Writing Philosophy

A Student's Guide to Writing Philosophy Essays

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Usually, the best remedy is either to use both masculine and feminine pronouns or to switch to the plural:
A good scientist will always check his or her work.
Good scientists will always check their work.
Any CEO of a large corporation will work hard because he or she is conscientious.
CEOs of large corporations will work hard because they are conscientious.
If this approach doesn’t eliminate discriminatory wording, you may have to overhaul the whole sentence:
Scientific work should always be checked.
Conscientious CEOs of large corporations work hard.

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Defending a Thesis in an Argumentative Essay

In conversations, letters to the editor, or online discussions, have you ever taken a position on an issue and offered reasons why your view is correct? If so, then you have defended a thesis. You have presented an argument, giving reasons for accepting a particular thesis, or conclusion. If you elaborate on your argument in a written paper, you create something even more valuable—a thesis defense (or argumentative) essay.

In a thesis defense essay, you try to show the reader that your view is worthy of acceptance by offering reasons that support it. Your thesis may assert your position on a philosophical, social, or political issue; or on the arguments or claims of other writers (including some famous or not-so-famous philosophers); or on the interpretation of a single work or several. In every case, you affirm a thesis and give reasons for your affirmation.

This type of essay is not merely an analysis of claims, or a summary of points made by someone else, or a reiterating of what other people believe or say—although a good thesis defense essay may contain some of these elements. A thesis defense essay is supposed to be a demonstration of what you believe and why you believe it. What other people think is, ultimately, beside the point.

For many students, this kind of writing is unknown terrain. This land can only be traversed by thinking things through for themselves and by understanding claims and the reasons behind them—and
students are seldom used to such a trip. The journey, however, is worthwhile and not entirely unfamiliar. In one form or another, you probably encounter thesis defense essays everyday. In advertising, political speeches, philosophical writing, letters to the editor, legal cases, special interest advocacy, press releases, position papers, and business communications of all kinds, you can see countless attempts to make a case for this view or that. Much of the world’s work gets done this way (especially in the academic realm), and success or failure often depends on your ability to make your own case in writing or evaluate cases that come your way.

**BASIC ESSAY STRUCTURE**

Thesis defense essays usually contain the following elements, although not necessarily in this order:

I. Introduction (or opening)
   A. Thesis statement (the claim to be supported)
   B. Plan for the paper
   C. Background for the thesis
II. Argument supporting the thesis
III. Assessment of objections
IV. Conclusion

**Introduction**

The introduction often consists of the paper’s first paragraph, sometimes just a sentence or two. Occasionally it is longer, perhaps several paragraphs. The length depends on how much ground you must cover to introduce the argument. Whatever the length, the introduction should be no longer than necessary. In most cases the best introductions are short.

If there is a rule of thumb for what the introduction must contain, it is this: The introduction should set forth the thesis statement. The thesis statement usually appears in the first paragraph. It is the claim that you hope to support or prove in your essay, the conclusion of the argument that you intend to present. You may want to pose the thesis statement as the answer to a question that you raise or as the solution to a problem that you wish to discuss. However presented, your thesis statement is the assertion you must support with reasons. It is like a compass to your readers, guiding them from paragraph to paragraph, premise to premise, showing them a clear path from introduction to conclusion. It also helps you stay on course. It reminds you to relate every sentence and paragraph to your one controlling idea.

In some argumentative essays—many newspaper editorials and magazine articles, for example—the thesis statement is not stated but is implied, just as in some arguments the premises or even the conclusion is implied. In philosophical writing, however, the thesis should always be explicit, asserted plainly in a carefully wrought sentence. Most likely, in any argumentative essay you write in college, you will be expected to include a thesis statement.

Your thesis statement should be restricted to a claim that you can defend in the space allowed. You want to state it in a single sentence and do so as early as possible. (More on how to devise a properly restricted thesis statement in a moment.) You may need to add a few words to explain or elaborate on the statement if you think its meaning or implications are unclear.

The other two parts of an introduction—the plan for the paper (B) and background information for the thesis (C)—may or may not be necessary, depending on your thesis and your intent. In more formal essays, you will need not only to state your thesis but also to spell out how you intend to argue for it. You will have to summarize your

<table>
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<th>How Not to Begin Your Philosophy Paper</th>
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<td>Some starters are nonstarters. That is, student philosophy papers often begin poorly. They may open with a cliché, an irrelevant comment, an obvious or superfluous observation, or a long-winded lead-in to the thesis statement. Here are some examples:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• “Bertrand Russell [or some other philosopher] wrote many books.”</td>
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<td>• “From the beginning of time, people have wondered about…”</td>
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<td>• “This paper will examine the ridiculous ideas of the atheist Jean-Paul Sartre.”</td>
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<td>• “The Bible tells us that…”</td>
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<td>• “According to Webster’s Dictionary, the word “necessity” means…”</td>
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<td>• “As everyone knows, humans have free will…”</td>
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Argument Supporting the Thesis

Between your paper's introduction and conclusion is the body of the essay. The basic components of the body are (1) the premises of your argument plus the material that supports or explains them and (2) an evaluation of objections to your thesis. Each premise must be clearly stated, carefully explained and illustrated, and properly backed up by examples, statistics, expert opinion, argument, or other reasons or evidence. You may be able to adequately develop the essay by devoting a single paragraph to each premise, or you may have to use several paragraphs per premise.

