Brendan's Style Guide
for College Papers, Essays, And Reports

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Introduction: What Are Essays For?

Most college students don't like writing essays. Why, then, do your profs assign them anyway? Because an essay is one way that students can show teachers that they can analyze, evaluate, research, criticize, reason, and imagine. Also, it's a chance to show your teachers that you can do all those things independently, and at a high conceptual level.

Basically, essays are one way for students to show that they can *think*.

The purpose of a college-level philosophy essay to pose a serious and principled question, a *philosophical* question. It's also to produce an answer to that question supported by the best argument that you can make. To explain this another way: the purpose of the essay is to practice the art and logic of persuasion. You probably already have some experience with convincing people to do things your way, or see things your way. An essay is a *written* form of that kind of work. It's an effort to accomplish something (ie. to persuade someone) whilst remaining within a broad but important set of boundaries about how to go about it. Those boundaries are the rules of logic. They include: that we follow logical inferences from premise to conclusion; that we bring forth the best evidence we can to support premises; that we avoid the fallacies (and avoid rhetoric, or unnecessary stylistic flourish, etc.) In that respect essay-writing could be compared to games: there is a clear goal to accomplish, and a clear set of rules serving as boundaries within which the goal may be reached. If a player flouted those rules, it's like he or she is no longer playing the same game.

Actually, both of those ways of thinking about essays are only putative. The real purpose of a college-level philosophy essay is to practice thinking deep thoughts. It's to demonstrate that you

can think (and write) in a manner that's more careful and comprehensive, more serious and subtle, and more imaginative, than you might do in ordinary speaking and writing. Think of the essay as a chance to show that, as much as any of the great philosophers of history, you can be wise.

The reward for writing an excellent essay is not simply a high grade. It is also the clear demonstration, to yourself (and your teacher), that you can learn and understand anything you may in future need to learn. It's the demonstration that you can reason about anything, make yourself understood even by those who think differently than you, and take a stand on principled matters. You'll be tested on that by more than just your teacher: you'll be tested when you go to job interviews, when you go on dates, when you have to make uncomfortable decisions, whenever you vote or buy something expensive, whenever close friends or family disagree with you about something important to you both, whenever you need to do something that you cannot do without thinking about it and talking it over with others. That's the test that matters. Ten years from now, you'll have forgotten most of the grades you got for your assignments and courses. But I hope you will remember that during your college years, you did things with your mind that you never did before, and so you can feel confident to expand your mind again.

Based on some ad-hoc research by Dr Sandy Goldberg, professor of philosophy at Northwestern University (Illinois USA),[1] here is a list of things a philosophy essay can do:

1. *counter-exampling an accepted analysis*
2. *proposing and defending a new analysis*
3. *unearthing a hidden presupposition in a discussion*
4. *raising an interesting new question*
5. *finding a new argument for/defence of an existing position*

[1] As cited in Justin Weinberg, "Types of Contributions to the Philosophical Literature" *The Daily Nous*, 5th February 2021.

6. *making useful distinctions*
7. *overcoming apparent distinctions*
8. *introducing and defining new concepts*
9. *creating and defending a new theory*
10. *raising a new objection*
11. *posing new puzzles or dilemmas*
12. *mapping the logical space / explaining options*
13. *philosophizing about a new (or previously not philosophized about) phenomenon*
14. *clarifying and improving understanding of an existing idea or theory*
15. *modelling or formalizing*
16. *providing a new analysis or explication of something used by non-philosophers*
17. *extending a theory or principle to cover new cases*
18. *showing how a problem is merely apparent*
19. *showing how a conflict or incompatibility across different theories or positions is merely apparent*
20. *taking an existing idea in one context and applying it to a new context*
21. *applying a philosophical idea/principle/theory to new real-world cases*
22. *showing how to (and how not to) solve a problem*
23. *drawing out the implications of an argument or theory for related matters*
24. *drawing out the implications of an argument or theory for other, seemingly unrelated matters*
25. *noticing what is missing from an argument/idea/theorizing*
26. *showing how a philosophical question is actually a multidisciplinary one*
27. *showing the historical background of a philosophical idea*
28. *discovering "new" philosophy and philosophers in history*
29. *explaining the value of a previously neglected philosophical contribution*
30. *showing surprising relationships or similarities between different ideas/arguments/ schools of thought*
31. *showing how a philosophical concept, position, or question has changed over time*
32. *identifying the types of empirical information needed to make progress on a philosophical question*
33. *analyzing an empirical experiment or case study*
34. *checking folk theories and assumptions with empirical or experimental methods*
35. *literature reviews*

As you can see, there's a lot you can do in an essay! In that sense there is no one single template for all philosophy papers. There is, however, a general format for the kind of essays you will write in *my* class, and that's what this guide will show you.

1) The Writing Process

Writing philosophy requires patience. If you leave it to the last day before it's due, you will almost certainly do a bad job of it. You need to take time.

Arrange your work space so that it's comfortable, quiet, and without interruptions. Get a coffee. Have pencil and paper handy, even if you are using a computer. If you want to listen to music, make sure it is also quiet, and choose music that does not have any words: you need the language centres of your brain to do the writing, and the words in the music will distract you. If you find yourself checking your phone or your social media while working, turn it off. (The physical arrangement of your work space is a *cognitive strategy*— see my guide to reading philosophy for more information about that if you're curious.)

1a. Start With The Best Question

All good philosophy begins with good questions. So, the first thing you need to do is form the question that your essay will attempt to answer. That question might already appear in the assignment instructions. If the work doesn't directly answer the assignment's question, it's more likely to get a low grade. Make sure you know what that question is asking of you. Talk to your teacher if anything seems unclear about it.

In philosophy, some kinds of questions are better than others. Good questions are tenacious, direct, searching, systematic, useful, fertile, and sometimes controversial. A good question doesn't have to have all of these qualities. But the more of them it has, the better. A question

that's rhetorical, leading, loaded, obstructionist, too narrowly framed, or ultimately empty, is a bad question, and you need to think of another one.[2]

1b. Outlining And Planning.

