

Philsoc Student Essay Prize: Judges' Guidelines

We set out here what we believe to be desirable, and indeed essential, for a good philosophical essay. We strongly advise anyone submitting an essay for the Essay Prize to follow the guidelines below.

Tripartite essay structure

- i) Introduction - a short paragraph (or two at most) to set the scene and announce the author's brief answer to the essay question. In the case of broad or open-ended essay questions, be explicit about limiting the essay's objective within the terms of the essay question. Remember the word limit.
- ii) The body of the essay - this should provide the material and arguments that logically fulfil the stated objective.
- iii) Conclusion - a paragraph or so that neatly draws together the threads, summarising how the answer stated in the introduction has been justified.

Clarity and explanation

Assume you are writing for an intelligent lay reader, not a philosopher. Write clearly, and briefly explain any technical terms used. Terms with specialist meaning in philosophy, like 'intension' and 'intentionality', need to be explained. Stylistically brilliant writing will certainly be found pleasing, but will not add nearly as many marks as will be lost by long-winded, obscure or inaccurate writing. Avoid repetition. Aim for clarity, concision and economy of words.

Argument

The essence of a philosophical essay is its argument - convincing, succinct argument in support of the conclusion you propose. The specific arguments do not have to be your own, original arguments. Such originality would be incredibly hard to achieve concerning questions that renowned philosophers may have argued about for centuries. Usually it is a question of taking sides in a current or historical philosophical debate, and giving plausible justification for your stance. To do that you will need to draw on what has been said for *and against* your position. Give your reasoned justification why your case stands up better than others, citing and combating opposing arguments. The judges may not agree with your verdict, but will not mark you down for a well reasoned case. Do *not* use expressions like "I think ..." or "I believe ...". Your opinion is irrelevant unless it is supported by plausible justification. Although you may cite the views of established authorities in support of your case (argument from authority), you should not omit their supporting argument.

Referencing and bibliography

It is a basic academic requirement in a philosophy essay (and one demanded by the judges!) not only to name the sources you have relied on, but wherever possible to identify the relevant passages or quotations referred to. Any reference made to a source work in the text or in footnotes should name the source shown in the bibliography *and also the page number* (e.g. 'See Chalmers 1981, page 137'). The bibliography at the end of the essay should list the source works according to a consistent format or publicly recognised 'citation style' (e.g. the Harvard System, or MLA Citation Style). It should demonstrate an appropriate range of the primary and/or secondary literature, but should not be unbelievably long.

Remember that numbered footnotes and endnotes (preferably footnotes!) are included in the word count, while the essay title and bibliography are not.

Stick to the essay question

The essay title is all important. Read it carefully. Read it again when you have drafted your essay, and eliminate all digressions, all 'interesting asides', all extrapolations, observations and stylistic flourishes that do not contribute to your central argument. It is often hard enough to fit the relevant argument into your word limit without making your task harder by including extraneous material at the expense of what you really need to include.

Style, grammar, spelling

Your judges are human, and cannot help being favourably impressed by genuinely fine writing in perfect English, and even more *unfavourably* influenced by incorrect grammar and spelling. Yet those are relatively unimportant compared with the virtues of clear, economic expression of the arguments, often best conveyed in short sentences. OUDCE's courses have a significant proportion of participants whose first language is not English, and this is allowed for. Marks are not necessarily deducted for awkwardness of expression that may result from unfamiliarity with the language, as long as the meaning is clear. Clarity is essential. Lack of clarity can be interpreted as a sign of unclear thinking.

The word limit

It is essential to read the competition rules and follow them closely. Do not exceed the word limit. If the class tutor has generously accepted an over long essay, be sure to prune it down to size before submitting it for the Prize.

FB, BC