Whatever tack you take, you must stick to the central rule of paragraph development: Develop just one main point in each paragraph, embodying that point in a topic sentence. Make sure that each paragraph in turn relates to your thesis statement.

If your essay is a critique of someone else's arguments, you should examine them in the body, explaining how they work and laying out the author's response to any major criticisms of them. Your account of the arguments should be accurate and complete, putting forth the author's best case and providing enough detail for your readers to understand the import of your own argument. After the presentation of the author's side of things, you can then bring in your critique, asserting and explaining each premise.

Some premises, of course, may be so obvious that they do not require support. The determining factor is whether your readers would be likely to question them. If your readers are likely to accept a premise as it is, no backup is required. If they are not, you need to support the premise. A common mistake is to assume that a premise would be accepted by everyone when in fact it is controversial (Rule 3-8).

In any case, you should present only your strongest premises. One weak premise can spoil the whole argument. To the reader, one flimsy premise is a reason to be suspicious of all the rest. It is better to include one good premise that you can support than three bad premises that are unsupportable.

Recall that in a good argument the conclusion logically follows from the premises, and the premises are true. Your task in the body of your essay is to put forth such an argument and to do so plainly—to clearly demonstrate to your readers that your premises are properly related to your conclusion and that they are true. You should leave no doubt about what you are trying to prove and how you are trying to prove it. In longer papers, you may want to back up your thesis with more than one argument. This is an acceptable way to proceed, providing you make the relationships between the separate arguments and your thesis clear.

Assessment of Objections

Very often an argumentative essay includes an assessment of objections—a sincere effort to take into account any objections or doubts that readers are likely to have about points in your essay. (In some cases, however, there may be no significant objections to assess, as is the case in the essay on cultural relativism in Chapter 1.) You must show your readers that the objections are unfounded, that your argument is not fatally wounded by likely criticisms. Contrary to what some may think, when you deal effectively with objections in your essay, you do not weaken it—you strengthen it. You lend credibility to it by making an attempt to be fair and thorough. You make your position stronger by removing doubts from your readers' minds. If you don't confront likely objections, your readers may conclude 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 argument stronger.

On the other hand, you may discover that you do not have an adequate answer to the objections. Then what? Then you look for ways to change your arguments or thesis to overcome the criticisms. You can weaken your thesis by making it less sweeping or less probable.
Or you may need to abandon your thesis altogether in favor of one that is stronger. Discovering that your beloved thesis is full of holes is not necessarily a setback. You have increased your understanding by finding out which boats will float and which will not.

You need not consider every possible objection, just the strongest ones. You might use objections that you have come across in your reading and research, or heard from others, or just dreamed up on your own. Whatever you do, do not select pseudo-objections—those that you know are weak and easily demolished. Careful readers (including your instructor!) will see through this game and will think less of your paper.

Where in your paper you bring up objections can vary. You may choose to deal with objections as you go along—as you present each of your premises. On the other hand, you may want to handle objections at the beginning of the essay or near the end after defending the premises.

Conclusion

Unless your essay is very short, it should have a conclusion. The conclusion usually appears in the last paragraph. Many conclusions simply reiterate the thesis statement and then go on to emphasize how important it is. Others issue a call to action, present a compelling perspective on the issue, or discuss further implications of the thesis statement. Some conclusions contain a summary of the essay's argument. A summary is always a good idea if the argument is complex, long, or formal.

A Well-Built Essay

How might all of these parts fit together to make an essay? To find out, read the brief paper by Kathleen Moore and review the comments that follow. You will see that although it is short and structurally simple, it has all the major elements that longer and more complex essays do. (There are no references to the paper's sources here, something that would normally be included in such an essay. We explore documentation styles in Chapter 6.)

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1 "Should Relatively Affluent People Help the Poor?" by Kathleen Dean Moore, following an outline written by her student, Brian Figur. Reproduced by permission of Kathleen Dean Moore.
surroundings, high infant mortality and low life expectancy that is beneath any reasonable definition of human decency."

3 Many people argue that wealthy people should not have to help those who are needy than they, unless they choose to do so. The strongest argument for this claim is articulated by Garrett Hardin, an ecologist from the University of Southern California. He points to the harmful results of helping people, claiming that by contributing to the increased survival rates of those who would otherwise have a relatively low life expectancy, wealthier people would increase the world's population and thus increase the rate at which natural resources are consumed and environmental problems arise. Although starvation is an evil, Hardin says, helping the poor would create an even greater evil—increased numbers of starving people and fewer resources to help them. Others argue that just because affluent people have a relatively higher income than others, it does not follow that they are morally responsible for those who do not.

4 I believe, in contrast, that people do have a moral obligation to help the desperately poor. For several reasons, it is not the case that helping the poor would necessarily increase population and thus increase environmental degradation. First, while monetary aid could bring medical supplies and food and thus increase population, it could also bring contraceptive devices and increased education about population control. And so, helping the poor could actually decrease the rate of population growth and, in the end, save environmental resources. Secondly, helping to reduce absolute poverty would also bring about more people who would be in a position economically, socially, and medically to contribute to cleaning up environmental problems and helping solve overpopulation problems. Finally, from a purely practical point of view, it is important to note that people are an economic resource at least as important as firewood and fertile soil, and to allow people to sicken and die is to spoil and waste that resource.