Once you've got your question, and *before* you settle on an answer, ask yourself a few more questions, such as:

- What information do I need in order to help decide upon an answer? (Any facts about the text? The author? The historical situation? Anything else?)
- Where can I find that information? (Course readings? Secondary sources? Lecture notes? An academic database online? Anything else?)
- Who could I talk to if I need help? (Librarians? Teachers— not just the one for the course? Other students in the program? Anyone else?)

Once you have the information you need, close your eyes and think about the paper's main question. Make a mental list of five or six possible answers. Consider each of them one at a time. Do any *reasons* appear in your mind for why that answer is a good one? How strong do those reasons seem at the moment? Use this process to rule out the weakest answers, until you have two or three answers left. Write those answers down.

Next, consider some reasons *against* each of those answers. This is called a *counter-argument.* It's the part that may seem most different from high-school writing, because it's the part where you argue against your own thesis, instead of for it. But this is an essential part of college level philosophical writing.

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[2] Please see *Clear And Present Thinking,* pp. 54-57, for more details about good and bad questions.

When you select an answer to the essay's question, don't try to anticipate your teacher's own beliefs or write what you think she wants to hear. Your teacher knows how to grade a paper with professionalism and impartiality, even when the thesis statement is something he or she personally disagrees with. Write with some sincerity; write with some honesty; choose an answer that you can stand by.

Finally, consider which of your two or three answers survives the test of the counter-argument best. That's the one you should make your main argument.

This process is perhaps one-third of the work of writing the essay, already done. Now you can sketch the general outline of the essay in its simplest form: perhaps needing no more than seven sentences:

1. The paper's main question
2. The answer to that question (the *thesis statement*)
3. Evidence and/or logic (ie. *reasons*) which supports that thesis
4. An anti-thesis: a different, perhaps contrary answer to the main question (the *counter-argument*)
5. Evidence and/or logic which supports the antithesis and/or casts reasonable doubt on the thesis
6. A defence of your thesis against the challenge of the antithesis and its reasons (the *reply*)
7. Evidence and/or logic which supports the reply

There. Now the process of writing your essay is only a matter of filling in the blanks between those seven sentences.

If, during this process, you find that you no longer like your thesis, that's okay. It may be that it was not as strong as you thought it was when you chose it. You have not wasted time with this discovery. Finding something that doesn't work is still finding something. You can go back and

choose a new thesis, perhaps keeping the work you did on that original thesis for use in your new counter-argument.

1c. A note about word-count limitations.

As you write your first draft, try not to think about the assignment's word count limit. Or, aim for some target that's between 10% and 20% *above* the limit. Then, as you make your second draft, find ways to cut 20%. This might hurt. You might have written something you feel good about, but isn't directly helpful for your argument. Perhaps it's a side remark, or a bit of 'filler' detail. Cut it anyway. (As it is often said in Creative Writing classes: "Kill your darlings!") Cutting 20% of your text forces you to decide exactly what needs to be said to make your point, no more and no less; it also forces you to find the most efficient way to say it.

2) Writing a full-length essay (~1000 words or more)

In your philosophy class you will likely have at least one, possibly two, full length essays. Depending on where you went to high school, and whether your previous education was conducted in English, French, an Indigenous language, or a non-official language,[3] you may have a picture of what an academic essay is like which differs from the picture held by your teacher, or even by other students in your class. There are many ways to write an essay, and many templates or patterns that academic writing can follow. This section will describe the template you need to follow for philosophy classes.

[3] I use this term 'non-official' to mean: languages that are spoken in Canada but are not classed as 'official' by the Official Languages Act (1969) or not protected by the Indigenous Languages Act (2019).

2a. The Introductory Paragraph.

In a philosophy essay, all of the important work is done in the body. So the intro paragraph needs to be short. *Very short.* It needs to get to the point as soon as possible. The intro paragraph has these three jobs to do, *and only these three jobs*, nothing more:

1. Introduce the topic, the field of discourse. It might be "Descartes' Evil Genius", or "Searle's Chinese Room", or "Socrates' Apology". You can do this with only one sentence.

2. State the philosophical question which your essay shall answer. This is probably given in your assignment instructions. You might rephrase that question slightly, in order to focus on what your particular essay will be about. Again, you need only one sentence here.

3. State the thesis. That's the statement which the rest of the essay will attempt to persuade the reader is the *best* answer to your question.

That is all the intro needs to do. It does not need to do anything else. Don't waste time or space with 'filler' text: "Since the beginning of time, humanity has looked to the stars and wondered…" Strike that crap from the page. Get rid of it. You don't need it. Your teacher doesn't care about it. If you're honest, neither do you. Get the intro done *in the shortest possible space.* Two sentences is ideal; three is acceptable; four or more is a distraction.

2b. The Main Argument.

This, the first major section of the body of the essay, is where about half of the important work of the essay will happen. This is where you bring forth the best *reasons* for why your answer to the paper's main question is the *best* answer. Your main argument needs to show the evidence, and the logic.

1. Evidence. Bring as much as you can. But it's better to bring *relevant* and *effective* evidence than it is to bring lots of it. Find the balance between volume and quality which fits into your assigned word-count limits. Evidence can come from the text you're reading. If your essay is about interpreting some philosopher's writings, what does that person actually say? Is there a context that contributes to the meaning of what is said? Evidence can also come from the facts. Choose responsible sources of factual information, and go as close to the original source as you can. Look for scientific reports, press releases from governments or corporations, academic publications, responsible journalists publishing in responsible news publications (avoiding fake news, excessively politicized sources, etc.) Your information literacy skills will come into play here.

2. Logic. This means your strongest claims should be written in the form of propositions, and that you should assemble them using those patterns of argumentation that your philosophy teacher taught you: Modus Ponens, Categorical Syllogism, etc. Indicate the important propositions, and show how they lead by logical necessity to the conclusion.

