

Political Philosophy: basic tips for writing and researching

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1. Writing

General advice:

The essay questions require you to produce arguments rather than literature reviews: use the readings to support your own arguments rather than merely describing the readings.

Philosophical arguments should begin with a clear and concise statement of your thesis and explain why the claims you make are interesting or important. You should also make sure to explain any technical terms used in your argument. The key aim of your essay should be to provide a logically structured argument. Give the reader reasons why they should accept your conclusion and provide evidence and argument to convince them. Try to focus only on the strongest reasons you can provide rather than simply giving as many as possible. You should test your arguments by considering and evaluating potential objections. At all times, try to be as clear and concise in your writing as possible. Conclude by stating what your argument has demonstrated.

A good essay is clearly structured and signposted, convincingly argued, and shows independent thought. In political philosophy essays it is fine to write in the first person and use possessive pronouns, e.g. “I argue that...” “In the second part of the essay I use the example of...to demonstrate that...” “My aim is to illustrate...” “My objection to this argument is...”. Use signposting and transition phrases to keep the reader apprised of where they are in your argument and where the argument is going, e.g. “I have demonstrated that...In the next section I show...”

Certain words and phrases used in ordinary language have special meaning in philosophical writing. Avoid using these terms unless you are certain of their technical usage. Common examples include “begs the question/question-begging”, “sound/unsound” “valid/invalid”.

Introductions

Use the introduction to tell the reader what to what you will do and how you will do it.

Your introduction should:

- Lay out your key claims.
- Tell the reader what reasons you plan to give in support of your conclusion.
- Summarise any counter-arguments you will consider and outline how you will overcome them.
- Briefly define any key terms necessary (although you should also avoid making your introduction a long list of definitions).
- Signpost to the reader how your essay will be structured.

Here's an example:

Q. Are Jaffa Cakes better described as cakes or biscuits?

A. In this essay I will show that Jaffa Cakes are better described as cakes than they are biscuits. A biscuit is a small baked product, either savoury or sweet, whereas a cake is a bread-like, sweet, baked dessert. In the first part of my essay I will offer fuller conceptualisations of the terms cake and biscuit, before moving on to demonstrate that the physical characteristics of Jaffa Cakes mean that they are most properly conceived of as cakes. The latter part of my essay will be devoted to addressing two common objections to the claim that Jaffa Cakes are cakes. These objections are: first, that Jaffa Cakes are too small to be cakes, and second, that Jaffa Cakes are more commonly eaten like biscuits than they are cakes. In response to the first objection, I will demonstrate that a particular size range is not a necessary condition for correct ascription of the term cake, and in reply to the second objection, I will show that although desserts usually conclude a meal, it is not necessary that they always do so. Finally, before concluding, I will consider the claim that biscuits are a form of cake, meaning that Jaffa Cakes can correctly be called either cake or biscuit. Although I concede that all biscuits are cakes, I argue in turn that it does not follow that all cakes are therefore biscuits.

The Argument (main body)

We often talk about the importance of good argument and analysis in an essay, but what do these two terms mean?

Argument

An argument consists in the giving of reasons (premisses) for or against a claim (conclusion). Two kinds of arguments are common: *deductive* arguments and *inductive* arguments. In a valid deductive argument the truth of the premisses guarantees the conclusion. For example:

All cats meow; therefore, if X is a cat then X meows.

In inductive arguments the premisses support the conclusion rather than guaranteeing it. Inductive arguments tend to be used when using observed/empirical data to support a conclusion. For example:

All the cats I have observed meow; therefore, if X is a cat then X meows.

A good argument is strong if it is inductive and sound if it is deductive. A sound deductive argument is one in which the premisses given in support of the conclusion are true and lead logically to the conclusion offered (are valid). In other words, if the premisses are true then they guarantee the conclusion. A strong inductive argument is where the conclusion is very likely true given the premisses. A deductive argument is either sound or unsound, an inductive argument can be placed upon a continuum from weak to strong depending upon the strength of the reasons given in support of the conclusion and the degree to which they do in fact support it. A weak argument will be inconsistent, incoherent, and lead to implausible or false conclusions. It will leave points that might have led to different conclusions undeveloped and will contain unacknowledged or undefended assumptions.

