

Philsoc Student Essay Prize: Judges' Guidelines

After some experience now of reading and assessing OUDCE's students' essays, we feel in a reasonable position to offer some guidelines on what makes a good philosophical essay, and what must be avoided.

There is a difference between what makes a good (academic) essay, and what extra, or less (!), is needed to qualify it as a good *philosophical* essay. Any good academic essay must be well structured, having a preferably brief and concise introduction, telling the *lay* reader what precisely the essay's objective is, and enough background to set the scene. The body of the essay should provide the material necessary to fulfil that objective, followed by a conclusion that neatly draws together the threads, summarising how the objective has been achieved. Other essentials for any good academic essay include clarity of expression, explanation of any technical terms used, and accurate references given in footnotes or endnotes *plus* a pertinent bibliography.

Just a word on references and bibliography. They should not only demonstrate honestly (no unbelievably long bibliographies please!) the range and depth of the author's relevant reading, but through precision of reference (e.g. page numbers and specific edition of a work) should facilitate easy reader access to the primary or secondary literature referred to. However, mere references are no substitute for a brief explanation of the point they substantiate: the reader may look them up, but needs to understand from the essay the point being confirmed by the source referred to.

For specifically philosophical essays, argument is essential. Narrative description may well be relevant to an essay on Jane Austen, but plays little part in a philosophy essay, in which the author must engage with, analyse, and defend or oppose the arguments for or against the case being made. It isn't enough to quote the *conclusions* of philosophers with views friendly to the author's. The argument needs to be set out. The same applies to arguments opposing the essayists' views, which must equally be spelt out and their refutation attempted. The relevant arguments, we assume, have been learnt from the OUDCE philosophy course attended by the Student essayist; so we look for arguments proposed by professional philosophers as well as the endorsing or opposing argumentation of the essayist.

All this sounds a lot to fit into 750 or 1,000 words, or even 1,500, and it is. However, the best submissions manage it well, clues being to select an essay subject that allows sufficient, concise treatment within the word limit, to state *explicitly* the essay's possibly limited objective, and then to focus on what is strictly relevant without otiose repetition. Also, valuable word saving is often achievable by editing down the introductory paragraph after the rest of the essay has been drafted.

How can (or should) a good entry to this competition give *less* than to other essay competitions? First, it should be relatively impersonal. The reader needs to be convinced by the argument, not by the unsupported convictions of the writer. Therefore, expressions like 'I believe' or 'in my opinion' are best omitted. Secondly, succinct and clear philosophical argument, often best expressed in quite short sentences, is more important than elegant style and perfect English. OUDCE's courses have a significant proportion of participants whose first language is not English, and this is allowed for, so that marks are not necessarily deducted for awkwardness of expression that may result from unfamiliarity with the language, as long as the meaning is clear. However, the judges are human, and susceptible to being favourably impressed by correct grammar and spelling.