

ESSAY WRITING GUIDELINES

This is a modified version of Dr Nikk Effingham's guidelines which can be found here:

<http://www.nikkeffingham.com/teaching.html>. Please pass any comments to me (sf343@).

These are NOT the official St Andrews University guidelines, and reading this does not excuse you from reading the official guidelines.

TECHNICAL MATTERS

Let's get the boring stuff sorted first. However good and insightful your essay will be, there are some basic formal requirements it has to meet. It has to be constructed in a certain way, it has to be written in good English, it has to be properly referenced and have a decent bibliography.

Construction work

Start with a plan. Remember that every essay has to have an introduction, main body and conclusion. Now what exactly to put in all those sections is another thing. But trust me, it's simple.

Plan – doesn't need to be very detailed, simply write down your main line of argument. A simple model plan? (works for most 'discuss', 'assess', 'evaluate' etc. questions, not completely universal though)

1. Introduction (ending with 'I will argue that X')
2. Explanation of the issue set in the essay topic (usually a philosopher's view)
3. Strengths and weaknesses of that view
4. A specific problem with that view, found in non-compulsory reading
5. And a counterargument to that problem (repeat as far as you can – see below)
6. Optionally, your own argument for or against one of the counterarguments
7. Conclusion (... and as can be seen from the above argument, X)

Introduction – a good introduction should set the stage and sketch your argument. If you're writing about why Cartesian dualism stinks, in your introduction you want to briefly state what Cartesian dualism is (a sentence or two is usually enough). Then you quickly say what line of argument you will adopt and formulate your thesis. That's it, simple. The most important bit is the last one – in the introduction you *have to* say what it is that you're going to argue for. You set the stage, and tell the reader what you're up to. Now here's a tip: don't write your introduction until the very end, when everything else is finished. Why? Because you can change your mind while writing, you can find literature that will convince you to something contrary you initially wanted to argue for. Write your essay, then you know what it is about, and then you can set the stage for it.

Main body – the main purpose of the body of the essay is to present an argument. The following sections will tell you how to do it properly.

Conclusion – the most boring part, a tl;dr. Really just quickly restate your argument and reinforce whatever you've been arguing for. Additionally, you can flag other problems that emerge from your inquiry (e.g. 'I have shown that X, however, further inquiry is required to establish whether X is still possible were Y to turn out true'). Never ever introduce new material in the conclusion.

Referencing and bibliography

This is important stuff. There are few things that can cause you really serious problems at the university, and one of the top ones is plagiarism. You can get very easily sacked for that, and rightly so – plagiarism is a crime (stealing of intellectual property), and it is the most disgraceful thing a student can do. Personally, I think the university should tattoo 'cheater' on the forehead of every person who plagiarises their essays.

OK, got it off my chest, back to referencing.

Plagiarism is using material from a source without properly acknowledging the source. So if you found something somewhere, thought it's great and put it in your essay, without telling us where it came from – this is fraud. It doesn't matter that you didn't mean to or didn't know. Tough. It is your responsibility to know those things, and the university flags it up everywhere. You should *always* acknowledge the sources you are using, and you should acknowledge them in a proper, formalised way. To make life easier for you, here's what you should do:

- Every single quotation you're using has to be referenced.
- Every time you say 'X said Y', reference it.
- Every time you use a concept or idea taken from somebody, reference it.

See the official university regulations to see what referencing system is accepted in your department, or ask your tutor.

STRUCTURE

This is the most important section. This is the section that you should read, and reread, time and time again until you can reiterate it off by heart. This is also the section that most people fail in. I'll lay it on the line for you. People often claim that A-levels don't prepare you for University. I agree, for it appears to me that the ability to construct an argument that follows a rational train of thought, one which evaluates

the pertinent information and aims towards a solid conclusion, is not something most first year students seem to be able to do. Instead, what is produced is a haphazard collection of statements, facts, summaries of numerous arguments, and then – in place of a conclusion – an endorsement of one of the positions for little or no discernible reason. The latter does not constitute an essay, and the single most important thing that you need to learn is what does constitute an essay. Just to say again: this section, and what it demands, is the most important section. Ignore it at your peril.

