Tips for Successful Philosophical Writing[1]

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1. Read the assigned question or topic, think about it carefully, and address it.

Address it as thoroughly as possible within the word limit. This involves thinking carefully about which points can be *left out*, in addition to which points must be included. Be sure to answer the assigned question, and not a different one (unless you have been told to design your own topic).

2. Do not talk about related but irrelevant points.

A common mistake is to take the essay question as an invitation to say whatever you know about the relevant reading, author, or topic. It isn't. Make sure every paragraph and every sentence is supporting your overall thesis, and make every sentence count.

Another common mistake is to take up space saying things that sound important on the surface, but are really doing nothing for your argument. For example, "Biologists have puzzled over the problem of altruism for millennia," or "Invasive species are the biggest problem conservation biology has ever faced." These might seem like relatively benign ways to make your essay sound interesting. But it is best to resist the temptation to spend time on big claims you do not have the space to defend, and instead get right to what *is* interesting: the view that you will argue for.

3. Give reasons (arguments) for your view.

Just asserting your view is not enough. Give your reader reasons to believe you. Opinions are not the same as reasons. Also, restating your view several times in different words is not the same as giving an argument for it. An argument will contain *evidence* for your view, distinct from your statement of the view itself, with clear reasoning connecting the two.

4. State your points clearly, using simple prose.

Do not commit the egregious error of presuming that long, fancy, overly verbose sentences full of obscure words and very hyperbolic or otherwise unnecessary embellishments make your writing appear more insightful or profound.

They don't. They make your writing confusing.

It is fine and good to use the first person in philosophical writing. It will be clear to your reader what you are up to if you say things like "I will argue that…" or "First I will describe the general view, then I will clarify it with an example…" or "This point follows from what I discussed above…"

An important tip, especially for those new to philosophical writing: Do not use fancy terms (like 'teleological', 'epistemic', 'ontological', anything in Latin…) when you do not have a good reason for using them instead of plain English, other than wanting to sound fancy. This is just as bad as misusing a technical term in scientific writing. It will lead to you sounding at best pretentious and confusing, or at worst like you don't know what you're talking about.

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[1] A number of these tips are adapted from Jim Pryor's "Guidelines on Writing Philosophy" (http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html) and Helena De Bres' writing tips (https://sites.google.com/a/wellesley.edu/pinkguidetophilosophy/how-to-write-1). I recommend reading these further resources as well.

5. Revise, proofread, and revise again.

Good, clear writing is necessary for communicating good, clear thinking. If your intended meaning gets confused or obscured by spelling and grammatical mistakes, that is just as bad (from a marking perspective) as your thinking being confused or obscure.

I am happy to discuss your written works-in-progress with you in office hours. There are also services available through Student Learning Services/Tā te Ākonga for help with writing, including English as a second language (see http://www.library.auckland.ac.nz/services/student-learning).

6. In summary, write as if your reader is LAZY and MEAN.

Write for a reader who is LAZY—she will not make any special efforts to decipher what you are saying when it is not obvious—and MEAN—she will interpret your confusing or ambiguous statements in the least charitable way possible. If you write something unclear, she will assume that your thinking is unclear, or that you do not understand the material.

7. Last but not least: Do not plagiarise.

You are responsible for knowing what constitutes plagiarism, and for avoiding it. If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please review this page and material linked therein: <http://www.cite.auckland.ac.nz/index.html>

Here are some examples of proper referencing and some examples of plagiarism, with excerpts from hypothetical student essays followed by comments about them:

Proper Referencing Example 1: Reference like this.[2]

"… Evolution does not design organisms or their traits in a forward-looking way. For example, whales' ancestors lived on land and subsequently moved to life in the water. But rather than evolving gills like fish, their nostrils gradually moved higher and higher on their skulls, as they adapted to aquatic life over many generations (Zimmer 2013, p. 13). This is just one example of how natural selection works with what it has, rather than optimising organisms "from scratch" to fit their environments…"

An example from Zimmer's book is used to support the author's point, so Zimmer is cited appropriately. At the end of the essay there will be a section called "bibliography" or "references" or "works cited," containing a full bibliographic entry for each cited source, and one of those entries will look like this:

"Zimmer, C. (2013). *The Tangled Bank: An Introduction to Evolution* (2nd edition). Roberts & Co."

Proper Referencing Example 2: Proper referencing, not very good writing.

"… Evolution does not design organisms or their traits in a forward-looking way. For example, "evolution did not completely retool cetaceans from the ground up. Instead, the phylogeny of cetaceans indicates that their nostrils gradually shifted up to the top of their skulls, allowing them to take in air more efficiently each time they rose to the surface of the water. Cetacean fossils also show

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[2] There are a number of different conventions for formatting references. You can use the format modelled here, or you can reference your sources in footnotes or endnotes. There are also different styles for how you convey the bibliographical information. I do not care which of these formats and styles you choose to use, as long as you use it consistently and thoroughly.

that the loss of hind legs took millions of years. Some 40 million years ago, fully aquatic species such as Dorudon had evolved. But Dorudon still had small but complete hindlimbs" (Zimmer 2013, p. 13). This is just one example of how natural selection works with what it has, rather than optimising organisms "from scratch" to fit their environments…"

This example follows proper referencing practice. Zimmer is quoted word for word, so quotation marks are used and a full citation is given at the end of the quotation. That is good. This essay excerpt could be more well written, though: the author is just copying and pasting a large chunk of someone else's work, rather than putting it in her own words. This typically indicates laziness, or failure to understand the material enough to put it in one's own words, or both. Use direct quotations judiciously, when maintaining another author's original wording is important for helping you make your own argument.

Plagiarism Example 1:

"… Evolution does not design organisms or their traits in a forward-looking way. For example, whales' ancestors lived on land and subsequently moved to life in the water. The phylogeny of cetaceans indicates that their nostrils gradually shifted up to the top of their skulls, letting them take in air more efficiently each time they rose to the surface of the water. This is just one example of how natural selection works with what it has, rather than optimising organisms "from scratch" to fit their environments…"

This example does not follow proper referencing practices. A sentence is copied almost word-for-word from the same Zimmer page as in the two examples above, with a minor wording modification, and no reference is made anywhere to Zimmer. This will be handled as a plagiarism case.

Plagiarism Example 2:

"… Evolution does not design organisms or their traits in a forward-looking way. For example, whales' ancestors lived on land and subsequently moved to life in the water. The first whales were typical land animals. As whales evolved, they lived in nearshore marine habitats and evolved nostrils positioned further and further back along the snout. This is just one example of how natural selection works with what it has, rather than optimising organisms "from scratch" to fit their environments…"

This example does not follow proper referencing practices. In this case, the author of this essay Googled "whales living on land", clicked on the first hit that came up—a website on Understanding Evolution from UC Berkeley[3]—and included a few sentences from that webpage in her essay. There were a few changes made to the wording that was lifted from the website and included in the essay, but that does not matter. This author has presented another author's material as her own, and this will be handled as a plagiarism case.

Note that if the author of this essay had simply (a) put the whale example in her own words or (b) put quotation marks around the relevant text, and cited the Understanding Evolution webpage from UC Berkeley, there would be no problem here.

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[3] evolution.berkeley.edu/evolibrary/article/evograms_03