Your main argument could be nearly half of the essay by itself. Its job, *its only job*, is to produce the strongest reason you can think of for why that thesis statement, the answer to that question, is the best answer. You need at least one strong reason here: two may also help, if you think they are equally strong and that you have space enough within your word-count limit to give them both a complete expression. If you want to bring in three "points in favour", so to speak, think about whether you have the space, or the logic and the evidence, to give all three of them a complete expression. You might think your teacher will be impressed by more points. Your teacher is more likely to be impressed by a smaller number of points supported by the

strongest evidence and the strongest logic. It's better to do one or two things well, than to do ten things poorly.

By the way: the main argument does not have to be only one paragraph. It could be as many paragraphs as it needs to be, *so long as this section is clearly distinguished from the rest of the essay.* Your reader should never have any doubt about whether she's reading your intro, your main argument, or the sections to follow after. This requirement may make your writing style feel a little awkward. Don't worry about that. You're not writing a poem or a love letter. You're writing an essay. Use subheadings if you wish, to separate the different sections.

2c. The Counter-argument.

This is the section of the essay that may feel strange to you, especially if you are still thinking about essays the way your high school teachers told you. This, the second part of the body of the essay, is *not* the place to describe a second point in favour of your thesis. It is, instead, the place to bring an argument in favour of your *antithesis*— an answer to your essay's main question which is different from your own.

Imagine that this essay is a conversation you're having with a friend. That friend is just as smart as you are, knows everything you know, and understands your point of view completely and accurately. But that friend has very different beliefs than you do. In fact their answer to your essay's question is so different, that your answer and that friend's answer cannot both be true at the same time. (Or so it may appear, *prima facie.*) The counter-argument section is the place where you bring the argument in favour of that different answer.

Earlier in this guide, I compared essay-writing to games. Here let me add that I'm thinking of games like Chess, or Go: games which have no dice throws or card pulls or other random elements, which require single-minded concentration over long lengths of time, which involve mathematical elegance and beauty, and which awards victory to the player who utterly destroys the opponent. Your counter-argument is like the opponent's move in that game. It's the place where you consider how someone else might persuade you that your thesis is wrong.

To write a good counter-argument, look at your main argument and consider: what's the best reason you can think of for why it is misleading? Incomplete? Missing a step? Why it doesn't take proper account of relevant facts? Why it leads to a troubling implication? Why there is a logical fallacy hidden inside it? Why there are other, perhaps better, ways to interpret evidence? The counter-argument doesn't have to cover all of these bases: one or two of them is enough. Nor does it have to be so strong that it utterly destroys your main argument. But it does have to be strong enough to cast your main argument into some good reasonable doubt. Write down the best of these counter-arguments.

This may make you a little uncomfortable. Most people don't like arguing against their own beliefs. But this is the place in the essay where you can show some intellectual imagination: putting yourself in someone else's shoes for a while, seeing things differently than you normally do. For this reason, among others, your counter-argument must abide by the Principle of Charity: the guideline of logic which advises us to interpret the ideas and arguments of others in the best possible light.

An easy mistake to commit here is to craft a counter-argument which is easy to defeat: a straw man, for example, or an argument with another obvious fallacy. Your counter-argument must

hold to the same high standard for evidence and for logic as your main argument. If you can do that, it will make the next part of the essay all the stronger, too.

2d. The Reply.

The third part of the main body of your essay is where you meet the challenge of the counter-argument. Show why your main argument can survive the attack of the counter-argument. Or, show why it's the counter-argument which is missing something, or incomplete, or undermined by contrary evidence, or bears a flaw somewhere in its logic. As before, the reply does not have to destroy the counter-argument. But it does have to introduce reasonable doubt into that counter-argument, or show why the counter-argument is more doubtful than the argument.

In this respect, an essay is like a conversation. In the main argument, you say, "This!" Then in the counter-argument, your friend says, "No, you're wrong, it's That!". And here in the reply, you can say, "Alas, my friend, but no, because of The Other Thing!"

2e. The Conclusion Paragraph.

As with the intro, the conclusion needs to be short. The important work of argumentation is basically done; if it has been done well, then there will be no need to say more. The conclusion needs only to wrap it all up in a tidy little bow. Perhaps give a three-sentence summary of the essay: one sentence for each of the main body sections. Perhaps say something about how your thesis statement could lead to further interesting questions. But keep it relevant, and brief. Like the opening, you need only two or three sentences here, and nothing more. Then you're done.

3) Writing Short Reports (250 to 350 words)

The process of planning, outlining, and writing a short report is much the same as for a full length essay. But since the word count limit (or range) is much smaller, you have a greater responsibility to use the space efficiently and effectively. So, in a short report:

- Don't write an intro paragraph at all. In a short report, you don't need it. Dive right into the argument. Similarly, don't write a conclusion paragraph. In the short report, the conclusion should be plain to see in the argument itself.
- Unless the assignment instructions say otherwise, short reports do not require a counter-argument and reply. Focus on the argument. You don't have the space for anything else.
- Stick to *only one* argument. It is better to do one thing well, than to do three or four things poorly. A simple way to stick to a single argument is to spell it out in its logical terms, one proposition at a time, and following one of the patterns of argument that you learned in the classes on formal logic (patterns like *modus ponens*, or *disjunctive syllogism*, etc.) Number the propositions for clarity, if you like, or offset them from the text as if they are a long quotation. The rest of the text can be given to demonstrating the reasonableness or acceptability of the premises, or defining any terms that might be ambiguous or unclear.

4) Formal Academic Style

Writing an essay is not like writing an email, a blog, a news article, or a novel. It has a voice and a style distinct to its own genre. Seeing as the purpose of an essay is to persuade someone to believe something, you need every word, every sentence, and every relation among them, to

serve that purpose and no other. Formal academic writing tends not to be clever, witty, or poetic. It may seem dry and boring. But when it is done well, it has the advantage of being clear. A well-written academic paper should leave you with absolutely no doubts whatsoever about the author's meaning, even if you find the author's position disagreeable or wrong. Academic writing can, occasionally, be beautiful. But that beauty arises from the ideas being conveyed, more often than from the writing style. As you write, concentrate on conveying your idea with the greatest clarity and precision and economy that you can; and if there is beauty in the idea, let that beauty speak for itself.

5a. What makes a paper 'formal'?