Let us start with what an essay should not do. Routinely, students produce essays that are of the form ‘Philosopher X says Y, and philosopher Z disagrees’, cite some references, and conclude with a comment along the lines of ‘Whilst position Y has a lot to be said for it there may well be numerous flaws’; or ‘I cannot decide between the two, as there are good arguments for both sides’; or ‘I think X is right!’; or (and this is my absolute favourite) ‘There’s not enough space in this essay to evaluate which is correct’. All of these constitute terrible essays. As philosophers we are unimpressed with your ability to recognise that one person said one thing, and another disagreed. That would make you a journalist, and that’s not what we’re looking for. What the above caricature essays lack is evaluation – they do not evaluate anything! Philosophers, quite unlike journalists, are interested wholly and solely in evaluation of arguments. That means that we need you to write an essay that argues for a particular conclusion, which is obviously different from citing what people say, and then ‘concluding’ that one of them is right. What we need is an argument, a train of thought that has as few flaws in it as possible, as to why your conclusion is right. Your personal seal of approval means squat. Merely writing ‘I reckon this guy is right because, heh, it just seems that way to me’ is not good enough. Remember the golden rule: I am not interested in your opinions. In philosophy or science no-one should be interested in anyone’s opinions, yours or mine. What philosophers are interested in is justified and well-argued reasons for believing a given proposition, not just the fact that people happen to believe it. That’s why the last example sentence is my favourite: if you write an essay but don’t leave the space to evaluate a theory, then that’s a sign – a rock solid sign! – that your essay has gone wrong. We don’t ask you questions that can’t be adequately evaluated in the space provided, because all we’re looking for is evaluation.

So, if I haven’t hammered the point home enough, the sole purpose of philosophy is to evaluate arguments (notice how often I keep using the ‘e’ word) and evaluation is not stating a personal preference or gut-feeling about a position. So the sole way to earn marks is to enter into a serious debate with the positions we present to you. Are the premises of the argument true? Does the conclusion follow from the premises? If not, why not – demonstrate to me the invalidity of the argument, don’t just state that you think it is invalid. Your beliefs on the matter are irrelevant, we demand a demonstration! Provide reasons for thinking the premises are false, or reasons for thinking the conclusion doesn’t follow (e.g. counterexamples or a proof).

How you set about evaluating arguments is likewise important. You can't just rely on the set text and the lecture material. The lecture material will (usually) present the position, and then present the reasons that people have, in the past, thought these positions to be false. But if you just did the above, you wouldn't get a great mark, as you'd just have recapped the lecture material. Consider: one reason to think utilitarianism is wrong is because it appears we should all enter into a 'survival lottery' whereby our lives may be randomly forfeit, and I could be chopped into pieces so others might live. You might have been presented with that in the lecture. Merely summarising that in an essay, though, won't get you very far. You need to consider further responses to that line of argument – so either why (i) utilitarianism doesn't demand a survival lottery or (ii) it does demand it, but perhaps it isn't all that bad a thing (i.e. being committed to survival lotteries doesn't constitute a reason to deny utilitarianism). You might find such arguments in outside texts, in journal articles and so forth. You might rely upon material presented by the tutor or other students in tutorials. You might come up with one on your own. Whatever. In any case, you go deeper into the argument. This is called a step down argument because... well, because you go a 'step down'. The more steps you give, the deeper the essay. The deeper the essay, the harder it will be for the reader to think of an objection. The harder it is for the reader to think of an objection, the more it qualifies as an evaluation – there's the golden 'e' word again! – and so the higher mark you shall receive.

Ping Pong Essays

The technique of essay writing just presented is sometimes called Ping Pong because it 'ping pongs' the argument back and forth. For instance, you get the position (say utilitarianism), and then a response (say survival lottery) and then a rejoinder to that response. Indeed, you can keep going: maybe a rejoinder to the rejoinder! Maybe a rejoinder to the rejoinder's rejoinder! Each step of the way you're evaluating the argument. So it's like ping pong, knocking the argument back and forth. Not everyone likes the ping pong model, and I won't lie and say it's the only way to write a good essay. But you get what you're given. Once you've mastered the ping pong model, and you're spewing firsts out six to the dozen, you can start ignoring my advice and do whatever the hell you want. Until then, ping pong it is.

The ping pong model also gives you some idea of the mark you'll end up getting. The more rounds of argumentative ping pong you shuttle back and forth (wait, shuttle is badminton isn't it? Never mind...) the higher the mark. Just make sure that each step down you go is saying something interesting and further than what's been said before (for example, don't just cite a rejoinder and then say 'But you could just restate the initial position' – if just restating the initial position takes care of the rejoinder it was a naff rejoinder to begin with and earns you no marks; more on this below).

