

How to Defend a Philosophical Thesis?

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May 6, 2015

Abstract

This short version of the excerpt “How to Write an Essay in Philosophy” is devised to cope with the challenge of writing an essay in philosophy.

1 A Philosophical Essay

In a philosophical essay, you try to show that your thesis is acceptable by providing reasons that support it. In other words, the aim of such an essay is to defend a thesis or conclusion. Your thesis may assert a position on any issue, but in every case you affirm or negate a thesis and you give reasons for the affirmation or negation respectively.

A thesis defense essay is not merely an analysis of claims, or a summary of points made by someone else, or a reiteration of what other people believe or say. For many students, this kind of writing is unknown. In order to succeed in such writing, you need to think things through and understand the claims as well as the reasons behind them. Note that students are normally not used to think beyond the information given in texts and to understand reasons behind the discussed claims.

Basic Essay Structure

1. Introduction

- (a) Thesis statement (the claim to be supported)

- (b) Plan for the paper
 - (c) Optional: Background for the thesis
2. Main part (or body)
 - (a) Argument in support of the thesis
 - (b) Optional: Assessment of Objections
 3. Conclusion

Introduction

The introduction should be no longer than necessary. The thesis statement should be explicitly and carefully composed in one sentence and as early as possible.¹ It usually appears in the first paragraph and serves the reader as a compass which guides them from paragraph to paragraph showing her a clear path from introduction to conclusion. It also helps you to stay on course instead of being lead astray (by too many ideas). The thesis statement reminds you to relate every sentence and paragraph to your one controlling idea.

The plan for the paper specifies how you intend to argue for your thesis statement. The plan comprises a summary of your argument, in which you state the (most important) premises and the conclusion. The background information for your thesis might contain some definitions and/or clarifications of concepts, its implications, and motivation for and/or importance of the investigation.

Main Part

The main part contains (a) the premises of your argument plus the material that supports or explains them and (b) an evaluation of the objections to your thesis.

(a) In contrast to the introduction, each premise needs to be clearly stated, carefully explained and illustrated, and properly backed up by mathematical proofs, statistics, arguments, examples, or other reasons or evidence.

¹You may, however, use some words to explain or elaborate on the statement if you think its meaning or implications are not fully clear.

In the main part you should stick to the central rule of paragraph development: Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence that expresses only one point, and develop the point in the paragraph.

Recall that in a good argument the conclusion follows deductively or inductively from the premises, and the premises are true. Your task in the main part is precisely to put forth such an argument. Hereby you should leave no doubt about what you are trying to show and how you are trying to show it.

(b) Often argumentative essays include an assessment of objections, i.e. a sincere effort to take into account the strongest objections or doubts that readers are likely to have about claims in your essay. Your task is it to show that these objections are unfounded. When you seriously deal with objections in your essay, and your claim still holds, you strengthened your argument. You lend credibility to it by considering all (important) sides and making an attempt to be fair and thorough. If you don't confront manifest objections, your readers may infer either that you are ignorant of the objections or that you don't have a good reply to them. An extra benefit is that in dealing with objections, you may see ways to make your own argument better. On the other hand, you may discover that you do not have an adequate reply to the objections. Then you look for ways to change your arguments or thesis to overcome the criticisms. You may weaken your thesis by some restriction, or you may need to abandon your thesis altogether in favour of another.

Conclusion

The conclusion appears in the end of the argumentative essay. It summarizes again the argument and the assessment of the objections. It may point to connections in other fields of inquiry or to further research to be done. A common mistake of students is to state a new point concerning the issue at hand. Such a point does not belong into a conclusion, because every relevant point should be developed at necessary length in the main part.

7 Steps of Writing

1. Select a topic and narrow it down to a specific issue such that you can adequately treat the issue within the given bounds, for instance, a certain number of words.
2. Research the issue.
3. Write a thesis statement.
4. Create an outline.²
5. Write a first draft.
6. Study and revise your draft.
7. Produce a final draft.

You may not be able to follow the steps in the suggested sequence. At any stage in the process of writing, you may discover that your argument is not as good as you thought, that you forgot to include an important fact or reason, or that there is another way to alter your essay in order to make it better. You should then revise your outline and/or draft. Rethinking and revising are normal procedures even (and especially) for the best philosophers.

²Here a practical advice: If you have the opportunity to meet your supervisor, you should have at least an outline that you send her some days before the meeting. The common basis for discussion may help the supervisor to understand what you are up to such that she may give you good advice and, perhaps, may point to interesting literature for the issue at hand. In any case, your supervisor should approve of your thesis statement before you invest many more hours of think-work in vain.