A paper is *formal* to the degree that it is organized, informative, and professional. This is a broad target, and it is possible to miss that target in two ways: by not being formal enough, and by being *too* formal. The best papers are not the ones that aim for maximum formality. You're writing for your teacher, after all, not for the Queen. Rather, the best papers aim for the *right* level of formality: the level that is appropriate for the nature of the sentence, the assignment, and the course. For example, consider the following three sentences:

1. Jones was sent to jail.
2. Jones was incarcerated.
3. Jones was thrown in the slammer.

Which of them has the right level of formality? You might think it's the second, because that one is the most formal of the three. But it's actually *too* formal. Big words like 'incarcerated' make it look as if you're trying to impress someone with how smart you are. Your teacher doesn't want to be impressed; she wants to be *persuaded*. (If she's going to be impressed, let that

happen naturally.) In the example above, it's better to use the first statement, "Jones was sent to jail", because it makes the point in the simplest, clearest, least pretentious, and most precise terms. The third option, 'Jones was thrown in the slammer', is too colloquial; we shall see more about that later.

Another feature of a formal paper that your high school teachers might have described to you is the paper's absence of a sense of irony and humour. At the college level, this is still mostly true. You should assume that your teacher, reading your essay, does not have a sense of irony. She will interpret each sentence with its literal, face-value meaning. You can, however, use a gentle sense of humour. After all, you're a human being writing this essay, and not an algorithm. But if you want to insert something funny, be sure that it is clearly an aside, relevant, brief, and not a distraction.

4b. World-Relational Knowledge and the use of the word "I".

You may have been told in your high schools that an essay is formal if it avoids using the first-person voice; that is, it avoids words like "I", "me", and "my". This is foolish and stupid advice. In papers you write for my class, it is acceptable to use the first-person voice: you can use the word "I". This is *your* essay, after all. It's not being written by a faceless, nameless nobody: it's being written by you. It's your thoughts on paper or on screen: your ideas, your argument.

The requirement to avoid the "I" is often treated as a way to get students to adopt a more objective way of thinking. But this requirement carries a definite and unexamined presupposition about the nature of knowledge itself: namely, that knowledge is more objective to the degree that

it is impersonal.[4] This presupposition is not universal; it does not hold for all theories of knowledge, nor for all cultures and communities. For example, in some Buddhist, Taoist, African, and Indigenous communities, a complete and accurate presentation of an idea or an argument requires embedding it or bundling it into the speaker's relationships with families, communities, local landscapes, and histories, especially insofar as those relations configure the speaker's identity.[5] In these communities: knowledge must be made alive or made real by establishing its place in a kind of epistemic ecosystem. For the sake of simplicity, let's call this *world-relational knowledge*. A century of bad essay-writing advice has improperly excluded this form of knowledge from academia, to the point where many academics do not know that it exists at all.

The challenge of academic writing today is not to exclude any realm of knowledge for the sake of achieving a narrow and impersonal standard for academic writing. Rather, it is to find ways to include all meaningful realms of knowledge while at the same time preserving academic seriousness. Therefore, in my classes, I consider it acceptable, appropriate, and correct, for a student to include world-relational knowledge in their formal essays and reports when:

- the reasons for including it are made clear; that is, the relevance to the assignment and to the student's argument is made clear;

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[4] In case you're curious, this theory of knowledge follows loosely from a tradition of philosophy that begins with the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle, and carries through to the reductionist theories of various contemporary Anglo-analytic utilitarians. In this theory of knowledge, the only meaningful statements are those which describe empirical facts, and those which describe the rules of logic. This excludes all statements of moral judgment, treating them as mere opinions. My rejection of this theory follows from the restoration of Virtue theory in analytic philosophy, especially as accomplished by Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, and Iris Murdoch. See: Benjamin Lipscomb, *The Women Are Up To Something*. (Oxford UK: OUP, 2022.)

[5] See, for example, Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among The Western Apache* (Albuquerque, NM, USA: University of New Mexico Press, 1996); see also Rupert Ross, *Dancing With A Ghost: Exploring Aboriginal Reality* (London: Penguin Random House Canada, 1992)

- it does not devolve into mere relativism;
- it does not lead the paper's argument away from a direct engagement with the assignment's questions and requirements (i.e. the fallacies of *red herring* and *straw man* still need to be avoided);
- any presuppositions that emerge from it are exposed and revealed, not kept hidden; these presuppositions may be examined elsewhere in the paper or in some other assignment.

In relation to that last point: I remind students and teachers that a process of *examining* the presuppositions of someone's world-relational knowledge need not necessarily lead to *rejecting* or *dismissing* them. Philosophy belongs to everyone: and it is up to all of us, teachers and students together, to make it more welcoming and inclusive.

4c. Crafting Good Sentences.

Imagine, if you will, a house. Let's say it has a wooden frame, and it's mostly built of bricks. Writing an essay can be compared to building the house. The course you're writing the essay for is like the neighbourhood where the house has been built. Each brick in the house is a sentence. The mortar holding the bricks together is the logic that holds the sentences into an argument. The frame is like the set of rules that govern how arguments and logical structures can or cannot be crafted. The further you go in your education, from high school to university, the more you are able to modify or influence the shape of the frame. But when you sit down to write any piece of academic work, and no matter whether you're still in high school or you're a tenured professor, you need to think about your work one sentence at a time.

You already know that a sentence requires one verb, and at least one noun, and that without those elements a string of words is not a sentence. Nonetheless, most people slip the occasional non-sentence into their written work. In my field, philosophy, the appearances of non-sentences in an essay can be a problem. The logic of an argument often depends on the clarity of the grammar of the sentence. So when the grammar makes a sentence unclear, the logic becomes unclear, and then the argument becomes unsound.

One reason why we slip non-sentences into academic writing is because we tend to assume that Written English is the same as Spoken English. But it's not. In Spoken English, we can let some of the rules of grammar slide while still trusting that listeners understand our meanings. In Spoken English, other forms of communication, such as tone of voice, and body language, contribute to the expression. But in Written English, we have only the written word, and nothing else.