With each step, your mark increases. A two step argument isn't as good, or as deep, as a seven step argument (actually, seven steps are pretty impossible in 1,500 words but 4-5 should be ok). Indeed, you can compare your essay to how much effort it'd take to write. For instance, if you wrote an essay which

gave utilitarianism, and then gave a response to utilitarianism – the Survival Lottery – and that was basically it, that’s a pretty naff essay. It’ll barely get you a pass. Why? Well, you could write that essay if you’d only wandered into the lecture on utilitarianism. You’d barely have to look at a book. Say you took a couple hours typing out the 1,500 words, and an hour sat in the lecture, the essay in total would only take three hours to write. You’d be lucky to get a pass! But now consider an essay that did the above but gave a rejoinder, say summarising an idea from the tutorial, as to how the Survival Lottery doesn’t work. That’d take more time, wouldn’t it? You’d have to have attended a tutorial! So you’d get a higher mark. Perhaps you go off and find a reason why what that guy said in the tutorial doesn’t work – even higher! At each step of the way you can look at what you’ve written and think ‘Exactly how much of the course would someone have to attend in order to write what I’ve just written’. If you’re only relying on lecture material the answer would be ‘Not much’, and that should be the mark you’d expect. If you’ve wandered off into the library and found your own material, the answer would be ‘A fair bit’, and that should likewise be reflected in the mark. If you’ve spent weeks in the library following a single train of thought, a single line of argument, a single chain of argument/counterarguments ‘ping-ponging back and forth, then that’d be a whacking great amount of work – and deserve a whacking great mark!

Many Responses Resets The Mark

Listing multiple responses doesn’t earn you any marks! Think of it like this, we mark the deepest argument you give. Every time you give up on a line of argument and go back to the beginning, you’re not adding to the mark, you’re effectively resetting it. So if you gave a response to the Survival Lottery, and then listed a few other responses to utilitarianism (not to the Survival Lottery response), tough titty – you just get marked on the Survival Lottery objection and the response you gave to it. The rest is superfluous and doesn’t demonstrate any further philosophical evaluation (there’s that word again!). This rule isn’t that hard and fast. For instance, if the rejoinder you give has two obvious flaws but you’ve got some cunning way to get around both of them, far better to explain why these flaws don’t work as opposed to really concentrating on only one flaw. Alack, at this stage, only experience will tell you how deep you need to go – but then if you get to that stage it’s all pucker as far as I’m concerned anyway. If you’re reaching that depth of argument, these essay writing guidelines will have already done their work.

Recognising Strawmen

Strawmen arguments are arguments that aren’t worth spending much time on. They generally deal only with caricatures of the position at hand, either mistakenly or willfully misunderstanding the nature of the debate, or they have obvious and crippling flaws. Either ways, citing a strawman argument, and why it’s false, earns you nil points – no marks for shooting fish in a barrel.

Nevertheless we will often present you with strawmen arguments in lectures. This isn’t so you can give them back to us in your essays! We present them because they are common responses that people often

give when they first hear an argument, but those common response turn out to be astonishingly bad, or miss the point in some way. So, in our capacity as tutors and lecturers, we set out to explain these positions so you don't foolishly start expounding them yourself.

Let's take an example: Peter Singer's argument that you are morally obliged to give all our money away to charity. One, strawman, response is that if we all did this the economy would collapse. That response doesn't work because, of course, the argument just says that you should do it, not everyone. Singer makes clear that if everyone did it, the amount of money you'd be obliged to give away would be minimal. Moreover, he points out that clearly not everyone is going to start giving all their money away and causing economic collapse. Indeed, he says this in his article. Singer (and your ethics lecturers) examine this a strawman response only because, straw filled as it is, people often cite it, and they have to be corrected. But you don't get any credit for giving this crap argument and then explaining its crappiness in all of its glory. It is presented for you to avoid, for you to go 'Oh, I see! Yes, that argument is really naff!' and then move on.

Sometimes you might spend a long time on a counterargument only to realise that it wasn't that good at all, and in actual fact stemmed from a misunderstanding. It happens to the best of us. The correct action is to give up on it, and ensure that in the future your exposition more faithfully represents the superior understanding you've now acquired. The incorrect action is to then stick your failed counterargument in your essay and write a 1,000 words of exactly where you went wrong and what it was you failed to grasp. Again, there's a fine line to walk between giving counterarguments that earn you marks, and giving counterarguments that go nowhere and stem from a misunderstanding. If in doubt, come and ask, that's what we're paid for.

Don't Sweat The Big Stuff

Given this concentration on evaluating just one line of argument, it is unsurprising that the best essays will spend their time making one, small point very clearly. Read that sentence one more time. It's all about the small points. Time for a quote, from Jim Pryor and his essay guidelines:

People very often attempt to accomplish too much in a philosophy paper. The usual result of this is a paper that's hard to read, and which is full of inadequately defended and poorly explained claims. So don't be over-ambitious. Don't try to establish any earth-shattering conclusions in your 5-6 page paper. Done properly, philosophy moves at a slow pace.

