claims. For example, you could say: "Given my interpretation of Fanon's text, it is reasonable to argue that he is critiquing race as a social structure."

These kinds of evidence in philosophical writing require that you extensively quote the texts you are engaged with. This practice can be surprising to students coming from other fields, where it is common to paraphrase. Paraphrasing makes sense when the texts at issue are easily comprehended and do not have a variety of possible meanings. **In philosophical writing, paraphrasing is not encouraged because it usually leads to a superficial engagement with the text.**

# Types of Writing in Philosophy

One challenge of philosophical writing is maintaining precision. You have to make sure that every statement you make cannot be expressed in a better way. In other words, you have to feel that you have reached the limits of your ability to convey what you mean. To that end, it is important to consider the purpose, the method, and the organization of your writing in philosophy.

## Argumentation and Exegesis

Philosophical writing is both **argumentative** and **exegetical**.

### Argumentative Writing

Argumentative writing takes a position or asks a question and consistently states the reasons for the position the writer holds or for the answer they provide to the question they've asked.

### Exegetical Writing

Exegetical writing consists of cogent and sophisticated interpretations of selected texts. Exegesis is the practice of clearly articulating what a text says while at the same time revealing aspects of its meaning that are not readily accessible to the reader.

**In philosophy essays, exegetical writing supports argumentative writing.**

## Parts of the Philosophy Essay

### The Introduction

State your position or question. Especially in more complex essays, include an itinerary of the steps your argument will take. Introductions can be difficult to write in philosophy because they can easily become too general or superfluous. You may find that in some of your classes you will be asked to skip the introduction and to go straight into your analysis instead.

### Example of an Introductory Paragraph:

In chapter four of *Visible identities*, Linda Alcoff introduces the concept of horizon in order to give an account of the self in relation to social identities. This essay explores Alcoff's concept of horizon and explains how it provides an accurate analysis of the experience of being a self and of the ways in which the self is determined by others. First, this essay explains the hermeneutic basis of the concept of horizon. Second, it analyses the concept of horizon as a theory of the self. Third, it explores the way in which the concept of horizon already implies a reference to others as constitutive of the self. In the conclusion, this essay suggests a way in which this theory of the self/other relationship can be the basis for identity politics.

### Supporting Paragraphs

These form the body of the essay. In these paragraphs you will interpret texts and support arguments drawn from these interpretations, as well as engage with the types of evidence explained above. As a rule, each paragraph should explain one idea or insight that builds toward the next. The sequence of paragraphs constitutes a step-by-step itinerary that leads your reader to your conclusion.

### Example of a Supporting Paragraph

Alcoff's concept of horizon has both subjective and objective implications. She writes: "The interpretive horizon...constitutes the self in representing the point

of view of the self, and it also constitutes the object which is seen in the sense that it is seen as what it is from the... point of view the horizon makes possible." [Here you would include a footnote with the citation.] The horizon is doubly constitutive, and its operation has to be understood as a determination of the self (a subjective dimension) and of the phenomenon the self interprets (an objective dimension). In other words, Alcoff's horizon brings to light and explains the reciprocal determination of subject and object.

### Conclusion

Finally, you restate your main argument very concisely, and reflect briefly on its larger implications and/or new questions that may arise. Conclusions are difficult in philosophy because they can be redundant. You may find that in some of your classes you will be asked to skip the conclusion.

### Example of a Conclusion

Our main argument shows that the concept of horizon is constructive as a basis for a theory of the self, especially with respect to how the self is affected by social contexts. An implication of this could be an understanding of identity politics as an intentional recognition of the social basis for the constitution of the self, and as a mobilization of this social basis to frame sites for dialogue and collaboration within democratic processes.

## Conventions of Philosophical Writing

- Students often ask if they are allowed to express their opinions in philosophy essays. The answer to this question is not straightforward. In general, if by "opinion" you mean a view that you bring to the discussion without much reflection, and with no engagement with the texts discussed in class, then your opinions should not be included in this kind of writing. Sometimes, though, students mean by "opinion" an original conclusion they have reached after wrestling with the texts from class and the ideas in them. In this latter sense, your opinions are certainly allowed and encouraged because they reflect your own critical thinking.

- Philosophy papers are written in the literary present tense and the use of personal pronouns can be appropriate.
- In philosophy, using the passive voice can be helpful to express difficult ideas and, although succinctness is valued, the complexity of ideas sometimes requires complexity in sentence structure.

## Citations and Formatting

Philosophy papers usually follow the guidelines outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*. You can find some more information on this citation style in the “[Student Resources](#)” section of the Debby Ellis Writing Center website. Endnotes or footnotes are appropriate places to expand on an aspect of the argument that is not central to your essay and to give more kinds of evidence for your position.

## A Few Common Errors to Avoid

- Students often write essays that are too broad and, thus, superficial. **The best essays engage just a few texts (mostly paragraph-long ones) and have one or two central points.** Make sure that the scope of your essay is limited enough that you can fully explore all of the texts you engage in your writing.
- Students often fail to adequately resolve an idea before they move to the next one. This is a very common problem, and **you should revise your paper carefully to ensure that you treat each idea fully** and include clear transitions that explain to your reader the relationships between ideas. Philosophy essays consist of clearly defined steps in an argument, where every paragraph expresses a single idea that builds on the previous one.
- Students frequently do not understand that the process of this kind of writing consists of a number of revisions. **Philosophy essays cannot be written the day before they are due.** You should write a draft at least a week in advance and then engage in thorough revisions of it. The point of these revisions is to make the essay as effective as possible in convincing the reader of your argument. Revisions improve clarity, precision, and organization.