With that in mind: clarity, conciseness, completeness, and precision, in the use of our written words, become necessary, not optional. Without them, errors are likely to enter into the conveyance of the writer's meaning. To avoid errors, here are some guidelines to follow.[6]

- Spell out the argument completely. Don't skip any steps. Don't assume the reader will fill in the blanks for you. (Watch out for the fallacy of *missing middle premise!*)
- Don't repeat yourself. Say it fresh or don't say it.
- Write as if every word is inevitable.

[6] I am grateful to Dr. John McMurtry (1939-2021), one of my mentors, for these three points of writing advice.

4d. Common errors.

1. Sentence Fragments. A sentence with no verb is not a complete sentence; it is a fragment. Write in complete sentences, every time.

4d.*2. Run-on sentences.* A sentence that carries on for more than two printed lines on a correctly formatted page, or which overlaps two or more ideas in a confusing way, is a run-on sentence. Find a way to break the sentence into two or more smaller sentences.

3. Colloquialisms and slang terms. It is not just the informality or the casual nature of slang terms that make them problematic in a formal college paper. It's that the reader might not understand them. At college and university, there's a good chance your paper is being graded by someone who is a generation or two older than you, or a member of a different cultural community. They might not know the same slang that you do. (Having said that, it is the grader's responsibility to be lenient and accommodating with students whose first language is not English, or who speak a dialect of English such as Ebonics.) Try to write as if you want to be understood by someone with whom you have nothing in common, except the English language.

4. Rhetorical questions. The trouble with rhetorical questions is that they have answers you might not expect, and which might not be friendly to your thesis. They also invite the reader to reach a particular conclusion on their own. But reaching the conclusion is the writer's job, not the reader's. Whenever you feel tempted to write a rhetorical question, phrase the idea in the form of a positive proposition instead. Leave nothing implied or merely suggested.

5. Short-cuts. This is a broad category covering words and phrases that people use to make the truth of a certain idea seem self-evident or obvious or established beyond all doubt. But when we

use these short-cuts, the idea does not get established at all. It's either incomplete, or perhaps it requires some more discussion. Here are some examples:

- "I feel that…"
- "It is my sincere belief that…"
- "In my opinion…"
- "At the end of the day…"
- "Everybody knows that…"
- "Although everyone has their own beliefs about it, I believe that…"

Such expressions, by themselves, are not arguments for anything, or against anything. The mere expression of a statement or an opinion is not, by itself, good enough in a formal college paper. The reader also needs to see your *reasons*.

It may strike you as odd that I recommend against the use of the phrase '*in my opinion'*. The mere statement of an opinion is not, by itself, an argument; the mere possession of an opinion is not, by any measure, evidence of its truth. And while I am an admirer of well-crafted propositions, a heap of propositions thrown together is not an essay. Your teacher wants to hear your opinion, but of far greater importance is *the best argument you can bring to support it*. We don't want you to present ideas on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. We want you to present ideas that someone could argue with. In that respect, whenever you're about to write the word 'opinion', consider whether a stronger word might do better: 'judgment', or 'view', or 'conclusion'. *And then, show the logic.* It's the logic that your instructor wants to see.

6. Numerals instead of numbers. Another type of shortcut is writing the numeral of a number, instead of the name of a number: "Jones as 9 cats" instead of "Jones has nine cats". This is a

short-cut people often use in text-messages on their phones, or in social media. In a formal paper, it looks lazy and sloppy. Of course, if the number is large, writing it long-hand is unwieldy. Here's a rule to follow: If the number is fewer than four digits long, write it out long-hand: "three hundred and sixty four". If it's four digits or longer, you can use numerals: "1,024". Also: a number should always be printed as a numeral when:

- it's a page number, especially in a citation.
- it's a scientific value: for instance, you're stating the mass of an electron, the atomic weight of hydrogen, or the speed of light.
- it appears in a mathematical equation. 2+2=4.

7. Mistaken words. Some Spoken English words sound very close to each other, if not exactly the same. And yet they are completely different words with different meanings. The differences are more obvious when the words are put down on paper. But because they sound alike, people often put the wrong one in their Written English work. Here are some of the most common examples:

- 'their' (possession), 'there' (location), and 'they're' (contraction of 'they are').
- 'its' (possession) and 'it's' (contraction of 'it is').
- 'you're' (contraction of 'you are') and 'your' (possession)
- 'based off' (apart or away from something) and 'based on' (with or in relation to something).
- 'we're' (contraction of 'we are'), 'were' (past tense of 'are'), and 'where' (location)
- 'then' (a time) and 'than' (a comparison)
- 'to' (a direction), 'too' (an expression of inclusion), and 'two' (a number)

8. American spelling and grammar. Since we are a college in Canada, I expect Canadian standards for spelling, grammar, and punctuation. For example:

- Words which, in American English, end with *-or*, in Canadian English normally end with *-our*. Examples: ‘colour’, ‘honour’, ‘rumour’, ‘behaviour’, ‘favourite’, ‘mould’.
- Words which, in American English have one letter ‘l’, often have two in Canadian English. Examples: ‘labelled’, ‘traveller’, ‘counselling’, ‘jewellery’.
- Words which, in American English, end with *-se*, must end with *-ce*. Examples: ‘licence’, ‘practice’, ‘pretence’.
- Words which, in American, end with *-er*, must end with *-re*. Examples: ‘centre’, ‘theatre’, ‘metre’, ‘litre’.
- In punctuation, Canadian grammar uses the Oxford Comma.

Please see *The Canadian Style*, published by the Government of Canada, for more details.[7]

4e. Crafting Informative Definitions.

In most college level papers, no matter the field you’re working in, you will need to write definitions. It could be for a legal concept, an historical period, a medical condition, a class of consumer products, or a genre of literature: anything at all that helps us isolate what we are talking about, even before we say anything substantial about it. A good definition is precise, clear, to-the-point, and informative. It is neither too broad nor too narrow, and it is not circular. Such a thing is often hard to write.