5 The obligation to help the poor is, to a certain extent, simply a matter of human rights. We believe that our pets have a right to decent treatment—enough food to live, shelter from the cold, medical care when they are hurt or ill, and affluent people in America spend large amounts of income to provide for these basic needs for animals. If animals have these rights, then surely humans have at least the same basic rights. People should be treated with more respect and consideration than animals by being given the chance to live in better surroundings than those afforded to animals.

6 However, the primary reason why the affluent have an obligation to help the poor has to do with the moral principle that killing another human being is wrong. If it is wrong to kill another person, then it is also morally wrong to allow someone to die, when you know they are going to die otherwise, and when it is within your means to save their lives at relatively little cost to yourself. By not acting to reduce the harmful, lethal
The introduction of this essay is laid out in paragraphs 1 and 2. Paragraph 1 introduces the topic: the gap between rich and poor and whether the more affluent have a moral obligation to help narrow that gap. Background information includes the observation that the gap is wider than ever and that people all over the world are dying as a result of extreme poverty. These points impart a sense of urgency regarding the problem and help explain why the author thinks the issue matters and why the reader should care. The thesis statement is expressed in the last sentence of paragraph 1: “people who are relatively affluent should give a certain fair percentage of their earnings to help reduce absolute poverty on a global scale.”

Paragraph 2 provides further background in the form of some definitions of key terms. “Relatively affluent,” the writer says, means “rich or wealthy in the context of a given society.” She cites philosopher Peter Singer’s definition of a “fair percentage” of earnings—10 percent. To define “absolute poverty,” she quotes Robert McNamara, someone who presumably has the proper credentials to offer an authoritative opinion. Absolute poverty, he says, is a condition “characterized by malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, squalid surroundings, high infant mortality and low life expectancy that is beneath any reasonable definition of human decency.”

The body of the paper begins in paragraph 3, where the writer explains the objections to her thesis. Discussing the objections early is a good strategy when they are thought to be especially strong or foremost in the reader's mind. Dispatching them promptly prepares the way for the writer’s own arguments. In many papers, however, objections are dealt with after the writer puts forth his or her own arguments.

In paragraph 3 the writer describes two objections in the form of arguments, one of which she considers the strongest against her position. Her approach is exactly right. Dealing with the most robust objection you can find will actually strengthen your case. On the other hand, to pick a weak objection to demolish is to lapse into the straw man fallacy, almost a guarantee that your argument will not be as strong as it could be (Rule 3-5). Moreover, in this situation, the strongest objection has been offered previously by a knowledgeable critic and is part of a real-world controversy.

The strongest argument against the thesis says that rich people have no moral obligation to aid the poor because helping them would actually increase the number of starving people in the world. Helping the poor would only multiply their numbers, raising the world’s population while diminishing its population-sustaining
resources. The second argument takes another tack: From the mere fact that the wealthy are relatively better off than others, it does not follow that they have a moral obligation to share their prosperity with those less fortunate.

After detailing the arguments against her thesis, in paragraph 4 the writer immediately launches a counterargument to show that aiding the poor would not necessarily multiply their numbers and their misery. Her three premises are: (1) Although giving money to help the poor might increase their population, it might also diminish it by providing them with methods of contraception and educating them about population control. (2) Reducing absolute poverty would shrink the world’s population by increasing the number of people who have the wherewithal to curb population growth and environmental harm. (3) People themselves are economic resources that can be used for the benefit of the world.

Notice that the writer does not immediately respond to the second argument against her thesis (“From the mere fact that the wealthy are relatively better off than others, it does not follow that they have a moral obligation to share their prosperity with those less fortunate.”) That is, she does not try right away to show that its conclusion is false. She instead counters the argument later when she presents her case for her thesis. She shows, in effect, that contrary to the opposition’s second argument, the wealthy do indeed have an obligation to share their prosperity with the poor.

After handling the main objection to her thesis, the writer articulates two arguments that support it. In paragraph 5, she holds that aid to the poor can be justified by an appeal to human rights. She argues that: (1) If animals have a right to decent treatment, then surely people have at least the same right. (2) Animals do have a right to decent treatment. (3) Therefore, people have a right to at least the same level of treatment (and in fact have a right to even better treatment).

In paragraph 6, she puts forth another argument that she believes is even more important than the preceding one: (1) It is wrong to kill another person. (2) If it is wrong to kill another person, it is wrong to allow a person to die (if you can easily prevent the death). (3) If the wealthy fail to decrease absolute poverty (something they can easily do), they allow poor people to die. (4) Therefore, it is wrong for the wealthy not to help the poor (they have a moral obligation to help).

Paragraph 7 presents the essay’s conclusion, summarizing what the arguments (and counterarguments) have shown: Wealthy people should help reduce absolute poverty.

An outline of the essay’s arguments would look like this:

**Objection 1**

**Unstated Premise:** If helping the poor would actually increase the number of starving people in the world, rich people should not help the poor.

