

ESSAY WRITING ADVICE

In a philosophy essay, your goal is to *explain and justify your response to some philosophical issue or problem*. You should see your essay as your strongest attempt to present your *best reasons* for accepting whatever conclusion it is that you've decided to endorse as a response to the question(s) that your lecturer has asked you to consider.

Writing a good philosophy essay is a skill. Or more precisely, writing a good philosophy essay relies on several skills, each of which is useful and important both within and outside of the philosophy classroom. The most important of these skills are:¹

1. **Comprehension.** Your ability to understand the sometimes very complicated ideas, theories, and arguments that other philosophers discuss.
2. **Explanatory ability.** Your ability to explain complicated ideas and arguments in a clear and precise way (without using too many words).
3. **Critical thinking.** Your ability to independently evaluate your own ideas and the ideas of other people in a balanced and well-reasoned way.
4. **Persuasiveness.** Your ability to present compelling reasons for whatever conclusions you choose to argue towards.

A philosophy essay tests for each of these skills at once, as well as a few other skills (such as your capacity for self-directed research).

The purpose of *this* document is to help you make the most out of demonstrating these skills in your essay, by helping you to improve the *writing* of your essay. There are five main sections:

- §1: [Staying focused](#)
- §2: [The main components of a philosophy essay](#)
- §3: [Quality writing](#)
- §4: [Referencing](#)
- §5: [Some tips on what *not* to do](#)

Do try to read all of this document if you can, but at the very least you should pay special attention to §1, §2, and §3, as the points discussed in those sections are more likely to make a significant difference to your marks.

¹ In the official marking criteria for the School of PRHS, these are categorised under *Intellectual Abilities and Skills, Knowledge and Understanding*, and *Quality of Writing*. These are for the most part just different words for the same things.

§1. Staying focused

One of the most frequent comments that I make when marking essays is that the essay attempts to talk about too many separate points, and as a result the discussion zooms past many points far too quickly.

So, one of the most important pieces of advice that I can give is:

1. *Don't try to talk about too many separate points — focus on a specific issue or argument*

By “something specific”, I mean a *single* argument plus one or two replies. At most, you might want to talk about a couple of different arguments (e.g., if you're answering a 2-part question). But in a 2000 word essay, it would be difficult to talk about three (or more) separate arguments in depth, and you should generally try to avoid sacrificing *breadth* over *depth* of discussion. (The only exception to this rule that I can think of is if you've been instructed to cover as many topics as possible — which is rare but not impossible.)

In practice, this means that you should usually try to *explicitly set aside* some points which are less relevant for answering the question. For example, you might say such things as...

- ✓ Due to lack of space, I am going to focus specifically on ... because ...
- ✓ There are several objections to this idea, but I am going to focus on ... because ...
- ✓ This view comes in several distinct varieties, but in this essay I'm going to focus on ...

When you set some discussion point aside like this, always try to say why you're setting it aside. This might be because, for example, it's not the most interesting thing to talk about; or it might just be because you don't have enough space to talk about everything. So you should try to write a sentence or two explaining why you've chosen to talk about the things you have.

If you want to, you can also *briefly mention* some of the issues or objections that you're setting aside. For example, you might write something like...

- ✓ There are several important objections to this idea, but due to lack of space I will focus my attention on ... For some discussion on the other major objections, see (citation 1), (citation 2), and (citation 3).

That way you show your reader that you *recognise* that there are other issues to consider which are *relevant* to answering the question. Your marker will appreciate that you've done the background research, and that you've chosen to leave out some of what you've learnt to make space for a more in-depth discussion on one part of the topic. Your marker will understand that you cannot talk about everything in a single essay, and you won't be punished for not discussing every issue.

§2. The Main Components of a Philosophy Essay

A good philosophy essay will almost always have five major components:

- A. A brief *introduction*
- B. An *explanation of the problem to be addressed* (including relevant background)
- C. An *explanation of and argument for your chosen response* to the issue or problem
- D. Some *critical reflection* on that defence (i.e., responses to potential objections)
- E. A brief *conclusion*

There are exceptions to the above, of course, but they are rare. The very large majority of good philosophical essays will include each of these five components. When you're writing your essay, I recommend asking yourself the following:

1. Does my essay include each of these components?
2. Is it clear to my reader that the essay includes each of these components?

