

WHAT MAKES A GOOD PHILOSOPHY ESSAY?

THE SHORT ANSWER:

Writing philosophy is very different from other writing you have been and may be asked to do. We want you to engage critically with the philosophers you read in such a way that you are able to form your own opinions about the issues under discussion and not just to report the positions advanced by those you read (though this is an essential element of a good essay – see below). While we do not expect you to be strikingly original or to substantiate new solutions to philosophical problems, we want you to begin the process which leads philosophers to their positions. To do that you must think for yourself as clearly as possible about some difficult, abstract questions.

The most serious faults in a philosophy essay are muddle and irrelevance. Usually an essay is supposed to provide an answer to a question. There is no right answer which we are looking for and although there are bad answers to philosophical questions, there are also many different good answers. You certainly do not get marked up or down for either agreeing or disagreeing with the lecturer. Hence although we are interested in your answer **we are much more interested in the way in which you reach it**. The three most important features of a good essay are listed below (in order) with some notes about how to achieve them.

1. Clear and accurate written English

- a. Use grammatical sentences (unlike spoken English).
- b. Say what you mean rather than leave the reader to work it out.
- c. Avoid unexplained jargon; define technical terms.
- d. Avoid stylistic variation: if one word is the right word to express your thought, then another similar word may not do equally well.
- e. Feel free to repeat yourself, or state the obvious, if it is going to ensure that you meet the other goals.

2. Careful reading and critical discussion of texts

- a. Keep asking yourself: Why did he say that?
- b. Don't categorize an author – he may be saying something similar to, but significantly different from, other authors you know about.
- c. Try to make your criticism such that the author needs to respond to it and consider how the author might respond to what you say.
- d. Don't ignore passages because they are difficult or seemingly irrelevant – it is up to you to understand why the author thought they were relevant.
- e. Try to find out as much as possible about things you do not understand (use dictionaries, encyclopaedias etc.)

3. Developing your own position

- a. Don't merely express your opinion – **argue** for it.
- b. An important part of thinking independently is how you organize your discussion of what you have read and your critical responses to it.
- c. Make sure your conclusion connects with what went before.
- d. If you think someone has not argued for a premise or assumption, try to work out why he did not think it was necessary to argue for it.
- e. Anticipate objections to your position and try to respond to them in advance.
- f. Don't worry if your conclusion is not original – what is important is how you argue for it.