An 5-page essay that tries to demonstrate, conclusively, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that all arguments for the existence of God are awful, is far less likely to be a good essay than one which demonstrates that Koon's version of the cosmological argument (one of the many arguments for the existence of God)

illegitimately relies upon a premise to do with the nature of facts. The latter is a small point, but one that if well made would make for a superb essay. The former would be overly ambitious. And when I say ‘overly ambitious’, what I mean is ‘riddled with hubris’. Only the ignorant and the foolish would think that, in the space of one essay, they can solve a problem that has scores of articles and books written about it. (Now note that the essay titles will often be so general that you could indeed write a book on the topic – if that happens, it doesn’t mean we want you to write a book, it means that we leave it to you which small part of the huge problem you’re going to tackle in your essay.) Even if it did turn out that you were a revolutionary genius, you’d still never be able to accomplish the task in the space of 1,500 words! That, I would think, is obvious. Having said that – the last thing we want to do is discourage smart people with great ideas – if you think you have more to say, come and see me after class, we can talk about it, and if your stuff is good, I can even help you write a paper about it, maybe send it to an undergraduate journal – just don’t stick it all in one essay.

CLARITY

Clarity is everything. It’s no good having astonishingly good ideas or brilliantly researched arguments if one can’t figure out what you’re banging on about. A clearly written essay will score exponentially higher than a poorly written essay. The clearer the essay, the higher the mark. It’s that simple people.

Here’s the rule of thumb: your essay should be accessible to the well educated intelligent reader with no specialised knowledge. That means that we should be able to give it to just about anyone with a few A-levels to rub together, and they should be able to read your essay and understand what your argument is. (At higher levels this is different – a paper on the philosophical implications of quantum physics may not be as accessible). Here are some suggestions as to how to achieve a suitable level of clarity.

Don’t Write Like a Nigerian Spammer

One day I received the following e-mail:

FROM MR PUNE JIM

TRANSFER OF 36,759,000.00 MILLION POUNDS TO YOUR ACCOUNT

My name is Mr.Pune Jim and I work in a Bank here in London.Therefore I need your cooperation in this transaction.I will provide all necessary information needed in order to claim this money.Hoping in God that you will never let me down now and in future. Your full name,occupation and phone number is needed.Let me hear from you urgently.

Best Regards

Mr.Pune Jim

Obviously I didn't get back in touch with him, but nevertheless I did consider it for a second. The spelling was so atrocious, the argument so awful, I felt almost immediately compelled to reply in order to set him straight and tell him what's what. Just look at the first two sentences! How can his working in a bank entail that he needs my cooperation in a transaction? Does that apply to everybody? Does everyone who works in a bank need my help? Am I to be inundated with requests from bank clerks all over the world? If so the economy is going to grind to a halt pretty quickly...

But he has an excuse. He is some scoundrel sitting in some basement trying to fleece me. He probably made these mistakes on purpose to pass himself off as a person who couldn't actually speak English. Shockingly, however, many essays I read are just like this e-mail. Not all of them, mind you, but more than one or two! When I read such things I am not sure which I would rather do: write a letter to the Prime Minister explaining to him that eighteen year old adults are leaving school unable to construct sentences in English, or just save myself the unmitigated pain I feel every time my eyes pass across such material by taking a Black and Decker drill to my own eyeballs. Not only is it obviously bad to do these things (write in poor English, that is, not use a Black and Decker drill on yourself – although that too is obviously bad), you will quickly discover that your examiner – for instance, me – will not sit there and charitably try and interpret what the sentence should have said if only it hadn't been written by someone with a passing grasp of the English language. No. It is not up to the examiner to translate an essay from a pidgin tongue into something that actually makes sense. Every sentence that makes no sense will be skipped over as if you never wrote it. And imagine what your mark will end up as if your examiner just ignores half the sentences you have written – whatever is left is unlikely to be worth much. So, the lesson is, write in English, rather than haphazardly and randomly throwing words on the page until you get something that a five year old might mistake for a sentence. The only real way to achieve this is to proof read your essay thoroughly. If need be, enrol in a University course on writing techniques. Here at Uni, if what I've said here applies to you, then it is up to you to recognise this fact (should it apply to you!) and seek appropriate help via the numerous courses the University has to offer.

Don't Write Like Kant (or Mill, or Hume, or...)

If I ever met Kant, I'd kick him. Reading what he writes makes me want to stick my head in a blender. For the love of all that is holy, don't try and emulate him! It is never a good thing if your examiner wants to stick his head in a blender.