That is: you should be writing your essay in such a way that each of the components is immediately apparent for your reader. There are many ways you might try to do this, but one very simple and obvious way that often works would be to have each component correspond to a distinct *section* of your essay, and then just write out the sections from A to E in exactly that order. Many good philosophy essays have exactly this kind of structure, including some of the best philosophy essays ever written: it's very formulaic, but that's not necessarily a bad thing!

But that's just one way you might structure your essay. There might be other ways of structuring your essay which work just as well, or perhaps even better. For example, if you are addressing a two-part question for your essay, then you might want to split components B, C and/or D into separate parts, one for each part of the question. In that case, your essay might have one of the following kinds of structure:

Introduction	Introduction	Introduction
Explain background for Q1	Explain background for Q1&Q2	Explain background for Q1&Q2
Argument for Q1 response	Argument for Q1 response	Argument for Q1 response
Explain background for Q2	Reflection on Q1 response	Argument for Q2 response
Argument for Q2 response	Argument for Q2 response	Reflection on Q1 response
Reflection on Q1&Q2 responses	Reflection on Q2 response	Reflection on Q2 response
Conclusion	Conclusion	Conclusion

Every essay is different, and ultimately you should write your essay in whatever way that *you* think makes your ideas clearest and your arguments most persuasive overall. That's something for you to judge yourself. What is most important is that each of the five components of a good philosophy is clearly present in the essay in one form or another.

So with the general stuff out of the way, let's now consider some specific advice for each of these five components in more detail...

2.1 The introduction

Your introduction should do *two* things:

2. *Your introduction should state exactly what you intend to argue (i.e., what your thesis is), and it should give some useful indication of the structure of your argument*

It is important that your introduction does both these things. (Note also that there is no requirement for your introduction to include a “warm up” sentence. For example, you don’t have to say anything like “Since the dawn of time, epistemologists have questioned the nature of knowledge...” — just cut straight to the chase, and trim any trite sentences from the introduction.)

Your introduction *must* (MUST!) include a clear statement of what you intend to argue. Your essay *will* be marked down if it doesn’t clearly state the intended conclusion somewhere at the beginning. Do not leave your conclusion as a “surprise” that’s only revealed in the conclusion! The reason for this is simple: an argument is much *clearer* and *easier-to-follow* if you know where it’s ultimately going right from the beginning. Your goal is to present the *best* and most *persuasive* argument for your ideas as possible. An unclear and difficult-to-follow argument is not persuasive, so you need to make your argument as clear as possible—and that means explaining to your reader what your intended conclusion is going to be from the very start of the essay.

For the same reason, your introduction should also give some *useful* indication of the structure of your overall argument. If your reader knows the overall structure of your paper at the beginning, then they’ll find it much easier to follow along.

This component of the introduction is a little more difficult to do correctly. The important part is that it shouldn’t contain *too little*, or *too much*, detail. But what exactly counts as “too little” or “too much” detail? Unfortunately I cannot answer that in a general way, because it will depend on the specifics of your essay. But some examples might be helpful...

- ✗ I will argue that we should accept the conclusion of the Raven’s paradox, and then I will consider some objections before drawing a conclusion.

→ This is far too little information to be *useful*: it only states the obvious. We already know that some objections will be considered and then a conclusion will be drawn, so this is not interesting or useful information for the reader.

- ✓ “I will argue that we should accept the conclusion of Hempel’s Raven’s paradox. First, I will discuss an important problem with one of the steps that Hempel uses to establish his conclusion (known as ‘Nicod’s criterion’); however, I will also argue that those problems can be safely ignored in the context of Hempel’s argument. Given this, I will then argue that Hempel’s conclusion is not actually paradoxical after all; in fact it is quite intuitive when understood correctly.”

→ This conclusion is just right: it gives a *useful* indication of the *overall structure* of the discussion to come, without getting bogged down in excessive detail.

