

Tips for Writing an Effective CPHL 606 Philosophy Essay

*"Do not write so that you can be understood, write so that you cannot be misunderstood."
-- Epictetus*

Introduction

I frequently get requests from my students after submitting their first written assignment (and getting their mark back) for guidance when it comes to writing effective philosophy essays. Although most of the advice in this document is specifically for the purpose of preparing to write the final essay assignment, some of its guidelines can also be applied fruitfully to the composition of your reading analysis assignment also.

Because this course has no prerequisite requirement, many students who take this course are new to writing academic essays in general, and just as many are new to writing philosophy essays in particular. If you find that either of these categories applies to you, then I offer the following advice based, mainly, on my experiences with student essays over the past five years as well as some specific advice in the appendices for those of you who may wish to write essays on a particular topic.

I realize that this document is lengthy and that reading this document carefully involves a time commitment. Naturally the temptation here is to skip reading it altogether, to read it at the last minute, or to "skim or speed read" this document. To this I can only say that of all the documents I will ask you to read in preparation for this course, none of them will repay the commitment in time that you will spend in reading this document unless thinking like a philosopher and applying critical thinking strategies comes to you as naturally as breathing – in which case, you probably should be teaching this course because even I do not constantly think like a philosopher.

Section 1. Take Advantage of the Advice Already Out There.

Several philosophy professors have already written excellent general guidelines on writing philosophy essays that can be accessed via the Internet. Try entering the following phrase on Google "How to Write a Philosophy Essay" and you will find several well written guidelines on this subject.

Section 2. Plan Your Work, Work Your Plan.

If you are interested in getting the most value out of your essays you need to start early. Find out when your essay is due and work backward, planning out in detail what you are going to do and when you expect it to be done. Here is a quick checklist:

1. Choose a topic.
2. Do your research (this should include not only material about your topic, but any other material you think might help in writing your essay).
3. Write a detailed outline for your essay (see Section 7 below).
4. Write a rough first draft and set it aside for a little while.
5. Go back and read draft and edit/re-write.
6. Get someone to proofread your essay (see Section 3 below).
7. See Point 5 above (repeat as necessary).
8. Turn it in, (on time of course ...).

Section 3. Proofreading

I can never state this too early, too often, too loudly, too much ... too whatever. **Get your essay proofread by someone other than yourself.** A good proof-reader should be able to spot difficulties with respect to the following basics:

- Clarity
- Diction
- Grammar
- Punctuation

People who tell me that they proofread their own essays get the same look from me that I give to people who tell me that they cut their own hair: it can be done, but most people do not do it well, and the results tend to be dubious at best. Most people are myopic when it comes to their own writing mistakes and tend to see “what they think they wrote” rather than “what they actually put on paper”. A fresh set of eyes helps avoid this tendency.

Section 4. Padding Your Essay

The main challenge with this kind of assignment isn't to make your argument by producing a large quantity of writing, but to present an effective argument by being selective and making the most of every line, every paragraph and every page. This requires a fair degree of focus and selectivity when it comes to deciding what to include in your essay. Writing that is included simply as a means of meeting or exceeding the page length requirement almost always ends up trading quality for quantity and it doesn't result in much of an overall gain.

If a sufficient amount of research is conducted, the issue of quantity should take care of itself. The writer of a well researched essay should find themselves in a position of having to decide what kind of material need **not** be included, rather than trying to figure ways to add extraneous material that doesn't really move your argument forward.

There are two ways to “pad” an essay with non-essential material that doesn't contribute to the quality of an essay in general. One is to skirt the style requirements (these are outlined in the **Basic Style Requirements [Document]**) the other is to include material that is not focused on moving your argument forward effectively. Here are some examples that are to be avoided in writing an effective essay:

A. Lengthy Introductions

Introductions that take more than a paragraph or two to explain to your reader what you are going to discuss, end up being counterproductive in the sense that the space you are using to tell your reader what you are going to discuss could be put to more effective use by actually presenting your argument. Essays on prostitution or pornography, for example, do not need to be prefaced by long explanations on the history or sociological development of either practice.

B. Digressions

Students who write essays without a clear outline in hand sometimes fail to recognize when their discussion digresses significantly from the topic at hand. There is no rule of thumb in this area and sometimes it takes a fresh eye from a proof-reader to spot a line of thought that has strayed from the original focus of the essay. The main corrective in this regard is to continue to ask yourself as you write, (or as you read over what you have written), is: “How does this serve to convince a critical reader that they should agree with my conclusion in this essay?” or “How does this material directly contribute to my argument?” If you can’t think of a clear and direct answer to either of these questions, put your editing powers to work. Better yet, draft a clear outline (see below) and make sure to stick to it.

C. Repetition

A well written and effective point only needs to be presented, or explained, to your reader once. A well composed essay outline should indicate (to you) whether you are presenting your reader with three distinct premises or the same premise stated in different ways. For example, arguing that adultery is wrong because it has disastrous consequences and then going on to dedicate the rest of your essay to describing those negative consequences results in arguing from one lengthy premise rather than from three distinct premises. This results in a significantly weaker argument in the event that if a critical reader finds a weakness in your single chosen premise (the rhetorical equivalent of putting all of your “eggs in the same basket”), there is little or nothing to prevent your argument from “collapsing” (or losing its effectiveness) altogether.

