

# Instructions for Writing Essays and Discourses

Social and Moral Philosophy



In Social and Moral Philosophy, essays can be used to pass courses in subject studies and advanced special studies. Essays can replace examinations. **If you wish to write an essay, you must always arrange it beforehand with the course instructor or with the person responsible for the course!**

## 1 What constitutes a good essay?

A good essay is clear, delimited and coherent, and projects the writer's comprehensive understanding of the subject in question. The essay should demonstrate that the writer knows the text and the material well, especially if the essay is intended to display a grasp of a single book for the degree requirements. The purpose of an essay is not to parrot information from the source texts, but rather to discuss the subject in your own words, within the limits laid down by the phrasing of the question. Scientific and philosophical writing is not about unrestrained stream of consciousness, but about the use of ideas and statements as pieces in the assembly of a puzzle.

## 2 Choose a topic

Choose an interesting topic, consider it and assemble your own thoughts and visions of it. It must be possible to examine the topic, i.e. you must find problems and questions of the topic, to which it is possible and sensible to find answers. Consider your ideas in a critical light and be prepared to change them as your work proceeds.

## 3 Get acquainted with the subject matter and choose sources

Perhaps the most important part of preparing the work is to get acquainted with the discussion and literature of the chosen topic. A thorough knowledge with the topic is also the key to learning strategies of scientific argumentation. Search libraries for lists of references and databases (e.g. The Philosophers Index) for material from

books in the field, and choose interesting and essential ones that concern your topic. You can ask the course instructor or person responsible for the study module for good tips regarding sources. You might also want to check the general books for what problems and themes are usually related to the topic in traditional research. The sources can be monographs (books) or articles from journals and collections in the field. For a one-credit essay you should have at least five sources of information, preferably more. Read widely and with an open mind, but sustain an independent and critical attitude towards what you read. Remember that you cannot read everything concerning the subject. Also keep in mind that the essay should be a sensible length: the resources you are required to handle must be proportional to the standard, which are set for each level of study. Be sure to leave enough time for orientation.

## 4 Define and specify your exact subject

When you have decided what resources to use in the handling of your topic, choose a more concise subject and set of source material for your essay. Defining the subject is a challenging task – it must be of a sensible size, you must be especially careful not to choose too wide and general a subject, which will cause the essay to become non-specific. If the essay has been given a ready-made title or topic, be sure to follow it strictly. If your subject is applied, think about what philosophical questions your subject contains, and try to stick to them.

## 5 Make a preliminary synopsis

Now you are ready to construct a synopsis, i.e. a statement of the structure and content. Consider and analyse in detail what themes, arguments and ideas you will cover in your upcoming work, and estimate how much time and space each will take up (how relevant they are to your work). Work out how you can construct a coherent and ongoing whole.

## 6 Advance consistently – but creatively – according to your table of contents

This is where the actual writing process begins. As you write, examine the statements competence, durability and credibility in a critical light, one chapter at a time. Don't consider your preliminary synopsis to be sacred, but modify it when needed. If you're using non-philosophical material, think of what philosophical value it might have, if any. Remember to state your facts accurately! And create a title which corresponds to the content.

## 7 The structure of the essay

A well-written essay has a logic structure, a clear beginning and end. In analysis, it's important to stick to the point. A writer who has understood the essentials doesn't make up stories, ramble or

jump back and forth. Dividing the text into chapters will help the analysis. The chapter titles should be brief and correspond to their content. Note that the title must not refer to things that are not contained within the text. The text of a chapter must be understandable without reference to the title. If a chapter is divided into subchapters, there must be at least two subchapters with titles per chapter (e.g. correct: 3, 3.1, 3.2, 4,...; incorrect: 3, 3.1, 4,...) The chapters may consist of one or more sections, but you must avoid sections with only one sentence; a single thought should be completed within one section.

### a) Presentative chapter or introduction

The introduction presents the subject, the problem, the chosen way of covering it and essential sources, and states why the subject is covered particularly in this way. The first chapter might also discuss, how are you going to proceed (e.g. "First I will define x and y and then I will focus on x more closely...")

### b) Background

The background chapter is used to present earlier conversation and research, to perceive and interpret the problems of the field, and to situate your own problem within it. You must also define the basic concepts you use with great precision, because the same concepts can be interpreted in multiple ways. This is how to avoid possible concept confusion.

### c) Main chapters

The main chapters introduce your work, argumentation, rationalization and conclusions. To integrate the chapters and note the progress of the work, you might briefly define what the chapter in question is going to deal with.

### d) Final chapter or summary

The summary and the conclusions are introduced in the final chapter. It's also good to return to the introductory text: Did you discuss everything that you mentioned in the introduction?

## 8 Conventions of style

Conventions of style should be followed closely. First of all, the right reference technique proves that the writer has internalised the idea of scientific writing. Secondly, established conventions make it easier to create the layout and to make the essay clear and readable. Faculty's style guide can be found in Finnish at <http://www.valt.helsinki.fi/gradu/harjaine.htm>

### a) Layout

The essays cover consist of the headline, formal given names of the author with the first name underlined, last name, student number, subject, name of the course and date.

The table of contents is placed at the beginning of the work on its own page, "Table of contents" is an adequate title.

List of references is placed at the end of the work, "List of references" is an adequate title.

The layout must be finalized. For the page setup you may use the following directive values:

Left margin: 4 cm, right margin: 2 cm

Top margin: 2 cm, bottom margin: 2 cm

Font 12 (e.g., Times New Roman)

Spacing: 1,5.