**Premise:** Helping the poor would actually increase the number of starving people in the world.

**Conclusion:** Therefore, rich people have no moral obligation to aid the poor.

**Objection 2**

**Premise:** From the mere fact that the wealthy are relatively better off than others, it does not follow that they have a moral obligation to share their prosperity with those less fortunate.

**Conclusion:** Therefore, it does not follow that the wealthy have a moral obligation to share their prosperity with those less fortunate.

**Response to Objection 1**

**Premise:** Although giving money to help the poor might increase their population, it might also diminish it by providing them with methods of contraception and educating them about population control.

**Premise:** Reducing absolute poverty would shrink the world’s population by increasing the number of people who have the wherewithal to curb population growth and environmental harm.

**Premise:** People themselves are economic resources that can be used for the benefit of the world.

**Conclusion:** Therefore, aiding the poor would not necessarily increase their numbers and their misery.

**First Argument for Thesis (and Response to Objection 2)**

**Premise:** If animals have a right to decent treatment, then surely people have at least the same right.

**Premise:** Animals do have a right to decent treatment.

**Conclusion:** Therefore, people have a right to at least the same level of treatment that animals have (and in fact have a right to even better treatment).
SECOND ARGUMENT FOR THESIS (AND RESPONSE TO OBJECTION 2)

PREMISE: It is wrong to kill another person.
PREMISE: If it is wrong to kill another person, it is wrong to allow a person to die (if you can easily prevent the death).
PREMISE: If the relatively affluent fail to decrease absolute poverty (something they can easily do), they allow poor people to die.
CONCLUSION: Therefore, it is wrong for the relatively affluent not to decrease absolute poverty (they have a moral obligation to help the poor).

MAIN CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION: Therefore, the relatively affluent have a moral obligation to decrease absolute poverty (help the poor).

In this outline you can see that the conclusions to the first and second arguments for the thesis are, essentially, the main premises for the essay's main argument, whose conclusion is "Therefore, the relatively affluent have a moral obligation to decrease absolute poverty (help the poor)."

WRITING THE ESSAY: STEP BY STEP

Now we examine the steps involved in crafting a good thesis defense essay. You have the best chance of writing a good essay if you try to follow these steps. Just remember that the process is not linear. You may not be able to follow the steps in the sequence suggested. You may have to backtrack or rearrange the order of the steps. This kind of improvising on the fly is normal—and often necessary. At any stage in the process, you may discover that your argument is not as good as you thought, or that you did not take an important fact into account, or that there is a way that you can alter the essay to make it stronger. You may then want to go back and rework your outline or tinker with the draft you are working on—and your essay will be better for it. Rethinking and revising are normal procedures for even the best writers.

Here are the steps:
1. Select a topic and narrow it to a specific issue.
2. Research the issue.
3. Write a thesis statement.
4. Create an outline.
5. Write a first draft.
6. Study and revise your first draft.
7. Produce a final draft.

Step 1 Select a Topic and Narrow It to a Specific Issue

This step is first for a reason. It is here to help inexperienced writers avoid a tempting but nasty trap: picking a thesis out of the air and writing their paper on it. Caution: Any thesis that you dream up without knowing anything about it is likely to be unusable—and a waste of time. It is better to begin by selecting a topic or issue and narrowing it through research and hard thinking to a manageable thesis.

A topic is simply a broad category of subject matter, such as human cloning, space exploration, capital punishment, and stem-cell research. Within topics lurk an infinite number of issues—that is, questions that are in dispute. From the topic of capital punishment, for example, countless issues arise: whether executing criminals deters crime; whether executing a human being is ever morally permissible; whether it is ethical to execute people who are insane or mentally impaired; whether the system of capital punishment in the United States is unfair; whether the death penalty should be mandatory for serial killers; whether executing juveniles is immoral... the list could go on and on. The basic idea is to select from the roster of possibilities an issue that (1) you are interested in and (2) you can adequately address in the space allowed.

Here are some issues under the topic of “God” that could be adequately addressed in a 750- to 1,000-word paper:

- Is Anselm’s ontological argument for the existence of God sound?
- Should the phrase “under God” be removed from the Pledge of Allegiance if its recitation is required of public school children?
- Does the Big Bang argument prove that God exists?
- Should belief in God be a requirement for being president of the United States?
Does William Paley’s argument from design show that God exists?

Can someone who does not believe in God behave morally?

Does belief in God cause terrorism?

And here are some issues whose scope is too broad to adequately deal with in a short paper:

Does God exist?

Are religion and science compatible?

Does the existence of evil show that there is no God?

Step 2 Research the Issue

The main reason for researching an issue is to find out what viewpoints and arguments are involved. Often your instructor will suggest good sources to research for a particular writing assignment. Your assigned reading may be the only source you need to check. Otherwise, you can read articles and books, talk to people who have studied the issue or at least thought about it carefully, or go online to review topical or philosophical sites.

Let’s say you begin with this issue: whether religion and contemporary morality conflict or complement each other. You probably can see right away that this issue is much too broad to be handled in a short (or long!) paper. You can restrict the scope of the issue, however—to, for example, whether a supreme being is the foundation of moral values, a perennial question in the philosophy of religion.