In addition to the above, here's two more tips to consider when writing your introductions:

3. *Keep your introduction short and sweet*

Anything significantly longer than the second example above is likely going to include *too much information*. As a rule, you should keep your introduction short — usually no more than 4 or 5 sentences at the most, or ~150 words, for a 2000 word essay. A perfectly good introduction might even have as few as 3 sentences, or less than 100 words. Under no circumstances should your introduction ever be a page long!

4. *Avoid explaining any difficult ideas, concepts, or arguments in the introduction*

Suggestion 3 also means that you should try to avoid explaining any difficult ideas or concepts or arguments in the introduction. Explanations of important background information should usually come in the paragraphs immediately following the introduction, or later when they become relevant — they should not be included in the introduction itself.

2.2 Explanation of the issue or problem to be addressed

The second thing that any good philosophy essay must always do is *explain* in adequate detail exactly what the problem or issue under discussion *is*. Often (but not necessarily), this is something that will be done in the paragraphs immediately following the introduction.

Aside from writing your sentences clearly (which we'll talk about below), there are three main things to look out for when it comes to this component of the essay:

5. *Make sure you explain any and all necessary background information*

A good rule of thumb is to imagine that you're writing for a friend of yours who also studies philosophy at an undergraduate level, but who has not taken this particular module. You can reasonably expect that your friend will understand very basic or general philosophical concepts (like *validity*, *epistemology*, *ontology*, or *justification*). On the other hand, you cannot reasonably assume that your friend will know what (e.g.) *reliabilism* is, or what the *Closure Argument for scepticism* is, and so on.

So your job is to explain *everything* that your friend would *need to know* in order to adequately understand the issues you'll be talking about in your essay. Moreover, you should explain it in such a way that your friend would be able to easily understand what is going on.

6. *Try to leave out any unnecessary background information in your explanations*

It's important that you don't include any lengthy discussion or explanation of points which *are not* required to understand the issue at hand. In particular, *do not include discussion of a topic or argument just because it was discussed in the lecture*, unless that topic is specifically *required* for the reader to understand the rest of your essay. Likewise, *historical information* is usually not necessary for understanding a philosophical argument — don't waste words on history, unless it's important for understanding your argument.

There are two reasons for this. First of all, if you are including discussion of some point from the lectures which isn't on-topic, then you're not really showing that you've *understood* the topic of the essay (or the lectures). You show your understanding by recognising and discussing only what's *important*, and leaving out any things which are irrelevant and/or

unimportant. Secondly, a 2000 word essay isn't actually very long at all, and it doesn't leave a lot of space to describe (in adequate detail) all of the relevant background information, *plus* your own preferred response to the problem, *plus* a reasoned and compelling argument for your response, *plus* reflection on possible objections to your response. So, if you're spending a bunch of your word-count explaining irrelevant background information that isn't really important for what you want to argue, then you're using up words that would be much better used elsewhere.

2.3 Argument for your preferred response

Every component of the essay is important, but this component is the *most* important. Your argument for your preferred response to the question is the **core** of your essay — everything else should be structured around it. One very important thing to keep in mind when writing this component of your essay is the following piece of advice:

7. *Your essay is supposed to be an argument for your ideas, not a book report*

There is a big difference between (a) an essay in which you *argue* for a conclusion by giving *your reasons* for accepting that conclusion, and (b) an essay in which you merely *summarise* what *other people* have said about the topic. Your reader (i.e., me, and the other lecturers who will be marking your essays) want to know what *you* think about the question, and *your* reasons for responding to it in the way you have chosen to do so. Your essay should therefore always be focused on explaining *your* reasons.

It is important to recognise that *your* reasons might have originated with *someone else*. Perhaps you have read Laurence Bonjour talking about the concept of *a priori knowledge*, and you very much agree with his arguments. Nevertheless, *you* chose to agree with Bonjour's view rather than the opposing view, so there must be something about *you* which explains why you choose to agree with Bonjour — those are *your* reasons. In that case, instead of writing...

✗ According to Bonjour, P is true.

You should write...