An essay might contain several strands of argument, it is important that these arguments do not contradict one another.

Analysis

Analysis is the process of tracing and testing chains of logic, causation, and inference. It often involves breaking down a problem or argument in order to understand its component parts and the relationships between them. In the case of empirical arguments this involves exploring whether the methods of data collection are good, whether the inferences made and causal patterns identified are plausible, the correct variable selected and excluded, the significance of findings is sufficient to inspire confidence or certainty, correlations have been correctly identified, etc. In other words, analysis seeks to answer the question of whether the data are relevant, correctly reported, and the conclusions reached from them reliable and reported with the right degree of confidence. Often it involves exploring possible alternative inferences that the data or premisses might support. In theoretical and normative analysis the

aim is to determine if the argument is sound or strong by testing and evaluating claims and the premisses they rest upon. Relevant key concepts will be properly described and shown to be understood. Good analysis begins by correctly identifying and describing the key claims made by an author, its aim is to show how successfully the evidence and/or argument supports the conclusions.

Now that we have defined our key terms, let’s look at what you should do in the main body of your essay. Primarily, this section of your essay should do what you said you would do in your introduction. Keep the following points in mind:

- Focus on the question and upon making sure that your arguments are sound or strong.
- Demonstrate that your argument is good by considering possible counter-arguments and defending it against them. Try to anticipate and respond to arguments against your position. These arguments can come from the literature. This process is often what is meant by the phrase 'critical analysis'.
- Do not merely agree with the literature – give reasons for agreeing with it and show that these are good reasons
- If you want to disagree with another’s argument then find counter-arguments and show that committing to your opponent’s argument leads to implausible conclusions.
- Be charitable: when considering another’s argument, present it in its strongest form. Your own argument will be better if you do this. Failure to do this can open you up to being accused of a straw man argument (see the list of fallacies).
- Only consider the strongest and most relevant objections to a claim.

When you make an argument, think about how confident you are of your claims and whether your arguments are intended to support your position or undermine that of your opponent. Does your argument challenge or entirely disprove your opponent’s? Does it establish your claim, or does it merely support it? The fourfold classification of arguments below, from Gerry Cohen’s essay ‘How to do political philosophy’ (you can find this in his book *The Currency of Egalitarian Justice*, p.226), can be helpful in thinking about your own essays:

	Decisively	Nondecisively
Supports my position	Proves	Doesn’t Prove
Attacks their position	Refutes	Doesn’t Refute

When critiquing someone else's argument, consider this useful advice from philosopher Daniel Dennett:

“How to compose a successful critical commentary:

1. You should attempt to re-express your target’s position so clearly, vividly, and fairly that your target says, “Thanks, I wish I’d thought of putting it that way.
2. You should list any points of agreement (especially if they are not matters of general or widespread agreement).
3. You should mention anything you have learned from your target.
4. Only then are you permitted to say so much as a word of rebuttal or criticism.”

Daniel Dennett (2014) *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking*. pp.33-34.

Conclusions

A good conclusion will demonstrate to the reader that you have done what you said you would in your introduction. The aim is to explain what your argument has established.

- Summarise your argument.
- Show that you have concluded that argument.
- Avoid introducing new claims in the conclusion.

Editing

Essays are always improved by editing and proof-reading.

- Ask yourself if you could have expressed any of the points you have made more clearly. Reading difficult bits aloud is a good way to tell if they are not expressed clearly.
- Check whether your essay meets the marking criteria in the student handbook.
- Check that your referencing and bibliography is correct. Always provide a citation when you attribute a claim to a thinker.

2. Basic research

Begin your research by looking at the key papers and authors cited in the readings for the module. Search for these in the library catalogue or via a search engine.

Using search engines effectively

- Use “quotation marks” to search for specific phrases rather than individual words.
- Use the minus sign to -exclude certain -“words or phrases” from your search.
- Use **Google Scholar** to restrict your search to academic texts: scholar.google.com
- Searching for author:surname-initials in Google Scholar will only return results by that author, e.g. author:schwarz-e
- You can also exclude authors with the minus sign: -author:garner-r
- Click on ‘Cited by’ and ‘Related articles’ under a Google Scholar search result to find papers on the same subjects and which engage with the arguments you are interested in.