Now you can explore viewpoints and arguments on all sides of the issue. You may not be able to examine every relevant argument, but you can probably inspect the strongest or most common ones, including some that you invent yourself. In your assessment, you want to determine what the premises are, how they relate to the conclusion, and whether they are true. Remember, one of the best ways to test an argument is to outline it, using complete sentences, with the premises and conclusion stated as clearly as possible. The point is to uncover a good argument—and one worth writing and reading about. (Refer to Rules 1-3, 1-4, 2-2, and 2-3.)

The evaluation process is much the same if you decide to use more than one argument to support your thesis. The conclusion of each argument would be used in support of the thesis, just as the premises of each argument would support its conclusion. The challenge is to ensure that the connections between all the parts of the essay are clear and logical.

Suppose you narrow the God-and-morality issue to a question about the divine command theory, the popular view that God is the foundation of morality (that an action is right if God commands it to be so). An outline of an argument against the theory might look like this:

**Premise 1**: If an action is right only because God commands it (that is, nothing is right or wrong in itself), then God’s commands would be arbitrary.

**Premise 2**: If an action is right only because God commands it (that is, nothing is right or wrong in itself), then abhorrent actions would be right if God commanded them.

**Premise 3**: If the implications of the theory are implausible, then the theory is implausible.

**Conclusion**: Therefore, the theory is implausible and should be rejected.

Step 3 Write a Thesis Statement

The conclusion of your selected argument will serve as the basis for your thesis statement. Often the conclusion is your thesis statement. Writing a good thesis statement is an essential step because the entire essay is built on it. An imprecise or clumsy thesis statement can lead to an imprecise or clumsy argument, which can wreck any argumentative essay.

At this stage, you should try to get the wording of your statement just right, even though you may revise it later on. Its scope should be restricted to what you can handle in the space you have. It should also be focused on just one idea, not several. It should assert, for example, that “Mandatory sentencing guidelines for judges result in many miscarriages of justice,” not “Mandatory sentencing guidelines for judges result in many miscarriages of justice, and the U.S. Senate should approve more judicial appointments.” This latter thesis makes two claims, not one. A good thesis statement must also be clear. No one should have to guess about the meaning of your thesis. The thesis “Same-sex marriages are intolerable,” for example, is intolerably vague since there are many ways that something can be intolerable. It gives us very little information about what will be discussed in the essay.
It is possible to devise a thesis statement that is restricted, focused, clear—and trivial. A trivial thesis statement is one that either concerns an insignificant issue or makes an insignificant claim. People generally don’t care about insignificant issues, and few would bother to disagree with an insignificant claim. Who cares whether pens are better than pencils or whether gambling is more fun than beachcombing? And who would care to contest the claim that pleasure is better than pain? An essay built on a trivial thesis statement wastes your readers’ time (if they bother to read it at all), and you learn nothing and change nothing by writing it. Thesis statements should be worthy.

Here are some thesis statements that meet these criteria:

- Jeremy Bentham’s moral theory known as act-utilitarianism conflicts with our commonsense ideas about human rights.
- The U.S. government should be allowed to arrest and indefinitely imprison without trial any American citizen who is suspected of terrorism.
- Subjective relativism—the view that truth depends on what someone believes—is self-refuting.
- Racial profiling should not be used to do security screening of airline passengers.
- The city of Cincinnati should be allowed to ban art exhibits if they are deemed anti-religious or blasphemous.

**Step 4 Create an Outline of the Whole Essay**

If you can write out your thesis statement and outline the argument used to defend it, you have already come far. Your argument and thesis statement will constitute the skeleton of your essay. The next step is to flesh out the bones with introductory or explanatory material, responses to objections, and support for the premises (which may consist of subordinate arguments, examples, explanations, analogies, statistics, scientific research, expert opinion, or other evidence). Producing a detailed, coherent outline of the whole essay is the best way to manage this task, and if you already have an outline of your argument, creating an outline for the whole essay will be easy. An outline helps you fill out your argument in an orderly fashion, showing you how the pieces fit together and whether any parts are missing or misaligned. This filling-out process will probably require you to research your thesis further—to check the truth of premises, examine alternative arguments, look for additional evidence, or assess the strength of objections to your argument.

Do not be afraid to alter your outline at any stage. As you write, you may realize that your thesis is weak, your argument flawed, or your premises vague. If so, you should go back and adjust the outline before writing any further. Writing is an act of exploration, and good writers are not afraid to revise when they find something amiss.

When you outline your essay, include your full thesis statement in the introduction. Then as you work on the outline, you can refer to the statement for guidance. The major points of your outline will include the premises, conclusion, objections, and responses to objections. Here, for example, is a preliminary outline for the divine command essay.

I. **INTRODUCTION:** (Thesis) The divine command theory is implausible and should be rejected.
   A. Explanation of theory.
   B. Socrates’s dilemma.

II. **FIRST PREMISE:** If an action is right only because God commands it (that is, nothing is right or wrong in itself), then God’s commands would be arbitrary—an implausible result.
   A. According to the theory, if God commands murder, then murder is right.
   B. God can command anything because he is all powerful.

III. **SECOND PREMISE:** If an action is right only because God commands it (that is, nothing is right or wrong in itself), then abhorrent actions would be right if God commanded them—another implausible result.

IV. **OBJECTION:** God would not command evil actions because he is all good.
   A. Response: The objection begs the question.
   B. Response: Rachels’s version of the question-begging response.