✓ According to Bonjour, P is true. I agree with this for the following reasons...

Or alternatively:

✓ I believe that P is true, and I will establish this using an argument that originates with Bonjour.

✓ According to Bonjour, P is true. Bonjour's offers several reasons in favour of P, and while I agree with some of them, I think some of his reasons are flawed. Let me explain why...

✓ I am convinced by Bonjour's argument that P is true, for the following reasons...

In other words: remember to make it clear for your reader about *whether* you agree (or disagree) with any important claims made in your essay, and *why*. If your essay is merely a *summary* of what some other philosophers have said, then you will not receive a very good grade.

2.4 Critical reflection

An essential part of providing a *compelling* and *well-reasoned* argument for your chosen thesis is always dealing with potential problems. These might be problems with either some particular step in your argument, or the conclusion of your argument, or both.

A philosophy essay usually (though not necessarily) needs a strong critical reflection component to achieve a very high mark — it is quite often the difference between getting a 1st and not getting a 1st. It's also one of the harder components of the essay to write, because it requires a deeper understanding of the topic and much more critical thinking.

There are two specific pieces of advice that I can give regarding this component of the essay. The first is:

8. *Always focus your critical reflection on the strongest potential objections specific to your argument and/or your intended conclusion*

It's simply not possible to consider every possible objection to your conclusion in a 2000 word essay, so you will have to pick-and-choose which objections you discuss. Since your goal is to make the most compelling argument for your conclusion that you can, this means that you should have some reasoned response to the most compelling *objections*.

The objection you consider should be *specific* to what you've said. This might be, for example, an objection to one of the premises in your argument, or it might be an objection to your intended conclusion. By 'specific', I mean that it should not relate *directly* to your discussion, and it should not be a very *general* objection or problem that applies to a great many different philosophical views for reasons that don't really have anything to do with the topic of the question.

Your essay will be a lot more impressive if you're able to come up with a good response to strong objections that are specific to your discussion. You need to consider, therefore, what is the *biggest* problem (or problems) for your argument — and then you need to have some plausible response. As a general rule of thumb: if you think the response to some objection is *easy*, then you might not be considering the biggest objection!

And that brings us to the next piece of advice...

9. *Critical reflection requires much more than a one-sentence response to an objection*

I very often see essays where the *entirety* of the critical reflection component consists in a single one-sentence rebuttal to a potential objection. This is not nearly enough, and you will not receive a very high grade if the critical reflection component is very brief. It should make up a *major chunk* of your essay — a few hundred words, at the least.

There will almost certainly be many potential objections to any interesting claims you make. Most of the time, those objections will be quite *deep* and *multi-faceted*. Responding to these problems adequately requires taking them *seriously*, and dealing with them in a *careful* and *detailed* way. There are very few interesting problems or objections in any area of philosophy which can be adequately dealt with in a single sentence. So as another general rule of thumb: if you think the response to some objection is *easy*, then you might not be taking that objections seriously enough.

2.5 Conclusion

Every essay needs to have a conclusion. The most important pieces of advice here are:

10. *Keep your conclusion short and sweet*

The bulk of your essay should be devoted to components B, C, and D that I listed above — those are the parts of your essay which are the most important for determining your marks. So, it's a good idea to minimise the amount of words devoted to your conclusion. That *doesn't* mean that you should leave out the conclusion entirely. Your essay *should* have a proper conclusion. It just means that you should make your conclusion very minimal.

11. *Do not introduce new points to your argument in the conclusion*

By the time you get to your conclusion, your argument should already be *complete*. You shouldn't need to add more premises, you shouldn't need more clarifications, and you shouldn't need any more critical reflection. If a discussion point is important enough to be worth mentioning *somewhere* in your essay, then it's important enough to mention *before* the conclusion.

§3. Quality Writing

I said at the beginning that an essay tests for (amongst other things) *comprehension* and *explanatory ability*. Demonstrating both of these skills to a high degree requires *high quality writing*.