Consider the following example:

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[7] You can download an electronic copy of *The Canadian Style* here: https://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.646585/publication.html

1. A wankel rotary engine is a really powerful thing.
2. A wankel rotary engine is a type of motor used in cars.
3. A wankel rotary engine is a type of internal combustion engine that uses a rotating triangular piston inside an oval-shaped chamber.
4. A wankel rotary engine is an engine with a wankel rotor.

We have similar issues with the first and second statements here. The first is not a definition at all, but a statement of amazement or delight: but we don't even know what kind of an engine it is. Is it electrical? Chemical? Magnetic? Computational? The first statement doesn't say. The second is better, but it is still too broad: it doesn't tell us what makes a wankel motor different from other kinds of motors. The second is also too narrow: it excludes the possibility that a wankel engine could be used in things other than cars: golf carts, or industrial drills, for instance. The third is much more informative and precise. The essay could move from that definition into a fruitful discussion of its various merits and flaws compared to other kinds of engines. The fourth is circular; it does not tell us anything.

Consider, as another example, the following statements:

1. Religion is all about what you believe.
2. Religion is when you worship God.
3. Religion is going to church on Sunday, reading the holy books, saying grace before meals, and so on.
4. Religion is a collection of social and cultural practices involving humanity's relationship with various spiritual beings and realities, and carrying psychological, ethical, and often political significance for the practitioners.
5. Religion, for me, is anything I do that makes me feel fully alive.

The first statement in that list is too broad. Many things are 'all about what you believe', and some of those things have nothing to do with religion. There are also religions in which what you believe doesn't matter; what matters instead is what you do. In that way, the first definition here is also too narrow. Indeed, it is a 'deepity': a statement that seems profound and wise, but it

achieves this appearance by being vague and nebulous, possibly to the point of emptiness.[8] The second statement is better, but it is too broad. There are religions in the world in which there are many gods, not just one, and in which there are many ways to relate to them, not just worship; this second definition improperly excludes them. The word 'when' in the middle of that definition also makes it incomplete: it leaves unanswered the question of exactly what happens or what is done 'when you worship God'. (Grammatically, it's also not a complete sentence: it's a fragment.) The third statement may seem like a definition. However, it is a list of examples of activities that could count as religious in nature; it doesn't tell us what, if anything, holds those activities together. In that sense it is not a definition: not by itself. But it could help enrich and clarify a definition. It could be part of the way the writer includes their world-relational knowledge. The fourth statement here is longer and more complex than the previous three. But it has the benefit of great precision and clarity. There's no significant doubt about the writer's meaning. It might be disagreeable: for instance, someone might argue that there are cultural practices which deserve to be called religious but which have nothing to do with anything supernatural. But even with that disagreement looming, the argument may begin. The last example here is couched in personal terms: the writer defined religion 'for me' instead of for everyone. In that sense it is more like an element of the writer's world view. It is not a universal definition, but it does not claim to be. But personal definitions can still be too narrow and too broad. And they often require more development and explanation: to keep them relevant, and to prevent them from devolving into relativism.

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[8] For an in-depth discussion of deepities, see Daniel Dennett, *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking* (New York: Norton, 2014), p. 56.

Another problem to watch for is timid, vague, or non-commital language. You might have been taught in your previous schools that formal essays must be as value-neutral as possible. This is bad advice. It can lead writers to craft definitions that are vague and uninformative, even when values themselves are precisely what's at stake in the definition. Consider the following example:

1. Followers of the 'Alt Right' are people who want to explore political ideas that tend not to be explored in mainstream politics.
2. Followers of the 'Alt Right' are lovers of freedom and critics of liberalism, feminism, and democracy.
3. Followers of the 'Alt Right' are people who believe that liberalism, feminism, and democracy should be abolished, and replaced with militant authoritarianism.

Clearly, the first of these three statements is the most value-neutral. But it is also the least informative. It doesn't actually tell us anything about what the alt-right stand for. The second example is more informative than the first, but its language is timid. It's trying to avoid controversy, and so it ends up saying very little. And it's still too broad: there might be lots of people who are critics of liberalism and yet are not alt-right. Of the three, the third is the most controversial. The reader might think the writer is implying that members of the alt-right are dangerous. But it is the most *informative*: it reduces as far as possible the amount of logical, empirical, and moral uncertainty that we may have about the thing being defined, while at the same time preserving the right degree of formality.

Since nothing in life is value-neutral, aiming for value-neutrality in your essay can sometimes make it hard to see reality for what it is.[9] Instead of aiming to be value-neutral, you should aim to be *informative*. In pursuit of that aim, try to make a definition that is as accurate, as precise, as

[9] This position also follows from the rejection of logical positivism, as discussed in footnote 4.

useful, and as meaningful, as you can. Do not be afraid of courting controversy with your definitions: do not be afraid of argument. Philosophy requires courage. So does life.

In general, you can avoid the problems of bad definitions by following these guidelines:

- Use more nouns and fewer adjectives, especially in your definitions.
- Try to think of what the definition excludes which it shouldn't, or includes which it shouldn't. This will help you avoid being too broad and too narrow.
- Don't use the word being defined in the definition itself.
- Try to make your definition only one sentence long.
- Watch for the fallacies of amphiboly, equivocation, and begging the question.

6) Formatting The Page.

Your teacher knows you're busy. You have six, seven, possibly eight courses all at the same time. You have a dozen or more assignments for each of those classes spread across the year. It is perhaps understandable, then, that some students submit written work without thinking overmuch about the presentation requirements. Most students know that their work has to be double-spaced, for example, or that they have to use a standard font and size. But when in a rush, some students hand in their work single-spaced, or in a type size that's too large or too small, or without a title, or without paragraph breaks. Some students even forget to include their own names on the paper.