V. **THIRD PREMISE:** If the implications of the theory are implausible, then the theory is implausible.

VI. **CONCLUSION:** Therefore, the theory is implausible and should be rejected.
Notice that this outline indicates where objections will be addressed. Objections lodged against individual premises (and responses to them) should be shown on the outline as subpoints under the main premise divisions. Objections that are handled in one place in the body of the essay should be indicated as another major point with a Roman numeral.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ten Common Mistakes in Argumentative Essays</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Failing to evaluate and revise a first draft.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Assuming that anyone's opinion is as good as anyone else's.</td>
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<td>3. Formulating a thesis that's too broad.</td>
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<td>4. Assuming that the reader can read your mind.</td>
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<td>5. Overstating what has been proven.</td>
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<td>6. Failing to start the paper early enough so there's time for evaluation and revisions.</td>
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<td>7. Attacking an author's character instead of his or her argument.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Padding the essay with irrelevant or redundant passages.</td>
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<td>10. Using quotes from authors in place of well-developed arguments.</td>
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Your outline should also reveal how you intend to provide support for premises that need it. This level of detail can help you head off any unpleasant surprises in the writing phase.

In many cases, the points and subpoints in your outline may correspond to the topic sentences for your essay's paragraphs. In this way, a detailed outline (in which each point is a complete sentence) can almost write your essay for you—or at least make the writing much easier.

You will find that as you tweak the outline, you may need to adjust the thesis statement. And as you perfect the thesis statement, you may need to adjust the outline. In the end, you want to satisfy yourself that the outline is complete, accurate, and structurally sound, tracing a clear and logical progression of points.

**Step 5 Write a First Draft**

Good writers revise ... and revise and revise. They either write multiple drafts, revising in successive passes, or they revise continuously as they write. They know that their first tries will always be in need of improvement. Inexperienced writers, on the other hand, too often dash off a first draft without a second look—then turn it in! A much more reasonable approach (and the best one for most students) is to at least write a first draft and a final draft or—better—several drafts and a final one.

In argumentative essays, because of the importance of articulating an argument carefully and the difficulty of writing later drafts of the essay unless the first one is in reasonable shape, the first draft should be fairly solid. That is, in your first draft, you should write a tentative version of each paragraph, and the wording of your thesis statement and all premises should be as close as possible to the final form.

Give your draft a good introduction that lays out your thesis statement, provides background information on the issue, and draws your readers into the essay. Make it interesting, informative, and pertinent to the question at hand. Do not assume that your readers will automatically see that your paper is worth reading.

A common problem with student papers is wordy and superficial introductions—those that go on and on about the topic but say little that is germane or necessary. Such intros read as if they are either just filling up space or slowly warming up to the subject. They can often be deleted entirely without any loss to the essay because the true introduction begins on page 3. The best introductions are concise, relevant—and, usually, short.

In a less formal essay, you can grab the attention of your readers and lead them into the paper by starting off with a bold statement of your thesis, a provocative scenario that encapsulates or symbolizes the issue, or a compelling fact suggesting the importance of your thesis.

In a more formal paper, the usual course is to assert your thesis statement, spell out the issue, and explain how you plan to develop your argument or how the rest of the essay will unfold (without going into
lengthy detail). In short papers, you can mention every premise; in long or complex essays, just stating the most important points should suffice.

Look at this introduction to the divine command essay (presented in its entirety later in this chapter):

1. Many people believe that God is a lawgiver who alone defines what actions are right and wrong. God, in other words, is the author of morality; an action is right if and only if God commands it to be done. According to this view, there is no right or wrong until God says so, and nothing is moral or immoral independently of God's willing it to be thus. God, and only God, makes rightness and wrongness. This view is known as the divine command theory of morality.

2. A simple version of the theory is widely accepted today, among both the religious and nonreligious. In this version, God is thought to be the source of all moral principles and values. He can be the source of all morality because he is omnipotent, being able to do anything whatsoever, including create the very foundations of right and wrong.

3. In the Euthyphro, Socrates brings out what is probably the oldest and strongest criticism of the theory. He asks, in effect, is an action right because God commands it to be done, or does God command it to be done because it is right? This question lays bare the dilemma that is inherent in the theory: If an action is right because God commands it, then there is nothing in the action itself that makes it right, and God's command is arbitrary. If God commands the action because it is right (that is, he does not make it right), then rightness would seem to be independent of (or prior to) God, and the divine command theory is false. I contend that, at least in the simplest version of the theory, this ancient dilemma still stands and that the most plausible way to resolve it is to reject the theory by accepting that moral standards must exist independently of God's commands.

This introduction is long because the issue requires considerable explanation and background. The key question of the essay, however, is raised almost immediately in the first paragraph: Does God make rightness? In paragraphs 2 and 3, the writer explains the divine command theory so that its controversial status is evident and its relevance to current views on morality is clear. After all, a version of the theory is “widely accepted today,” and the question of its truth was raised by none other than Socrates. The thesis statement appears in the last sentence of paragraph 3: “Moral standards must exist independently of God's commands.”

The body of your essay should state, explain, and develop your argument in full. You should present each premise, elaborate on it as necessary, and provide support for it if it is likely to be questioned by readers. Plan on devoting at least one paragraph to each premise, although many more may be needed to make your case.