I'll explain exactly what I mean by that in a short moment. But before I do, let me quickly say something about what *don't* mean by 'high quality writing': I'm **not** talking about spelling and punctuation. You should try to write your sentences with proper spelling and punctuation to the best of your abilities (and doing so is part of the marking criteria!), but writing with proper spelling and punctuation is *not* the same thing as writing *well*, which requires adherence to the following advice. First of all:

12. *Eschew superfluous grandiloquaciousness (i.e., use simple language)*

Keep your sentences short and easy to read. Avoid using big words and philosophical jargon unless they really are useful. Don't add fancy adjectives to every other word to try to give your sentences more "style", as it actually just makes your writing ugly and more difficult to follow. Always try to use consistent terminology throughout — get rid of that thesaurus, it's not helping!

This is the second most common mistake that I see in undergraduate philosophy essays. You do not get bonus points for writing in a way that sounds "smart" or "profound" or "poetic" — in fact, your marker will almost certainly mark you down if there are many sentences could have been re-written in a much simpler way without changing the meaning. I know you've all heard this before, but I really cannot stress it enough: make your writing as simple as possible while still being clear and precise, and you will almost certainly significantly improve your marks.

13. *Explain your technical terms*

Recall what I said in point 5 above: imagine you're writing for a friend who also studies undergraduate philosophy, but perhaps hasn't taken *this* specific module. So you can assume that they understand very general or basic philosophical concepts, and you don't need to explain those; for everything else, you should explain it. (Sometimes it can be a bit vague whether you ought to explain a term or not — you'll just have to decide what's best in those cases, but you should probably err on the side of caution where unsure. Or ask about it during office hours!)

There are two reasons why you should always explain your technical terms. First, a good way to show your understanding of some difficult philosophical concept is to *explain* what you mean by it (in your own words). Do this briefly and clearly, but definitely *do* it. Secondly, there is a chance that you might be *misusing* the term in question. Mistakes happen. When some technical term is being misused, it can sometimes be *very* hard to work out what the author thinks it means—and this can make comprehension *very* difficult. However, if you have explained how *you* understand the meaning of the technical term, then your reader won't be completely lost when it is being misused because they'll know *how* it's being misunderstood.

14. Do not use quotes to make your points for you

This one is straightforward: put your explanations in your own words as much as possible. Try to avoid excessive use of quotes, especially if you're using those quotes to do all the explaining for you. There are two ways to use quotes excessively: you might be quoting too often, or you might only a few quotes but they are very long. (I've seen quotes that are an entire page long before — don't do this!)

Remember: one of your goals with the essay is to show that you *understand* the topic, and the best way to do that is to explain the relevant points on your own. Anyone can copy/paste some quotes from a reading or from the lecture notes, and doing so doesn't adequately demonstrate understanding. On the other hand, it takes genuine *comprehension* to express ideas in your own way. This means using your own examples, your own phrasing, and your own sentence structures.

More generally, quotes should only be used sparingly. Unless your essay is specifically about what some philosopher said (in which case you would expect to be quoting that philosopher a fair bit), there should usually not be multiple quotes every single paragraph. A perfectly good essay might have zero quotes, or perhaps only one or two in locations where they're especially useful. If there are dozens of quotes on every page, then you're almost certainly quoting too much.

§4. Referencing

I get asked a *lot* of questions about referencing. Sometimes it can be tricky to do right. The first and most important rule is: **don't plagiarise**. But you already knew that. The following more specific pieces of advice should help you avoid common mistakes.

15. Don't bloat your bibliography with dozens of superficial citations

The single most common question I get asked about essays is some variation on "How many references do I need to get a good mark?", or "Is it better to have lots of items in my bibliography?" The answer for both of these questions is: *you're thinking about it the wrong way*.

You do not get "bonus points" for having many items in your bibliography. *There is no magic number of sources you need to have in your bibliography get a good mark*. On the other hand, you *will* typically receive a better mark if you can show that you have *thoughtfully engaged* with a substantial number of philosophical works. But here it is crucial to recognise that there is a very big difference between (a) *citing* many different papers, and (b) *thoughtfully engaging* with many different papers. (And your marker will be able to tell this difference very easily.)

