

# TUTORIAL INTRO

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## READING

Generally the reading is given in the order in which I'd suggest reading it. It's important that you read it all: if you leave any out, you're likely to have a gap in your understanding of the topic that will make it very difficult to answer the essay question. (Note also that for the vast majority of papers, reading them once is not enough: there are very few papers that I could understand after one reading.) Let me know if there's any week in which you think I've assigned too much (or too little) reading.

## ESSAY

Your essays should be something like 2000 words; that's about four single spaced pages. More or less is fine, but keep it under 2500 words. When you email your essay to me, *cc everyone else in your tutorial group*. And be sure to read *and think about* your tutorial peers' essays. Email your essay to me by 6 PM the day before the tutorial (unless I specify another time); I won't read late essays.

Please pay close attention to the following advice, especially 1 and 2. They try to cater for the most common and most easily solved problems I find in students' essays. Please take them seriously.

- 1 *Explain*. In short: explain *everything*. It should be possible for an intelligent peer who hasn't studied philosophy to fully understand your essay without needing read the authors you're writing about. So, for example: if you use a technical term or mention a concept that has particular significance for an author, make sure you clearly define/explain it; similarly, for any argument or position you discuss, you must clearly explain it to your reader. This is partly because good academic writing should be explicit and easily understood, but this is not the only or even the main reason. Rather, your ability to explain the ideas you're discussing—clearly, precisely, and succinctly—is one of the principal things you're being assessed on. You might well know, say, what a categorical imperative is, but you need to *show* that you know it and how precisely you know it. Explaining even small, simple ideas well is a lot harder than you might think; don't underestimate

how important it is, and how much work it takes.

- 2 *Justify.* Assume that for every claim you make, the reader is asking ‘why should I believe that?’ In a philosophy essay, there should always be an excellent answer to this question. You should consider this to be, above all else, your aim when writing an essay. The worst thing you can do is to make bold assertions without defending them, and the second worst is to make bold assertions and defend them weakly. Note that this includes interpretive claims: if you write ‘Plato believes that p’, you need to show your reader, perhaps by giving a supporting quote, that this is indeed something Plato believes.

*A bad essay:* ‘p!’

*A good essay:* ‘For reasons x, y, and z, it seems that p.’

*An excellent essay:* ‘Reasons x, y, and z give us good grounds for thinking that p, although someone might offer an objection along the following lines ... However, I think there is a promising response to this objection ...’

- 3 *Use headings.* Before you start writing, sketch a structure for your essay. When writing, use headings that reflect this structure. A typical essay might have 2–4 headings.
- 4 *First understand, then assess.* Be careful not to rush into criticisms of what you read before you’ve fully understood it. Approach everything you read with charity. That is, assume (since it’s likely) that the author has thought intelligently and carefully about what they’ve written, so is unlikely to have made obvious mistakes. For example, if you notice a *prima facie* objection to something you’re reading, read it again carefully to see if there’s a way to understand it that avoids the objection or try to think of a plausible implicit assumption the author might have made that caters for the objection.
- 5 *Go from general to particular.* The topics we’ll look at are broad. One could reasonably spend years writing hundreds of pages about them—you only have a few pages and one week. This presents a challenge: on the one hand, you want to cover the whole topic, showing that you’re familiar with all the major issues that arise; on the other hand, you want to do more than simply scratch the surface, never looking at anything in detail. This can be a difficult balance to achieve, but in general it is much better to *err on the side of detail*. A good approach might be to devote about the first third or half of your essay to a more general discussion and then use the last half or two-thirds to examine one or two smaller points in much greater detail—you might, for example, focus on one argument, premise, or objection that you think is especially important or interesting.
- 6 *Ensure your conclusions reflect your arguments.* You might have been taught that strong, persuasive prose requires confident assertions, rather than hesitant, qualified ones. This is not the case in philosophy: your assertions should reflect the actual degree of confidence that is warranted by the evidence you’ve provided. Decisive arguments are rare—even rarer are decisive arguments in just a few lines of a student’s essay. So be very careful not to mistake considerations that give us a good reason for believing that p for an argument that conclusively

proves that p. A good essay is likely to have a large range of (appropriate) qualifying phrases: ‘this shows decisively that p’; ‘this is a strong reason to believe that p’; ‘this suggests that p’; ‘this makes it less implausible that p’; and so forth. Be especially careful with ‘factive’ or ‘success’ verbs like refute or prove.

- 7 *Use quotes.* Especially in historical subjects, including quotes from the relevant primary texts can be an excellent way to illustrate, justify, and give some focus to your discussion. One way (of many ways) to use a quote would be the following: make a claim; present a quote that you think backs up the claim; and then explain and interpret the text of the quote in order to show that and why it backs up your claim. Two cautions: first, quotes from secondary sources are less useful; second, avoid using a quote as a way of *saying* something—rather, a quote should be presented as evidence *about which* you have something to say.