You might think that proper formatting is not as important as the content of the work itself. And this is true. However, a badly formatted paper draws attention away from the content. A

paper with especially bad formatting can make it hard for the person assessing the work to see the content at all. By analogy: you may have prepared a delicious five-course meal with exotic ingredients and perfectly-balanced flavours. But if you serve it in a plain and unmarked cardboard box, the diners at the table will notice the box first. Only later, and perhaps with difficulty, will they notice the quality of the scents, flavours, and textures in their own right. Good formatting is a way of ensuring that your work is well organized, concise, and easy for your instructor to read. It's also a way of showing respect to yourself: it's a sign that you think of yourself as a professional person, capable of professional work. Also, you need to leave enough space on the page for your teacher to make notes and comments, and you need to avoid giving your teacher too much eye-strain. Your teacher is probably going to assume that if you don't format your page correctly, then you probably didn't read any of the other the instructions, and therefore your paper is more likely to have additional flaws. (You don't want your teacher reading your essay while annoyed. I was a student once, too— I know what that was like.)

No matter what you are writing in your philosophy class, be it a formal essay, a presentation summary, a short lab report, a research proposal, and no matter whether you are handing it in on paper or electronically, your written work must be formatted as follows:

- Your page size should be US Letter, or A4. Don't use US Legal, or any other page size, unless the instructor specifically asks you to use it.
- Double-space every line of text after the title page.
- The first line of each paragraph should be indented between 3/16ths of an inch and 1/2 an inch.

- Use a font that's simple and easy to read. I use Times New Roman, but you may also use Arial, Times, Helvetica, Geneva, or Courier.
- Set the size of your font to 12 points, exactly.
- The margins should be exactly one inch, all around.
- The page number should appear at the centre of the bottom of the page, or at the top right-hand corner of the page.
- Align the text to the left side, not to both sides. Do not centre the text.

This is, as you can see, the formatting template used by this very style guide, the one you're reading now. In case you need a visual guide, there's a diagram on the last page of this guide.

There are some exceptions to these rules.

- A paragraph that has a bullet list, a block quote, an image, or some other insertion, doesn't need an indent on the first line after the insertion, unless it is the start of a new paragraph.
- A block quote can be single-spaced. However, it must be indented from the margins by half an inch, on both sides. There must also be one blank line before and after it.
- Some bullet lists or numbered lists, like the one on page 4 of this guide, can be single spaced. But if so, they may need a space between each item on the list. I recommend putting a blank line after each item on the list.
- Bullet lists should also be indented on both right and left margins, like block quoted text.

Some of these formatting requirements are impossible to meet if you type your written work on a smartphone, or a tablet, or a text editing application which does not allow you to manipulate the format of the document. For that reason, you likely need to use a laptop or a desktop computer to write the work. You will also have to use a professional, industry-standard word

processor such as Corel WordPerfect, Pages, Scrivener, Google Docs, LibreOffice, WPS Office, or Microsoft Word. Don't use trimmed-down, simplified word processors like NotePad or TextEdit; these normally don't offer you enough options. If you don't know how to use a full-service word processor, now is a good time to learn.

7) Formatting Citations

You have probably been shown a style of citation from another academic program, such as APA Style, or MLA Style, for referencing texts. Philosophers generally use Chicago Style. It's simple, doesn't take up too much space, and gives no more and no less than the information your teacher needs if she wants to look up the same things you looked up. If you don't want to learn Chicago Style, most teachers in our college's Philosophy department accept APA and MLA style. Pick one, and use it consistently. The college library has some online resources to show you how to form a citation properly in all of those styles.

Everything that you put into your essay which is not your own idea requires a reference! Even if you paraphrase someone's work without quoting it directly, you still have to show where it came from. This is, for one thing, a courtesy to the originator, and a sign that you're doing research. Not to do it is to risk committing plagarism, or another kind of academic dishonesty (and the college has some rather heavy sanctions for it. Check the policy.)

So, what kind of citation should you use? In general, you should use one of three kinds of citations in the body of your text: inline citations, footnotes, or endnotes. Pick the one that seems easiest to you, and stick with it consistently.

7a. Inline Citations, Footnotes, and End Notes

These are citations containing minimal information, such as the author's sirname, the title of the work or an abbreviated title, and a page number or similar reference to where in the work the quotation or information can be found. Inline citations are placed in brackets immediately after the text being cited, and as part of the line of text itself.

An inline citation looks like the text you can see in brackets in this example:

> "Here's something that I'm quoting from another text." (Smith*, I wrote a thing!*, pg. 3)

Like inline citations, footnotes and endnotes contain minimal information about the source of the quoted text. Your word processor likely has a function to automatically order them at the bottom of the page (a footnote) or the end of the document (an endnote). The rest of the publication data about Smith's book, *I wrote a thing!*, can go in the bibliography.

Note that the works of some books have standard forms of citation that you will have to use. The Bible, the Koran, the Upanisads, and other holy books, are cited by chapter and verse; information about the translator and the edition can go in the bibliography. The works of Shakespeare are cited by act, scene, and line, as well as by title. The works of some philosophers, such as most of the ancient Greeks, also have special citation procedures. Check with your instructor for details.

7b. Shortening and clarifying a quotation.

You might have selected a quotation that fits your needs, but it's too long to fit in the essay. You can shorten the quote in several ways.

A long quote can be shortened using three dots in the place of any part of the quote that you remove. Thus, a quotation which, in the original text, looks like this:

> When we think of the virtues in general, or 'virtue' *tout court*, it seems that we think in the Aristotelian way.

can be shortened in your essay to look like this:

> As Rosalind Hursthouse says: "When we think of the virtues… we think in the Aristotelian way." (Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, pg. 13)

(Those three dots, by the way, are called *ellipsis marks*.) But that example does not fully preserve the meaning of the quoted author's original words. To do that, we can insert a clarifying word into the quote. To ensure the reader knows that extra word is your insertion and doesn't appear in the original, embed your inserted word in square brackets, like this:

> As Rosalind Hursthouse says: "When we think of the virtues… we [usually] think in the Aristotelian way." (Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, pg. 13)

You can also use square brackets like that to clarify a selection of text in which some adjectives or pronouns are left dangling. For example, the original text might say:

> In his case, it was as though Jean-Jacques rebelled against a man called Rousseau.

By itself, that selection doesn't say whose case we are talking about. You can clarify that missing information by inserting the person's name into the quote in square brackets, like this:

> As Hannah Arendt says: "In his [Rousseau's] case, it was as though Jean-Jacques rebelled against a man called Rousseau." (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pg. 39)

7c. Formatting the Bibliography.