Page numbers are placed in the middle of the top margin. Pages are numbered beginning with the first actual page.

## b) Citations and quoting

The basic idea of **citation** is that **whenever you quote someone else's thoughts directly or indirectly – you include a reference.** A philosophical essay cannot be written without references, because an essay consists of introducing former theories, doctrines and conceptions and comparing and judging them. You can also use references to point out your own view of the issue.

In Practice, textual references are used to mark citations. Textual references consist of the name of the writer, the year of publication and the page number. They are placed in brackets immediately after the text they are referring to. Complete information about the texts is placed in the list of references. References should be as accurate as possible; a reference which merely cites a without reference to page numbers is unacceptable. When making references it is important to make the distinction between whether the reference refers to the preceding paragraph, or just the preceding previous sentence. The difference is indicated with a full stop: when the reference refers to the whole of the preceding paragraph, it is written at the end of the paragraph in brackets as an independent sentence, e.g. ... "No, the elements, the individuals, must exist. If redness, roundness and sweetness did not exist, we could not imagine them". (Wittgenstein, L. 1958, 31.)

If the reference refers to the preceding sentence, it is written in brackets at the end of the sentence, e.g. ... Our ontology is determined once we have fixed upon the over-all conceptual scheme which is to accommodate science in the broadcast sense (W. V. Quine, 1953, 16-17).

The basic rules of **quotation** are simple. When you quote someone's text directly (that is, when you write exactly the same thing as the original text):

- Quotes, of less than three lines are marked in quotation marks inside the text

- Quotes, of more than three lines are separated into their own paragraph with an indentation

Direct quotations are always written in the original language or in Finnish. In a Finnish essay, Hegel can speak Finnish or German, but never English.

Be honest. Never present someone else's thoughts as your own or try to hide them with an inaccurate quotation technique.

In **footnotes** you can deliver extra focus. It is useful to place the original version of a translation in a footnote. Footnotes are marked with a superscript number<sup>1</sup> immediately after the quoted text (with no space). Footnotes are placed at the bottom of the page, or at the end of the whole text. If a text is mentioned in a footnote, more complete information should be placed in the list of references. Footnotes should be written with a smaller font, e.g. if the font used in your essay is 12, use 10 in the footnotes.

1 There are further ontological constituents which are unimportant for our purpose. Compare G. Bergmann: "Ineffability, Ontology, and Method," *The Philosophical Review*, 69, 1960, 19-40.

## b) Sources

In the list of references all sources that the text refers to, should be mentioned. You should not present all the books you have read for the essay, those you have cited or directly quoted. In the list of references, sources are mentioned in alphabetical order according to the name of the writer. All sources of information should contain bibliographical information, i.e. the name of the writer and the book (the name of the book *italics*, and the "name of the article" in quotation marks), publisher and place and date of publication. Learning the following established way of formatting the list of references is worth the effort.

*Book – monograph:*

Feinberg, Joel (1973): *Social Philosophy*. Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey.

*Translated text:*

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1905): *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Translated into English by Thomas Common, The Modern Library, New York (Original book *Also Sprach Zarathustra* published in 1892.)

*Article:*

De Marneffe, Peter (1990): "Liberalism, Liberty and Neutrality", *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 19, 253-274.

*Article in compilation:*

O'Neill, Onora (1991): "Transnational Justice". In Held, David (ed.). *Political Theory Today*. Polity Press, UK, 276-304.

With regards to *electronic publications*, the standard reference guidelines are adapted as followed:

The creator/administrator of the page = writer

Year of print = year of update

The name of the book = header of the page

The publisher = the server administrator

Location = actual www-address and time when the page was read, e.g. Fieser Jim 1997: The Hume Archives. The University of Tennessee at Martin, www.utm.edu:80/research/hume/hume.html (22.2.1998)

If you can't find this information on the page, consider seriously, whether the page can be used as a source of information. All this information is usually found in formal web pages. You might also want to print a copy of the page for your own records.

## 9 Finalization

When your work is done, read it through carefully and correct any formal errors. Pay attention to the coherence of the essay: does the title reflect what you really discuss in your work, and does your work have a clear argument all the way through? Also, check the linguistic form of your essay, because even a good analysis of the subject may remain unclear to the reader if the text has for example, lots of misspelling, solecisms or excessively long and complex sentences. When the works seems to be done, you should give it to someone else to read. It may be easier for someone else to notice the holes left in the work, which can still be corrected before handing it in. Remember to hand in your work by the appointed time.

## 10 Grading and feedback

Unless the course instructor or the person responsible for the course gives more specific instructions, generally the relation between length and credits is: 4-5 pages = 1 credit, 7-8 p = 2 credits, 10-12 p = 3 credits, 13-15 p = 4 credits, 16-18 p = 5 credits, 19-20 p = 6 credits.

Essays are graded depending on the study module, with the six-stepped (5-1, fail) or two-stepped (pass, fail) grading system. It's good to remember that the grade is not based on the length of the work. Evaluation criteria are the author's grasp of the facts and proficiency handling the subject philosophically. The importance of the latter criteria increases as the author's studies advance. When moving from one level to another, the standards for the basic-, subject- and advanced special studies increase cumulatively: the student has to prove himself to be able to control the subjects better and in more depth than on the previous level.

**Ask the staff for advice on all questions relating to writing. Also remember that you can ask for feedback from the grading.**