#### SOME BASICS OF TYPOGRAPHY

The following are a few typographic conventions worth learning. They are not mandatory, but if you ignore them I’ll be annoyed; unfortunately, it won’t affect your mark or report, because no one else cares.

- 1 *Indent paragraphs.* But do not indent the opening paragraph of the document or the first paragraph after a section heading. You may instead—not in addition—separate paragraphs with a blank line, although this is better suited to list-like texts, such as legal documents, than continuous prose.
- 2 *Use single line spacing.* It’s easier to read. Double spacing is only necessary when a printed copy of your work will be annotated.
- 3 *A footnote mark is always placed after punctuation.*<sup>1</sup> It is almost always best to place a footnote at the end of the sentence, *after* the sentence-ending full stop, even if you are referring to something earlier in the sentence. Avoid consecutive footnotes; instead, place all information in one footnote if possible.
- 4 *Indicate quotes with either quotation marks or by using a block quote.* Extra flourishes, such as italicising, are unnecessary. And never place a block quote within quotation marks.
- 5 *Learn the difference between a hyphen (-), en-dash (–), and em-dash (—).* Use an en-dash like ‘to’ in ranges of dates or numbers (e.g. 87–142) and to express certain relationships between words: for example, an ‘on–off switch’ or ‘Irish–American relations.’ Either an en- or em-dash can be used to indicate a parenthetical phrase. If you use an en-dash, add a space either side – like so – but em-dashes are always unspaced—like so.
- 6 *Make ellipses with three full stops separated by spaces.* Like this . . . , with a space either side. You will most commonly use an ellipsis to indicate portions of text that you’ve omitted from quotes. Don’t omit any sentence-ending full stops that precede an ellipsis (i.e. together they make four stops). For example:

1. This includes full stops, commas, colons, semi-colons, and quotations marks.

[P]articulate care needs to be exercised when eliding text to ensure that the sense of the original is not lost . . . A deletion must not result in a statement alien to the original material. . . . Accuracy of sense and emphasis must accompany accuracy of transcription. (CMS, 16th, 13.49)

- 7 *Use a single space after full-stops.* A double space, once common, is now rightly recognised as unnecessary.

## REFERENCING

In your essays you should reference both quotes and claims or arguments that originate from one of the authors you've been reading. You should also have a bibliography of all the works you've referred to in the text.

You can use whatever bibliographical style you choose, so long as it's consistent. The following is an example of a typical author-year referencing style, starting with what the bibliography will look like:

**Book:** Author (Year) *Title*, Place: Publisher.

Fine, G. (1993) *On Ideas*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Freeman, S. (ed.) (2003) *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Article:** Author (Year) 'Title', *Journal*, Volume, pp. Pages.

Irwin, T.H. (1977) 'Plato's Heracleiteanism', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 27, pp. 1–13.

**Article in book:** Author (Year) 'Article Title' in Editor(s) (ed(s).) *Book Title*, Place: Publisher.

Scanlon, T.M. (2003) 'Rawls on Justification' in S. Freeman (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

**In-text citation:** (Author, Year, Page(s))

It has been argued that the charge of conservatism laid against Rawls' idea of reflective equilibrium is unsound (Scanlon, 2003, pp. 150–151).

Scanlon argues that the charge of conservatism laid against Rawls' reflective equilibrium is unsound (2003, pp. 150–151).

## PLAGIARISM

The university guidelines are here: [www.admin.ox.ac.uk/epsc/plagiarism](http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/epsc/plagiarism). From the college regulations:

Plagiarism is the presentation of someone else's work without acknowledgement as if it were your own. Typically, this involves copying an essay from another student or from the Internet, or copying passages from a book without quotation marks and a clear page reference. It is a very serious offence to plagiarise someone else's work, and there are serious academic penalties which may include the offender being sent down from the College and the University. ... Please also be aware that poor academic work

practices, such as copying sections directly from academic articles into your notes for information, might lead to unintentional plagiarism, but that this unintentional offence will still be dealt with severely by the University as 'reckless' plagiarism.

Two good reasons not to plagiarise. 1. I'll spot it. It's really easy. 2. If you think about it, there is really no advantage to plagiarising an essay, just serious disadvantage if you're caught. The most you'll gain, if you're lucky, is to make me believe that you wrote an essay when you didn't—but why would you care what I believe? If you genuinely can't write an essay for whatever reason, try to write part of an essay, some notes, or—in the worst case—nothing.