No matter which academic citation style you use, the bibliography must contain all the information about the sources you consulted. Any assignment, no matter how large or small,

which cites the work of another person, needs a bibliography. In short reports, the bibliography can go on the bottom of the last page. Alternately, in short reports, the publication data for anything you quote or refer to can go in the footnotes or the endnotes. In longer works such as full-length essays, there must be a bibliography, and it must go on its own page, at the end of the paper.

In my classes, you can use any academic citation style you are already familiar with, so long as you use it correctly and consistently. Here's what an entry in a bibliography can look like using Chicago Style, the style preferred by most philosophers today.

1. Citing a book, film, or music album: show the author's name (last name, first name or initials). The title, in italics. The publisher data, in brackets: city, publisher name, date of publication. You can cite films and music albums much the same way: substitute the film production company or the record company name in the place of the book publisher.

> Baruchello, Giorgio. *Philosophy of Cruelty.* (Gatineau, Quebec: Northwest Passage Books, 2017).

(By the way: a list of films or television shows is called a *filmography*, and a list of music albums or podcasts is called a *discography*.)

2. Citing an essay or article in an academic journal or database: show the author name(s): (last name, first name then initials); if there are many authors, use the no more than the first three names and then add "et.al." to indicate there are more contributors. Put the title of the article in quotations and the name of the journal in italics. The volume and number of the journal goes next, followed by the date, and the first and last page of the article as it appears in the journal.

> Ashlee Cunsolo, et.al., "You can never replace the caribou: Inuit experiences of Ecological Grief from Caribou Declines" *American Imago*, Vol.77 No.1, Spring 2020, pp. 31-59.

3: Citing a newspaper or magazine article, in print or online:

> Haroon Siddique, "Legal experts draw up 'historic' definition of ecocide" *The Guardian*, 22 June 2021.

4. Citing a web site: it's much like citing a newspaper or magazine article, though you also need to add the URL at the end, and the date you retrieved it.

> Scripps Research Institute. "COVID-19 coronavirus epidemic has a natural origin." *ScienceDaily.* www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/03/200317175442.htm (accessed June 18, 2020)

Here are a few more tips to remember:

- If you are about to write a footnote or an inline citation that has the same data as the previous one, use the sign *ibid.* (short for the Latin term *ibidem,* 'in the same place') to save space.
- If the author's name is not available, simply put *n/a* (short for 'not available) in the place where the name should go. Some newspapers or magazines will use a wire service for the authorship, or they may simply say 'Staff writers' when the article was composed by several people together.
- Don't copy/paste a web URL into your inline, footnote, or endnote citations, without the rest of the necessary data. A URL by itself is lazy referencing.
- *Never* copy/paste a Google search URL. This is meaningless to your teacher. It's also lazy: it tells your teacher didn't want to take the time to form your bibliography properly (and even if that's true, you don't want your teacher to know that).

7d. Citing a date.

You have likely come across several different ways to write a calendar date. For example:

- April 1, 2012
- 1st April, 2012
- 01-04-2012
- 04-01-12

Which one is correct? As long as you and whoever you are talking to use the same convention, then the one you both use consistently is the correct one. However, if you need to write a date for someone who does not follow the same convention, you might not make yourself understood. The last example on the list above, for instance, is probably the 1st of April 2012, as suggested by the context of the other examples. But it could be the 4th of January 2012, or the 12th of January 1904, or the 1st of December 2004. If we don't have a context, we cannot know which is correct.

The best format for writing dates is the one that leaves nothing uncertain, no matter who is reading it. I tend to use the second example from the list above: "1st April 2012." It is an elegant shorthand for the full noun: "The first day of April, in the year 2012 of the Common Era".

The International Standards Organization, an arm of the United Nations Standards Coordinating Committee, recommends a form which moves from the largest units of time to the smallest.[10] This includes the hour, minute, and if necessary the second. So, the 1st of April, 2012, at quarter to four in the afternoon, would be written as: "2012-04-01 15:45:00". Notice that the year is spelled out with all four digits, and the hour is spelled out as if on a 24-hour clock. This standard is helpful because if you needed to create an ordered list of events, such as on a spreadsheet or in a scientific lab report, the numerical order of the digits and the temporal order of events will match each other.

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[10] *ISO 8601,* International Standards Organization. https://www.iso.org/iso-8601-date-and-time-format.html (accessed 12th January 2022.)

So, there you have it.

Writing an essay might feel like a chore. But *philosophy* doesn't have to be. Philosophy is discovery, inspiration, curiosity, the liberation of your mind, the expansion of your world, and the development of your humanity. It's hard to do, and it's *supposed* to be hard. But you will be more proud of yourself when you do well at something that is hard, than something else that is easy.

Try to remember, also, that underneath all that hardness, philosophy is still the love of wisdom. A thousand generations of thinkers are standing behind you, sharing that love with you through their books and letters, cheering you on. If you can hold on to that love while doing hard things like writing essays, then you can hold it anywhere, and you might be better off for it.

The First Page Of Your Essay Should Look Like This:

Authorship data. This can go in the upper-left corner of the first page, or on its own title page.

Essay title: centred, and boldfaced. This can also go on a separate title page.

Subheadings. Bold, left-aligned, and not indented.

Paragraph. The first line is indented 3/16ths of an inch. The text is double spaced, and left-aligned.

Short quote: no more than two printed lines. Double spaced, like surrounding text. You can use a footnote (as here), or an inline citation, to show the source.

Long quote. Indented on both sides 1/2 inch, single spaced. No quotation marks.

Footnotes. Your word processor will position them automatically at the bottom of this page, or on the next page if there isn't enough room.

Page number. Centred at the bottom of every page.

Student's name
Course name
Teacher's name
Date

Title of essay

Introduction.

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.

Argument

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. "All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses."[1] The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.

> Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains. Those who think themselves the masters of others are indeed greater slaves than they. How did this transformation come about? I do not know. How can it be made legitimate? That question I believe I can answer.[2]

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick

[1] Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, pg. 1.
[2] Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, pg. 49.

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