As a specific example, here's what I *don't* want to see in an essay:

- ✗ *A priori knowledge is knowledge which can be justified independent of experience (Bonjour 2000). It is knowledge of propositions which can be known through reason alone, without the need for any experience (Robinson 2010). If it can be justified without the need for any experience, then it is a priori (Pickering 1995). By 'independent of experience', I mean that experience is not required for the justification for the knowledge (Smith 1999). An example of a priori knowledge is 'A thinking thing exists', which can be known independently of experience (Descartes 1641).*

Notice that in this example, many different works are cited, but only at a very *superficial* level. The citations are all made for slightly different versions of the same very general claim (none of which really needs a citation). Moreover, not one of the citations in that example indicates a deeper *engagement* with the source material. This will have a *negative* impact on your essay overall, so try to avoid it!

16. If you're referring to what philosopher X said, then cite philosopher X

Quite often, I see the following kind of mistake:

- ✗ *According to Laurence Bonjour, there is a positive and a negative aspect to defining the 'a priori' (Russell 2014).*
- ✗ *A possible reply to this argument originates with Quine (Smith 2017).*

The sentence is about what some philosopher says, but there is no citation *to* that philosopher or where they said it. Instead, there's a citation to an encyclopedia article, or someone else's summary, or (gasp!) some lecture notes which talk about what Bonjour says.

If you want to know *why* you shouldn't do this, then just think about what you're effectively telling your reader. You're saying: "I couldn't be bothered finding and reading the orig-

inal text, so I just cited a summary encyclopedia article instead”. And that’s not the kind of impression you want to make on the person who will be grading your essay! Take the initiative, and demonstrate to your marker that you made the effort to look up the original source material for the ideas you’re discussing.

17. *Don’t cite the lecture notes/lecture slides, and try to go beyond encyclopedia articles*

This is closely related to the previous point and applies for the very same reason. For a 2000 word essay at 2nd or 3rd year university level, you should **not** be relying on lecture notes for your essay research.

(You should probably be relying on more than encyclopedia articles as well — we want to see that you’ve been engaging with journal articles and book chapters, not brief overviews and online summaries of the subject matter. You’re doing upper-level tertiary education now, you shouldn’t be relying solely on encyclopedias.)

For everything that was said during the lectures, you *should* be able to find a proper reference with just a little bit of research. Let me be a little more specific about that. There are two kinds of things that are said in the lectures. Either (a) they will be very general points, for which you do not need citations (e.g., you don’t need to provide a citation for the claim that the traditional analysis of knowledge is in terms of justified true belief); or (b) they will be specific points made by specific philosophers, for which you should be able to find your own references either in the suggested readings or through your own research.

18. *Once is (usually) enough: don’t over-cite*

This one is a little more complicated, but the short version is: you don’t need to provide a citation for every single sentence whenever you’re explaining an argument or idea which goes over several sentences. The easiest way to see what I mean is through examples. Compare the following:

- ✘ There are three key principles that underlie the paradox of the ravens (Hempel 1945). First, there is what’s known as Nicod’s criterion, a plausible criterion of confirmation that we will discuss further below (Hempel 1945, pp. 9-10). Then, there is the Equivalence condition (Hempel 1945, p. 12), and finally there is the background assumption of classical logic (Hempel 1945, p. 11). Together, these seem to entail that the observation of a white shoe confirms the sentence ‘All ravens are black’, which at first blush seems absurd (Hempel 1945, p. 13).
- ✓ There are three key principles that underlie the paradox of the ravens (first presented in Hempel 1945). First, there is what’s known as Nicod’s criterion, a plausible criterion of confirmation that we will discuss further below. Then, there is the Equivalence condition. Finally, there is the background assumption of classical logic. Together, these seem to entail that the observation of a white shoe confirms the sentence ‘All ravens are black’, which at first blush seems absurd.

Notice that the second example clearly indicates that the ideas belong to Hempel, even though Hempel is not cited for the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th sentences. There is no danger of plagiarism here, since the ideas are clearly presented as belonging to Hempel. The general rule is that your citations should always make it clear where the ideas are coming from, and you

don't give the impression that you came up with any ideas which are not your own. The second example does this with only one citation.