It's an unfortunate fact of life that we force you to study philosophers who aren't exactly the clearest buggers around. Not every philosopher is like this, but certainly some of the ones we ask you to read make for a hellish experience as you wade through their ill constructed sentences and mind numbing terminology. This is not an excuse to do likewise. They have three excuses. First, they didn't have word processors. It wasn't exactly a walk in the park for them if they wanted to proof read and redraft their

books. Second, at the time what they said was probably clearer than it seems now. Idiomatic phrasing changes over time, so what you find hard to read now is sometimes a result of linguistic drift across the centuries. This, again, is not an invitation for you to regress your writing style back three hundred years and start mimicking 17th century English. I am not a Dominican monk, and do not care for such language. Third, guys like Kant and Heidegger are allegedly geniuses. You're not (you may be a genius, but it is unlikely that anyone of note has alleged it to be so). I'm willing to give them the benefit of the doubt – they're great philosophers in spite of the way they write not because of it. So, whilst we subject you to the writing style of these guys, don't mimic it yourself.

You see, modern philosophy is all about clarity. Contemporary philosophy is dead hard. It makes our heads hurt. Writing in simple, straightforward English is therefore a must. Spending time solely trying to just figure out what a sentence says isn't what a philosopher wants to do. A philosopher wants to be thinking about whether that sentence is true. Again, philosophy is about evaluation, not interpretation. As we are training you to be contemporary philosophers, every time you read a piece of philosophy from years ago (such as Kant) do keep in mind that they weren't held to the highest standards of clarity. You, on the other hand, will be.

So – How to Write?

Having explained how you shouldn't write, how about how you should? I wanted to entitle this bit 'Do Write Like A Newspaper' but then I thought of tabloids – please don't deluge me with essays that begin 'Kant in Imperative Failure Shocker', or 'Descartes in Cartesian Crack Scandal'. So, let us be clear – at the beginning, write like a good broadsheet newspaper. And when I say that, I mean the news columns, not the comment sections. Have a glance at the news columns in any broadsheet, and you will find the tone dispassionate. I never ever find myself having difficulty understanding what the front page of the Guardian says. I never discover that it has multiple interpretations, or that parts of it are ambiguous, or that it uses words that I don't understand without first introducing them. I never ever need to reread a sentence. The news article just gives me the facts: cold, hard, and fast. Your essay should be like that.

An example of this in practice would be recent articles. If you want to see how philosophy should be written, nip down to the library and glance at the journal *Analysis*. The articles there are short and tremendously clear. You may not understand the content of what is being said, but that's irrelevant. What's relevant is simply the way they're written: very short and very clear.

So, let's sum up and reiterate: your essays should be succinct. With regard to the writing, one might even go so far as to use the word 'boring'. It is to have no resemblance to poetry, or the writings of the Ancient Greeks, nor should it be suitable to be read from a pulpit. In no way should it be verbose, reflect emotional states you may have towards the authors/philosophers you deal with, or have even a hint of

pretension. Imagine that your marker is a mean spirited lad who went to a comprehensive, and likes nothing better than downing pints of lager in the local pub and marking down pretentious gits who want to spend more time making flowery comments than getting to grips with the issues at hand.

Techniques to Ensure Clarity

First, don't be afraid to bin what you've written. Redraft your essay if needed. I know that redrafting an essay is a long and involved process, but if when you read it yourself you find that it contains long winded explanations that can be shortened, makes glaring mistakes, and rambles off on a tangent at some point – well, if you noticed it, I definitely will. And yes, your mark will reflect that. Don't worry – it happens to all of us. Happened to me and I've been in the game for years, so I'm guessing it will happen to you. What you need to do is look over your essay with an eye to rewriting it thoroughly. In fact, the best advice I can give is this: write the essay, stick it in a drawer, forget about it, read it a few days later with a fresh mind, assess it as if it wasn't yours, and decide if it needs rewriting. If not, great, if yes – don't cry over it, just do it. Yes, this does mean you have to start earlier if you want to be on time with it. Ideally, you want to start the research two weeks before the deadline, write the thing about a week before, leave it for a four days, re-read it and either rewrite it or just correct bits and pieces. It never ever happened to me that I didn't have to correct anything. Seriously.

Second, give your essay to someone else to read. Specifically, give it to a non-philosopher. We aren't kidding about an essay being accessible to the average intelligent adult. Just about anyone should be able to read your first year essay and make sense of it. So you should be able to hand it to them, then they should be able to read it in a reasonable space of time, and understand what went on and tell you what they think. Points to consider (i) if it takes them ages to read through, that's probably because it isn't very clear; (ii) they should be able to tell you what the problem you address is, without prompting from you or you having to answer any questions; (iii) they should be able to tell you what your argument is again without prompting from you – if your essay doesn't make those things clear, that's a failing with your essay. And make sure that your reader really understands what they read, not just says they do.

