

# Writing a Philosophy Essay

Is there a God? Are there objective, universal moral norms or rules? What is meant by ‘reality’? Do we have free will? In studying philosophy, students aim to do the following:

- understand such philosophical questions and the concepts, arguments, and theories that philosophers use to address them
- think critically about such arguments and theories
- develop their own answers to philosophical questions

Writing philosophy essays is a key part of studying philosophy. Make sure first to understand the assignment, looking out for the questions asked and paying attention to prompts such as “outline” or “evaluate” or “compare”. Most philosophy assignments will ask you to demonstrate your understanding of the subject through **exposition** of arguments and theories, and many will also test your ability to assess these arguments and theories by writing a **critical evaluation** of them. Write your paper so that the reader understands how your exposition and evaluation answer the questions and address all parts of the assignment.

## Read the Texts Carefully, Asking Questions

Before you write a paper, though, you need to understand the course texts and recommended readings. Philosophical works need to be read slowly and with focused attention. As you read, ask yourself the following:

- What philosophical question(s) is the author addressing?
- What exactly is meant by key ideas or concepts in the text (e.g., Plato’s “Forms”, Aristotle’s “substance” and “accident”, Kant’s “categorical imperative,” Sartre’s “being-for-itself”)? Each discipline has its own technical language, which students must learn.
- What arguments does the author make (e.g., Aquinas’s five arguments for the existence of God)?
- What theories does the author propose (e.g., a dualist mind-body theory or—one of its competitors—a physicalist theory of mind)?

## Organize Your Ideas into a Logical Structure

Take notes as you read. Then put your ideas for the essay into a logical order. Because philosophy papers proceed by logical argument, creating a point-form outline that captures the structure of your argument is generally a good strategy. An outline will allow you to spot problems in your argument more easily.

## Augment Your Thesis with a Road Map that Reveals the Structure of Your Argument

Most assignments will require you to present a clear thesis statement that sums up the position for which you are arguing. In the introduction you should also provide a ‘road map’—a few sentences that announce in sequence what you intend to accomplish in each of the key stages of your paper. Road maps often rely on first person (“First, I will analyze . . .”), but if your professor prefers that you don’t use the first person, you can instead describe what your essay will accomplish (“First, the essay will analyze . . .”).

## Show Your Understanding through Clear and Accurate Exposition

Try to make your expository writing as clear and accurate as possible, and try to show the logical connections between the different parts of a philosophical system. Avoid vague or overly brief exposition, serious omissions, or misunderstandings.

In some first year courses, an early assignment may ask you to write a short paper expounding but not evaluating a concept or theory. For example: “Explain what Plato means by Forms.” Subsequent assignments in the course usually involve evaluation as well as exposition (e.g., “Outline and evaluate Plato’s theory of Forms”). In some courses, assignments may call for detailed interpretation of a text rather than an assessment of it. “Was Hume an idealist?”, “Was Wittgenstein a behaviourist?” and “Was Marx a nihilist about morality?” are examples. Such questions are posed when there is disagreement among scholars about how to interpret a philosopher. In such essays, you will need to examine texts very closely, find passages which support a yes or no answer, choose where you stand in the debate, and defend your answer.

### **Critically Evaluate a Philosophical Theory**

When studying a philosophical theory, you will need to think about both its strengths and weaknesses. For example, is a particular theory of art (such as the view that art is the expression of emotion) comprehensive: does it apply to all the arts and all types of art, or only to some? Is it logically consistent or does it contain contradictions? Are there counterexamples to it?

As you think about your topic, read the course materials, and take notes, you should work out and assemble the following:

- the strengths of a philosopher’s theory
- the arguments the philosopher gives in support of the theory and those the philosopher did not provide but which might still support it
- possible criticisms of those arguments
- how the philosopher has replied or could reply to these criticisms

Finally, ask yourself how you would evaluate those replies: do they work or not? Be selective, especially in a shorter paper. In a 1,000-word essay, for instance, discuss one or two arguments in favour and one or two against. In a 2,000- or 2,500-word paper, you can include more arguments and possible replies. Finally, plan carefully: leave enough space for your assessment.

A different type of critical evaluation assignment may ask for a comparative appraisal of two or more theories. For example, “Which account of human decision-making is stronger: X’s free will theory or Y’s determinist theory?” In such essays, your thesis could be that one account is better than the other or, perhaps, that neither account is clearly superior. You might argue that each has different strengths and weaknesses.

### **Develop Your Own Answers to Philosophical Questions**

In the type of critical assessments above, you are already, to some extent, articulating your own philosophical positions. As you read texts in a course on, say, philosophy of mind or philosophy of art, you should be asking, based on what you have read so far, which theory is the best? Don’t be content to just understand theories and know their strengths and weaknesses. Push yourself to think out your own account of mind or art.

Some upper-year essay assignments may throw a fundamental philosophical question at you: “What is art?”, “Do we have free will?”, “What is morality?”, or “What is reality?”. Here, you will present your own answer, giving reasons, answering objections, and critically evaluating alternative approaches. Your answer/thesis might be an existing theory or a synthesis of two or more theories, or (more rarely) a completely new theory. Now you are not only expounding theories or critically evaluating them; you are also developing your own philosophy!