The exception to this rule is that if you have any *direct quotes*, you must always provide a citation (with specific page numbers). But as noted in point 14 above, you shouldn't have too many direct quotes to begin with!

19. Use an established citation style (e.g., Harvard), don't make up your own

The standard citation style for the School of PHRS is the Harvard style (see the examples above). It's very simple for in-text citations, and there's no good reason not to use it.

§5. Some Tips on What *Not* to do

Finally, a general piece of advice that collects together a lot of little mistakes that frequently occur in essays:

20. *Make sure you're using basic philosophical terms (like 'argument', 'validity', 'proposition', etc.) correctly*

What follows are some major offenders...

1. The word 'argument'...

An *argument* is a set of claims (the premises) which are taken to support some final claim (the conclusion). An argument is **not** the same thing as an *idea*, or a *concept*, or a *proposition*, or a *view*. Do not call everything in philosophy an 'argument'. For example, *reliabilism* is not an argument, it's a *position* or a *theory*.

Do not say that an argument 'true' or 'false'; it makes no sense to say this. Arguments can be valid or invalid, sound or unsound, but they cannot be true or false.

2. The words 'valid' and 'sound'...

An argument is *valid* just in case, if the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true as well. An argument is *sound* just in case it is valid and all of the premises are also true. Try not to mix these two things up: they have a *precise* meaning in philosophy, and they should *only* be used in that way.

It does not make sense to ascribe 'validity' or 'soundness' to anything *other than* an argument. It does not make sense to say that a *sentence* is valid (or sound), and it doesn't make sense to say that a *theory* is valid (or sound).

3. The word 'proposition'...

A *proposition* is the meaning of a declarative sentence. A proposition is a way things might be, and can be either true or false. If you are not sure exactly what this word means, then it might not be a good idea to use it.

A proposition is not the same thing as an *argument* or a *concept*.

4. The word 'concept'...

The word 'concept' is used in several different ways in philosophy, but most commonly it's used to designate the (content of) an idea of some specific thing — i.e., a type of object, or a person, or a state of being, or a property, or a relation. If you are not sure exactly what the word 'concept' means, then it's probably not a good idea to use it at all — you can almost always replace it with another word that's easier to understand.

A concept is not the same thing as an *argument*, and it is not the same thing as a *proposition*, and it is not the same thing as a *theory*. For example, *reliabilism* is not a concept. The JTB analysis of knowledge is not a concept. The regress argument for foundationalism is not a concept. Do not call everything in philosophy a 'concept'.

§6. Summary

The *vast majority* of my comments on essays relate directly to the points listed above. For your benefit, here's all of them collected together...

Staying focused:

1. Do not try to talk about too many separate points—focus on a specific issue or argument

The main components:

2. Your introduction should state what you intend to argue (i.e., what your thesis is), and it should give some useful indication of the structure of your argument
3. Keep your introduction short and sweet
4. Avoid explaining any difficult ideas, concepts, or arguments in the introduction
5. Make sure you explain any and all necessary background information
6. Try to leave out any unnecessary background information in your explanations
7. Your essay is supposed to be an argument for your ideas, not a book report
8. Always focus your critical reflection on the strongest potential objections specific to your argument and/or your intended conclusion
9. Critical reflection requires much more than a brief response to an objection
10. Keep your conclusion short and sweet
11. Do not introduce new points to your argument in the conclusion

Quality writing

12. Eschew superfluous grandiloquaciousness. (i.e., use simple language)
13. Explain your technical terms
14. Do not use quotes to make your points for you

Referencing

15. Don't bloat your bibliography with dozens of superficial citations
16. If you're referring to what philosopher X said, then cite philosopher X
17. Don't cite the lecture notes/lecture slides, and try to go beyond encyclopedia articles
18. Once is (usually) enough: don't over-cite
19. Use an established citation style (e.g., Harvard), don't make up your own

General

20. Make sure you're using basic philosophical terms (like 'argument', 'validity', 'proposition', etc.) correctly