Third, proof read your essay. Again, stick it in a drawer for a few days, then proof read it and make sure the grammar and sentences sound right. One way to achieve this is to read it out verbatim. Correct the bits that don't sound right. It makes you sound weird, and your housemates, friends and family will think you've gone doo-lally, and maybe even have you committed and/or disown you, leaving you destitute and with nothing to live for except philosophy, but that's a small price to pay in my opinion...

RELEVANCE

Relevance is fairly simple. Don't write about anything other than what the question asks for. Here are some specific hints and tips, and possible pitfalls you might encounter.

Every Sentence Counts

Simply put, every single sentence in your essay should further your argument towards your conclusion. Any sentence that does not do that is irrelevant and a big waste of space. For instance, to spend even a sentence telling people how great you think Kant's metaphysics is, when you are slagging off his ethics, just because you really wanted your examiner to know, is pointless. Every. Sentence. Counts.

Keeping to the Point

You get credit for what you write that relates to the essay topic, and nothing else. Everything you write that is not connected to your chosen essay topic is wasted space. For instance, if the question is about the Survival Lottery in utilitarianism, then a historical account of the moral theory, or other refutations against utilitarianism, are unlikely to earn you any credit. Such things are generally a waste of space, and your essay will end up being just as good if you had left them out. What you need to ensure is that every sentence is driving you towards your conclusion, and every sentence is crisp, clear, and succinct. You've only got 1,500 words to play with, and a lot needs to be done in that space, so being succinct is vital.

Essay Questions are Round Holes, Don't Make Your Answer A Square Peg

Answer the question asked, not the question you think we should have asked nor the question you really wished we had asked. If the question asks specifically for objections to utilitarianism on the grounds of the Survival Lottery then only talk about the Survival Lottery. No matter how much you love talking about the Space Monster objection (and I do sympathise – I love the Space Monster objection), if you try and beat that drum, perhaps with some cursory glance at the Survival Lottery ('The Survival Lottery is not a good objection – what is a good objection is Nozick's Space Monster'), then you're metaphorically loading that shotgun, pointing it at your foot and pulling the trigger. Answer the question. On the topic asked. Do not try and twist and turn the question into something it isn't. This is the most common mistake. In a vain effort to fill the word count people end up waffling on about something different. Or, someone feels the need to cram everything they ever learnt about the subject into 1,500 words. Or, someone incorrectly comes to believe that a particular issue needs to be explained or discussed when it is, in actual fact, utterly irrelevant to the topic at hand. It's wrong to do any of this.

Again, the best way to figure out whether it's necessary to include a sentence or not is that when you pull the draft out of the drawer you shut it in a few days before, it should hopefully become obvious what is or isn't pertinent to the conclusion you're arguing for.

INDEPENDENCE

You've arrived in University. It's fun, it's academically challenging, finally an environment to truly expand your mind. And you've been told that this is it: a place where we want to hear what you've got to say. This is all true, but there's a fine line between ill informed ranting and insightful and adept independent work. This section is designed to steer you more to the latter, and away from the former. And, without wishing to offend, the former is not an uncommon occurrence.

What we mean by independence

We mean many things. Independent work basically sums up anything that takes place outside of the lectures and tutorials – the stuff we leave you to do on your own, the stuff we leave you to do independently. Now that can include a lot. It can include not just sitting there and thinking about your own ideas, but also discussing other people's ideas, using ideas from tutorials, reading articles, reading books, reading articles about books, and so on and so forth. So when we say we want something independent that doesn't mean that your essay on Aristotle has to say something no man has ever said before. Indeed, an essay that gave an excellent exposition of what someone else said would be a good example of just one type of essay we are looking for. In fact, an essay that surveys a debate between two other people, say a debate between two philosophers, would not only be independent (as long as those papers weren't the set reading!) but also beautifully capture that ping-pong structure we're looking for. Independence knows many faces. Your own original idea is just one face of these many types of independence.

Not that your own ideas are to be ignored! We don't want to stifle your own ideas. If you've got your own idea – great! It might be worth checking to see whether someone else has said something similar (say by liaising with your tutor). If so – ALSO GREAT! Too many people get disheartened when they discover the cracking idea they came up with has already been published by some other fella. I am always puzzled by this – if I discovered that I'd come up with an idea that some other published genius had come up with I'd be rather pleased myself. It would demonstrate I was on the right track, that I knew my stuff, that I had the philosophical skills, I was actually learning things at university and it wasn't just a place to get boozed up etc. Better yet, given the time we spend studying the material, you probably came up with that idea in a far shorter space of time than the published philosopher who probably took ages – clearly a sign of your brilliance. Anyhow, if the idea has been used before – go off and follow it up! It's your idea, you should be interested in what people say in response! Also, in coming up with the idea yourself you'll have your own spin on it, and probably your own intuitions as to how to respond to criticisms of that position. All good reasons to follow up on that line of interest up.

