How to Write a Philosophy Essay

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In this class you will be asked to write a philosophy essay or paper in which you present, explain, and evaluate some ideas. This handout explains how to do this.

When you present a view you should state that view as it was presented in class or in the reading. You do not need to present the view word-for-word. However, the further you get away from the official formulation, the more risk there is of getting something wrong.

When you explain a view you should do two things. First, define any key terms that appear in the statement of the view. In general, a key term is any term that was defined in class or in the reading. Second, restate the view in your own words. Ideally, this will involve giving examples or analogies to show that you understand the view under discussion.

When you present an argument you should reconstruct that argument as it was presented in class or in the reading. Ideally, this will involve writing out all of the premises, in order, along with the conclusion. As before, you do not need to state the argument word-for-word. However, the further you get away from the official formulation, the more risk there is of getting something wrong.

When you explain an argument you should do two things. First, define any key terms. Second, explain the reasoning behind the argument in your own words. Ideally, this will involve going line-by-line and explaining what the justification is for each step. In many cases, a premise will be backed by a general principle that we discussed in class. You should always mention these principles.

When you evaluate an argument you should discuss potential objections to the argument. More than one objection will often be raised in class or in the reading. You should discuss as many of these objections as possible.

Finally, here is a very general, and very important piece of advice. Students often think of themselves as writing their essays to their professors. This can be dangerous. If you think of yourself as writing an essay to someone who already understands all the issues, you’re much more likely to take things for granted. For example, you’re much more likely to leave key terms undefined. To avoid this kind of mistake, I encourage you to think of yourself as writing your essay to a friend or family member who doesn’t know anything at all about philosophy. Doing this will force you to slow down and explain everything in complete detail.