Every paragraph in your paper should relate to the thesis; every sentence in each paragraph should relate to a topic sentence. Delete any sentence that does not serve the essay's purpose. Ensure that paragraphs appear in a logical sequence and are clearly linked by transitional words and phrases or references to material in preceding paragraphs. Your readers should never have to wonder what the connection is between parts of your paper.

These two paragraphs follow the introduction:

4. The central argument against the notion that rightness is whatever God commands is this: If an action is right only because God commands it (that is, nothing is right or wrong in itself, or independent of God), then cruelty, murder, torture, and many other terrible actions would be right if God commanded them. If God commanded such acts, then they would be right, and no one would be committing a wrong by doing them. On the simple version of the theory, there are no limits whatsoever to God's power, so he could indeed command such things. If nothing would be right or wrong until God wills it, he could have no reason to either command murder or forbid it, to sanction the torture of innocents or prohibit it. Therefore, if God commands rightness, God's commands would be arbitrary—a result that would be implausible to the religious and nonreligious alike.

5. A parallel argument is also possible. As stated above, if an action is right only because God commands it, then cruelty, murder, torture, and many other terrible actions would be right if God commanded them. This means that such immoral actions—immoral in light of common moral standards—could be transformed by God into moral actions. This outcome, however, would also be implausible to both the religious and nonreligious.

This essay presents two separate arguments to support its thesis statement—one in paragraph 4 and one in paragraph 5. Paragraph 4 argues that if God commands (makes) rightness, then his commands are arbitrary, a point expressed in the topic sentence (the last one in the paragraph). Paragraph 5 argues that if God commands rightness, he could make immoral actions moral, and this too is implausible. This argument also appears in the paragraph's topic sentence (the sentence beginning “This means that . . .”).

The connection between the statements in paragraph 4 and those in paragraph 5 is apparent. The transitional sentence in paragraph 5
("A parallel argument is also possible") helps bridge the gap between the paragraphs.

In most cases, your essay will need a conclusion. It may simply reiterate the thesis statement (without repeating it word for word). In long, formal, or complex papers, the conclusion may include a summary of the essay's arguments. In short or simple essays, there may be no need for a conclusion; the point of the whole essay may be evident and emphatic without a conclusion. If you are unsure whether your paper needs a conclusion, take no chances: Include one.

The conclusion, however, is not the place to launch into a completely different issue, make entirely unsubstantiated claims, malign those who disagree with you, or pretend that your argument is stronger than it really is. These tactics will not strengthen your essay but weaken it.

Step 6  Study and Revise Your First Draft

Your first draft is likely to have problems both big and small. At this stage, however, you should scrutinize mostly the big ones. This is no time for proofreading (correcting spelling, fixing punctuation, repairing typos, and the like). This is the time to make substantive changes such as those listed here. Put your paper aside for a while, then read it critically and do the following:

- Examine your argument first. Check to see that the premises are properly related to the conclusion and that they are adequately supported. Ask: Does the conclusion follow from the premises? Are the premises true? Is the supporting evidence solid? Would a reader be convinced by this argument? Rewrite the argument, or parts of it, if need be.

- Check for unity. Make sure that every paragraph relates to the thesis statement and discusses just one idea. Delete or modify paragraphs and sentences that go off on tangents. Remove any padding, passages that are irrelevant to the essay but are inserted to lengthen the paper or make it seem more impressive.

- Test for clarity. As you read the paper, ask yourself: Is the thesis stated clearly? Does the paper's introduction tell the reader what the essay is about and how the argument will unfold? Do the topic sentences need to be more explicit? Are there points that need to be emphasized more? Are ideas and premises adequately explained? Are the connections among ideas clear? Are there appropriate transitions to keep readers on track? Revise for maximum clarity.

- Hunt for repetitions. Look for phrasing in which you have repeated ideas or words unnecessarily. Are you just repeating yourself rather than fully developing your points? Cut out or rewrite suspect passages.

- Think your paper through. Ask yourself if you are really engaged in the critical thinking required to produce a good paper. Are you just repeating what your sources say without fully understanding them? Are you assuming, without checking, that certain statements are true? Are you ignoring contrary evidence or contradictions? Are you going for the obvious and the simplistic when you should be trying to address complexity?

- Smooth out the language. Fix awkward sentences, grammatical errors, wordy constructions, pretentious phrasing, and other impediments to clear communication. (See Chapters 7 and 8.)

- Show your draft to others. Even if those who read your paper know little about philosophy, they should be able to understand your thesis statement, your argument, and all important points. They should be able to tell from the introduction exactly what you are trying to do in your paper. If any part of the essay is confusing to them, consider rewriting that passage.

After writing and revising your first draft, repeat the process, creating as many drafts as necessary. Your goal is to revise until you have made all the necessary substantive changes.