If your idea hasn't been talked about...

Let's level here – if your idea hasn't been talked about there's probably (note, only probably) a good reason for this. Whilst at higher levels you will study more cutting edge problems, at the moment you are studying age old problems. Many of which have been knocked around for at the least a few decades, and at most a few millennia. If in that time no-one has come up with your idea then either (i) you're a frickin' genius with insight unbound or (ii) the idea isn't that good. Alas, the more common result is (ii). But again, that's not a bad thing. This is what this section on Independence is about – trying to teach you to recognise when you have a good idea, and when you have a bad idea, and managing to sort the wheat from the chaff. Being able to tell bad ideas and explain why they're bad, is really important. As you become more philosophically advanced, your ability to do this will likewise increase.

If you're dealing with a well discussed problem and have an answer that's never been discussed, you've got to pause to wonder why. Of course, if you mention it to your tutor and they shoot up and shout 'THAT'S AMAZING!', then that's great (by all means abuse your tutor to determine what works and what doesn't). Likewise if you're dealing with a problem that hasn't really been discussed (maybe it's a recent, or lesser known, response to a well discussed problem; or you're studying a module that only deals with cutting edge philosophical topics; or what have you) then you should be less surprised that no-one has come up with your idea, and therefore less reticent in moving forwards with it.

Stick to the course material

Keep in mind that we raise issues in lectures and tutorials because we expect them to be discussed. If the content of your essay about Marx's view of the proletariat spends more time discussing Jainism in the 12th century, your 'independence' is probably not independence at all but just horse crap. If the course you study introduced numerous technical terms, and was full of technical notions, and you don't use any in your essay, then again your work doesn't reflect the module. I don't really know what more to say than that – stick to the course material (which doesn't mean stick to the reading list you are presented with, or anything like that, just broadly stick to the issues raised).

Thy Tutor Guideth

Most importantly, your independent work can only be guided by keeping in contact with your tutor. See them with essays plans. See them saying 'I fancied talking about...' and inserting whatever it is you want to talk about. Pilot ideas in tutorials, and see what they say. I've seen some amazing students come up with some really excellent material, but it's always under the auspices of the tutor. Individuals who just naff off and do their own thing generate rubbish – and of course they would! If you could come up with excellent stuff sitting on your own somewhere like a hermit you wouldn't need lecturers and tutors, and you could just wander into the exam when you fancied and pass. Clearly working with those in the know is going to inflate your mark. Sitting at home all the time isn't. That doesn't mean you spend all your time

with the tutor, and certainly I'm not suggesting that you just become a scribe for what they say, all I want to convey is the importance of touching base every once in a while to make sure your work is going in a good direction and progressing sensibly, rather than veering off into a bad place.

...finally

What I want to encourage is students who come across interesting articles in the National Geographic about how all cultures share similar values and apply that to moral relativism; or how you think it is fair and reasonable to interpret Mill as believing a different thesis about hedonistic pleasure than previously thought through the use of numerous textual references that you've painstakingly hunted down; or about how Kant's demand that you sublimate your unwanted desires is a form of self harm if you take any view of psychology since Freud, and as Kant rules out self harm his own moral psychology is screwed; I want you to give me interesting theodicies to the problem of evil; bring your knowledge of physics to bear in philosophy of science; utilise the abilities learnt in critical thinking modules to accurately and clearly lay out an argument as you see it; I want you to present me with why the Buddhist philosophers who analytic philosophy generally ignore had some interesting arguments for why objects don't persist through time. This is what we want.

I don't want to read your essay about Sufism and the realm of the imagination, which is written in the style of a poem. I don't want you to tell me how dualism is true on the grounds that you believe the universe is wrought by a battle between angels and demons. I don't want to hear some metaphorical crap about how existence is a transitory state of limbo induced emotion (what's that even mean?), which is what you believe ever since you chatted to some blokes down at the pub last night. We don't want to hear your theory of property dualism whereby the properties are located in the space between a nucleus and the electrons, and that's why atomic bombs are so explosive because when you split the atom you destroy the soul. I've heard it all (really, these things actually took place, I'm not making it up) – and, yes, it is all very original. But there's a difference between these things, and the items from the previous list.

COMMON MISTAKES

With a description of those criteria in place, let's turn to some common mistakes. Jimmy Lenman has a list of even more, in his advice on how to write a crap essay. If you want to write a crap essay, then follow the common mistakes Jimmy lists. Otherwise, try and avoid them.

