

## Typical Philosophy Essay Woes

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There are some typical writing problems in philosophy essays (where “Smith” is an arbitrary author):

1. Think explicitly about sentence and paragraph structure. For instance, why smash an objection together with a response to the objection in one sentence, when it is clearly more logical to separate them (indeed, to separate them at the *paragraph* level)? Don’t respond to an argument before you reconstruct it – we need to know what you are talking about!
2. **Essays are not reports.** *Reports* primarily summarize material exhaustively and present data. *Essays* primarily present an argument. Essays have theses that the author themselves defends; essays do not merely repeat or report the arguments of others. Essays consider likely objections to those arguments. Of course, you need to indicate and reconstruct arguments in an essay. But you should only do so *in order to* make an argument about it.
3. Be strategic about your examples. Students often barrage the reader with 5 thought experiments or considerations to explain in 1500 words. That’s way too many. Books are written on one thought experiment or one premise of an argument. If you are using examples extensively, focus on one or two cases, and manipulate them throughout the paper.
4. At least half of the essays I receive **could be shorter by at least 100 words**. That is, many essays could substantially focus their arguments, as well as address arguments that seemed relevant but (probably due to word count) were not addressed. A useful task for your next paper: no matter how long it is, once you are “done” with the paper, try to eliminate at least 50 words from it. For all intents and purposes, this is *always* possible! This will get you into an “editorial” mindset, and force you to think about what the function of each word and sentence is.
5. I received several topic sentences of the form “Smith says P, and my view is that it’s really hard to know whether P” or “P is really complicated” or “P is subjective, so who knows whether P.” This strategy is known as *punting*, and those of you familiar with football know that games cannot be won if your main play is to punt.
6. Many of you asserted that Smith said P, but didn’t provide textual evidence or citation information to support the claim that Smith said P. As in a courtroom, hearsay is not admissible as evidence. This is particularly true when we are trying to determine what the correct interpretation of a *\*text\** or *\*argument\** is. To improve your essay, you should include well-chosen pieces of text/citations that illustrate your point. So if you are asserting that Smith said XYZ, then you should find nice quotations where she literally says it.
7. Some student thesis statements state that “Smith does a good job” or that “Smith’s view is great etc.” In general, avoid words that appear in Trump press conferences: “excellent,” “fantastic,” “great,” “impressive job,” and “good job” are almost never appropriate components of a thesis statement. Be more specific: what went well with the argument?
8. Many of you praise Smith for “expanding” on ideas, or else criticize her for neglecting all of the details or for not “saying more.” I frequently read something like: “Smith argued that P. But more could be said about P. So P is false.” This form of reasoning is obviously fallacious. Fact: merely saying more is not necessarily good, and sometimes saying less is better. The strength of an argument has nothing to do with whether you have included every (often irrelevant) detail pertaining to a subject. You need to indicate *why* further detail is required.
9. Some of you list a bunch of counterarguments and do not develop them much (e.g., you provide 3 or fewer sentences of discussion). This is the *let’s see what sticks* approach to

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counterarguments. This approach has two hazards. The *first* is that it is rare that every counterargument is equally probative or effective. It is even rarer that a brief essay could develop (say) three substantive objections in a way that *shows* that they are probative or effective. The *second* is that if you endorse a counterargument, you are now committed to the entailments of that counterargument. If the counterargument implies that Q, then you are now committed to Q (or else you should reject the counterargument). The (recommended!) alternative to the let's-see-what-sticks approach is the judicious development of one or two central objections which will serve to illustrate your own view.

10. Some of your thesis statements claim something like: "I argue that Smith's argument/principle should be accepted, but only in a limited/partial way." This is vague. What part are you objecting to? What is the limitation? If you don't tell us in the thesis statement, then you are writing a *mystery novel thesis statement*. Philosophers don't like unnecessary mystery. That said, **qualified thesis statements are encouraged**, but the qualification (the limitation/alteration) should be concrete and specified in the thesis statement itself.
11. There is a temptation to argue using rhetorical questions: "Smith says P. But what if Q? And even if not Q, then what are we to say about P's influence on society? Therefore, [something to the effect that P is false]." I like to think of this argumentative strategy as *death by a thousand questions*, though it is really a garden variety informal fallacy, an *appeal to ignorance*. Two points. *First*, the example above clearly does nothing at all to show that P is false. *Second*, the example above advances no positive claims, because questions by themselves are not arguments. They are neither true nor false.
12. It is okay to use the first person in academic writing. You can write "I think ..." or "I argue that" or "In my view, ...". However, this does not give you license to emote, state your passing thoughts about a text, or state things without argument. So don't tell the reader that you "personally believe" something without saying why you believe it or why it is relevant context for your argument; do not tell the reader that a passage "made me think about" something without saying why the reader should care. Essays are not reflections or journal entries.
13. "Therefore," "thus," "consequently," "because," "since," "for this reason," and "it follows that" (among many others) are crucial logical connectors in philosophical prose. But many students don't use them correctly. It is common to see a sentence like "Theory X faces an important objection. *Therefore*, theory X is clearly flawed." Well, the sentence followed by "therefore" *does not* follow from the sentence that precedes it. The fact that an argument is challenged by some opponent does nothing to show that the argument is false or flawed; the objection actually needs to work! So you definitely *should* use logical connectors in your writing – they make your argumentative structure clear. But you should *also* make sure that Q follows from P when you write "Q because P" or "P, thus Q."