Step 7  Produce a Final Draft

After completing all substantive changes, you should generate a final draft, the one you will turn in. The final draft should reflect not only the big changes, but also the corrections of all minor errors as well—misspellings, typos, grammatical errors, misplaced words, faulty punctuation, and documentation mistakes. This task should be primarily a proofreading job. At this stage, you should also format the manuscript according to your instructor's requirements. (If no requirements are specified, follow the guidelines given in Appendix A.)
The key to producing a clean final draft is down time—an interim in which you leave the last draft alone and focus on something else. Coming back to your paper after a day or so away from it can help you see errors that passed right by you before. You may be surprised how many mistakes this fresh look can reveal. If you cannot set the essay aside, ask a friend to read it and give you some constructive criticism.

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<th>QUICK REVIEW: Steps in Writing a Philosophy Paper</th>
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AN ANNOTATED SAMPLE PAPER

The following is the full version of the divine command essay, which demonstrates many of the considerations discussed in this chapter—organization, argument, thesis, explanation, sentence clarity, and more.

**The Divine Command Theory**

1. Many people believe that God is a lawgiver who alone defines what actions are right and wrong. God, in other words, is the author of morality; an action is right if and only if God commands it to be done. According to this view, there is no right or wrong until God says so, and nothing is moral or immoral independently of God’s willing it to be thus. God, and only God, makes rightness and wrongness. This view is known as the divine command theory of morality.

2. A simple version of the theory is widely accepted today, among both the religious and the nonreligious. In this version, God is thought to be the source of all moral principles and values. He can be the source of all morality because he is omniscient, being able to do anything whatsoever, including create the very foundations of right and wrong.

3. In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates brings out what is probably the oldest and strongest criticism of the theory. He asks, in effect, is an action right because God commands it to be done, or does God command it to be done because it is right? This question lays bare the dilemma that is inherent in the theory: if an action is right because God commands it, then there is nothing in the action itself that makes it right, and God’s command is arbitrary. If God commands the action because it is right (that is, he does not *make* it right), then rightness would seem to be independent of (or prior to) God, and the divine command theory is false. I contend that, at
least in the simplest version of the theory, this ancient dilemma still stands and that the most plausible way to resolve it is to reject the theory by accepting that moral standards must exist independently of God's commands.

4 The central argument against the notion that rightness is whatever God commands is this: If an action is right only because God commands it (that is, nothing is right or wrong in itself, or independent of God), then cruelty, murder, torture, and many other terrible actions would be right if God commanded them. If God commanded such acts, then they would be right, and no one would be committing a wrong by doing them. On the simple version of the theory, there are no limits whatsoever to God's power, so he could indeed command such things. If nothing would be right or wrong until God wills it, he could have no reason to either command murder or forbid it, to sanction the torture of innocents or prohibit it. Therefore, if God commands rightness, God's commands would be arbitrary—a result that would be implausible to the religious and nonreligious alike.

5 A parallel argument is also possible. As stated above, if an action is right only because God commands it, then cruelty, murder, torture, and many other terrible actions would be right if God commanded them. This means that such immoral actions—in mind of common moral standards—could be transformed by God into moral actions. This

outcome, however, would also be implausible to both the religious and nonreligious.

6 The main objection to the above arguments is that God would never command us to commit heinous acts. He would not because he is morally perfect—all-good in all ways. This counterargument, however, begs the question; it is a circular argument. The divine command theory is offered to explain what makes an action right—what makes something morally good. But to try to define what good is by saying that God is good is to talk in a circle: God's commands are good, and they are good because they are God's commands. This definition reduces the divine command theory to empty tautology. If we wish to have a better understanding of what makes an action right, we cannot be satisfied with such a definition.

7 Moral philosopher James Rachels makes this same argument in a slightly different way.

8 If we accept the idea that good and bad are defined by reference to God's will, this notion is deprived of any meaning. What could it mean to say that God's commands are good? If "X is good" means "X is commanded by God," then "God's commands are good" would mean only "God's commands are commanded by God," an empty truth.2
To return to Socrates’ dilemma, either an action is right only because God commands it, or an action is right (or wrong) independently of God’s commands. As we have seen, if an action is right only because God commands it, then God’s commands must be arbitrary, and it is possible for him to sanction obviously immoral acts. Since both these consequences are unacceptable, we must accept the second alternative: Rightness must be independent of (or prior to) God’s commands. We therefore must reject the simplest version of the divine command theory.

Conclusion.

Summary of arguments for thesis and thesis restatement.

As you surely must know by now, arguments are the main focus of most philosophical writing. Recall that an argument is a combination of statements in which some of them are intended to support another one of them. The statement meant to be supported is the conclusion; the statements meant to do the supporting are the premises. The premises are supposed to be the reasons for accepting the conclusion. As a reader of philosophy, you want to determine whether the arguments you encounter are good ones. As a writer of philosophy, you want to ensure that the arguments you use to make your case are also good. You want to avoid being fooled by, or fooling others with, a bad argument.

You can become more proficient in these skills if you know how to identify fallacies when you see them. Fallacies are common but bad arguments. They are defective arguments that appear so often in writing and speech that philosophers have given them names and offered instructions on how to recognize and avoid them.

Many fallacies are not just failed arguments—they are also deceptively plausible appeals. They can easily appear sound or cogent, misleading both you and your readers. Their potential for slipperiness is another good reason to study fallacies.

This chapter reviews many of the most common fallacies, explaining why they are bogus and how to detect them in your everyday reading and writing. The best way to use this material is to study each fallacy until you can consistently pick it out of any random selection of prose.