Bluff the Tutor – Something I am sure none of you will ever do. You cannot bluff the tutor. You cannot make it look like you understand the subject when in actual fact you've done no work at all. Big words and florid, impassioned writing does not camouflage a complete lack of argument. We are not dumb.

‘There’s no right or wrong’ – For some reason people believe that a philosophy essay licences you to say whatever you feel like, because there is no right or wrong. The mistake they make is that there is a right and a wrong. Who knows why people would think philosophy doesn’t have right and wrong answers – I just couldn’t tell you. When I mark things I want to see a conclusion goddammit, not some namby pamby ‘In philosophy nothing is ever conclusively right or wrong’. If I find that in one of your essays I’ll learn the secrets of voodoo for the sole purpose of hexing you. Honest. And just because there is a right/wrong, doesn’t mean that you are expected to come to the same conclusions as your tutor. You are not marked wrong for disagreeing with your tutor, you can write essays that directly contradict what your tutor believes. In fact, I would hope that by the by you don’t even know what your tutor believes to ensure that you don’t fall into temptation. As a side note, for some reason most of the firsts I have awarded have been to essays that conclude something that I believe to be wrong, so I’m not lying here.

A Bunch of Useless Historical Information – In an essay on utilitarianism I do not need to know the Bentham/Mill pedigree of the theory. In an essay on Descartes, I do not need to know where he was born, and how long he served in the army. I do not need to know the dates of the births and deaths of all and sundry. This is all pointless, useless information that does not motivate me towards your conclusion. Is Kant dying in 1804 going to make me more likely to believe state sponsored executions are wrong? No. Is Wittgenstein getting into a poker armed argument with Popper going to make me more likely to accept logical atomism? No. All useless historical information. Whenever I read such things I just see: ‘I hate my tutor. I want him to read lots of pointless information that doesn’t have anything to do with my argument. Please mark my essay accordingly’.

Phrases to Avoid – ‘Since the beginning of time man has pondered...’, ‘X was discussed by philosophers for centuries’, etc. It’s just strange. Usually it’s also wrong, for since the beginning of time man has spent most of his time ignoring whatever it is you want to discuss, and instead going out and getting loaded. Sentences like these just make it your essay sound pretentious. If your essay sounds like it can be read from a pulpit this isn’t a good thing, it isn’t necessarily a bad thing either, but in all honesty it just makes the person marking your essay chuckle a bit (and not in a ‘laughing with you’ kind of way).

Avoid ‘Some philosophers say’ and ‘many philosophers have argued that’, for three reasons. The first is that you may well be wrong, and grouping ‘philosophers’ together makes it sound like we’re members of some secret society (which would be upsetting, because if there is I’ve never been invited). Secondly, you may as well use this chance to demonstrate some knowledge. Don’t say ‘some philosophers’, give the name of the philosopher who proposed this argument. Lastly, whilst sometimes it is called for, people have a tendency to use these phrases because they don’t want to write ‘I think’ or ‘I believe’, and instead want to pin the blame on some other philosophers. If you believe something then stick your money where your mouth is, there’s no harm in it.

‘As we can see’, ‘in our analysis’, etc. Who is ‘we’? You and your mom? ‘We, by God’s grace Queen of Britain’? If you think something, say ‘I think that X’, be proud of it! It is ok to write in the first person in philosophy. Also, there is no need to use the impersonal ‘The author of this paper thinks that X’ that sciences sometimes use.

Phrases to Use Carefully – ‘Therefore’, ‘thus’, etc. Remember the letter I got from Mr Pune Jim? The word ‘Therefore’ indicates an implication: what stands after it is a consequence (or conclusion) of what stands before it (usually the premises). If there is no such implication in your text, then you just indicated that you think that any random stuff can follow from what you wrote. Not a good sign.

‘Logically’ – logic is a discipline, so ‘logically’ doesn’t just mean ‘reasonably’, it means ‘according to laws of logic.’ If you mean ‘reasonably’, just write that.

Jokes – Careful with jokes. If you’re lucky, you’ll get a laugh. But if you overdo it, you’re just making it sound like you’re not taking things seriously. Of course, I make jokes when I’m writing papers, as do other philosophers (although they are almost entirely boring geek jokes that only other philosophers get). So why am I hypocritically instructing you to not try to be funny? Well, as I say, it’s a rule of thumb, and when you’re churning out essays that score firsts left, right and centre, feel free to give my advice the finger and stick in whatever bad puns or silly examples you care for. At that point your examiner will recognise your genius and laugh along with you. Until then, play straight.

Indeed, that applies to everything I say here. I am teaching you a generic, and workable, writing style. When you have mastered this generic writing style, you can start ignoring my advice and start making your style your own. Until then, ignore what I say at your peril.