3. Reading political philosophy

Philosophical texts can require a different approach than other kinds of reading. The texts you will encounter in political philosophy tend to consist mostly of argument rather than factual information. When you read a philosophical text, you should look for the argument being made.

The papers you read will usually try to do the following:

- Illustrate a particular problem.
- Argue for a solution to that problem.

Typically, they will argue in either one or both of the following ways:

- They will advance an argument in favour of the view being proposed (positive arguments).
- They will critique views opposed to their own (negative arguments).

Often, to understand a reading you will need to read it slowly and do so more than once.

When you read a paper, book, or chapter it is worth doing so looking out for certain features of the paper detailed below. Making a note of these features is good practice for your revision and in order to form the basis of a literature review. A good place to look for an overview of the argument made in a paper is in its abstract.

Key features of a paper:

1. What is the problem the author is address?
2. What are the author's key conclusions?

3. What evidence or argument does the author offer to establish that their conclusions are true?

In a well-written paper the author will state their conclusions early and signpost how their argument will be structured. Often, paragraphs in the main body of the paper will begin with a summary of the argument being made in that paragraph.

The reasons that an author offers to support their conclusions are called the premisses. Often you can spot that conclusion is being drawn by the use of signposting words and phrases like: *thus, therefore, then, hence, consequently, so, it follows that*. You can identify premisses by the use of words like: *since, for, because, if*.

It can be useful to try to separate and summarise the arguments being made in a paper into premisses and conclusions, e.g.:

 Premiss 1. Socrates is a man.

 Premiss 2. All men are mortal.

 Conclusion 1. Socrates is mortal.

Keep in mind that a paper may contain multiple arguments, so make sure you identify which premisses support which conclusions.

4. What objections does the author consider and how do they respond to them?

Common ways to object to an argument are:

- to cast doubt on one or more of the premisses;
- to identify an unstated (and questionable) premiss that an argument relies upon.
- to show that the conclusion does not follow from the premisses even if they are true/plausible;
- to show that the conclusion is undesirable in some way;
- to show that the conclusion clashes with some other important principle.

5. What key terms and definitions does the author rely upon?

Sometimes a paper may rely upon a particular definition of a contested term, or may use a term with a different technical meaning than is commonly understood. It is important for you to understand what the author means when they use a particular term.

4. Common Fallacies

Fallacies are forms of faulty reasoning. Below are some common fallacies that often crop-up in essays. Identifying these mistakes in your own and others' reasoning is an important skill.

Appeal to Authority

Referring to a well-known figure who supports your claim without providing an argument. Very often this takes the form of simply providing a citation to support a conclusion but without describing how that thinker's position supports your own.

Begging the Question

An argument where one or more of the premisses used to support the conclusion rests on the assumption that the conclusion is true. E.g.: murder is wrong; the death penalty is murder; therefore the death penalty is wrong. Here the first premiss is true because murder is wrongful killing, so the premiss: 'the death penalty is murder' rests upon the conclusion that the death penalty is wrong.

Non Sequitur

The conclusion does not follow from the premiss(es). A good example is when correlation is used to imply causation, e.g. the cockerel always crows before dawn, therefore dawn is caused by the cockerel crowing.

Slippery Slope

Asserting that a small step will inevitably result in a set of much larger (usually undesirable) consequences without evidence to support the claim. For example, if gay couples are allowed to marry then eventually the government will permit people to marry their pets.

Straw Man

Attributing a false position to your opponent and then attacking that instead of their true position.

See also: <https://yourlogicalfallacyis.com/>

5. Further Reading:

Feinberg, J. (2008) *Doing Philosophy: A guide to the Writing of Philosophy Papers*, 4th edn., Thompson Wadworth, Belmont CA.

Fogelin, R. and Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (1991) *Understanding Arguments: An Introduction to Informal Logic*, 4th edn., Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, Orlando.