D. Overuse of Lengthy Quotations

Again, bear in mind this is a matter of focus. The point of this exercise is for you to work through your own thinking on a particular issue, too many lengthy quotations, or the inclusion of significant amounts of extraneous material, sends a signal to your reader that you may be relying on someone else’s thinking to make your argument rather than presenting your own carefully considered argument on an issue. The general rule of thumb here is that for every sentence of unoriginal content, your essay should have (at least) two sentences of your own original analysis.

E. Employing the “Course Survey” Strategy to Writing

This strategy consists of filling up an essay with an unimaginative and lengthy recap of the material that has been covered in this course, usually constructed by simply reproducing or loosely paraphrasing the class notes, or dedicating a paragraph or two to “discussing” the content and subject matter of each module that was covered. These essays usually begin by stating that they are going to “discuss” a broad topic like “love” or “sex” (See Section 5 below) only to proceed to produce a weak and extended discussion that should rightly be titled “a brief overview of everything I learned in CPHL 606 this semester.” Avoid this mistake at all costs.

Section 5. Choose Your Thesis Topic (a.k.a. your Conclusion) Carefully

Your thesis topic and your conclusion are actually the same thing. At the beginning of your essay you tell your reader what you are going to argue for – this is your thesis statement (**ideally it should be in the first paragraph of your essay**). At the end of your essay you re-state the point you are arguing for – this is your conclusion. Please make sure that you state clearly what you are going to argue for or against and make your topic manageable. Do not bite off more than you (or your reader) can chew by tackling a topic that is too broad. Please do not:

- Tell me that you are going to “survey” many opinions or outlooks on a topic.
- Tell me that you are going to “explore” an issue or a viewpoint.
- Tell me that you are going to “present” several perspectives on a particular topic.
- Tell me that you are going to “discuss” several perspectives or viewpoints on a particular topic.
- Tell me that you are going to “discuss, survey or compare” both sides of an issue.
- Tell me that you are going to “illustrate” an issue or viewpoint.
- Tell me that you are going to “validate” an issue or viewpoint.

These thesis statements are too broad for a short philosophy essay, the purpose of which **is not** to present a broad discussion or exploration of an issue, but to argue in support of a specific point. You should be able to state your position on an issue in one single clearly written sentence and commit to supporting that specific point. The rule of thumb at this stage is to keep things manageable by focusing on keeping your argument direct and simple.

Section 6. – The Purpose of a Philosophy Essay is to present an Argument to Your Reader for their Consideration.

The job of a philosophy essay at this level is to present a clear and cogent argument for your reader’s consideration. In ordinary language, the word “argument” can cover all kinds of exchanges, debates, squabbles, disputes etc ...

In philosophy, the word “argument” has a more precise and technical meaning. It refers to a process where a statement (thesis statement or conclusion – they are actually the same thing as we will see in the next section) is presented for someone’s assent. The intention here is to have your reader agree that thesis statement or conclusion is true.

A starting point to getting this kind of assent to the truth of your thesis statement is to anticipate the main question that will be in the mind of your hearer or reader, namely:

Why should I accept your thesis statement as true?

Answering this particular question is the main purpose of your essay.

The standard academic approach to this question is **to present your reader with reasons why they should accept your thesis statement** (to regard it as true). These reasons are called **premises**. As a general rule, the better your premises are, and the better the connection is between your premises and your conclusion, the better your argument is. This is why it is very important to be particular about the premises that you present to your reader in support of your conclusion. What you are asking your reader to do is to accept the truth of your thesis statement for the same reasons that you do. The basic point behind an argument being that it represents an exercise whereby you present “your reasoning” in written form for your reader’s consideration. Ideally, if your argument is effective, your reader will agree with your conclusion as a result of recognizing that the connection between your premises and your conclusion constitutes a “cogent argument”.

The key to constructing a good argument here is to bear in mind that your reader will probably not share your belief regarding the truth of your conclusion at the beginning of your discussion (otherwise why bother presenting an argument?) so your argument will have to be effective in providing your reader with grounds or support in such a way that any reasonable individual who does not already share your

conviction with respect to your conclusion, will (at the very least) have to give your argument careful consideration before they decide that they are not prepared to accept the truth of your conclusion, or make the same inference as you – or both.

There are several good websites on informal logic that can help out in this area that can be included in your research efforts. Here is just one if you would like some extra help in this area:

<http://papyr.com/hypertextbooks/comp1/logic.htm#causality>

Section 7. Construct a Clear Outline for the Argument that You Will Present to Your Reader in Your Essay.

If you haven't constructed an outline to follow when composing your essay, then your argument (and your writing in general) will probably display a distinct lack of focus and your reader will get the impression that you are simply "rambling off your loosely connected thoughts" or "presenting them with a collection of your opinions or musings on an issue" rather than presenting a clear and concise argument for their consideration. Constructing an outline gives you a bird's eye overview of your argument and it allows you to decide where you want your argument to go and how you want to get there. As any architect will tell you, the more detail that is put into this planning stage, the more sturdy and well structured the result will be.

Consider the following example outline which has more than enough detail to construct an 8 to 10 page essay:

Thesis Statement: _____

I believe (am convinced that) this is the case because:

Premise 1: _____

Premise 2: _____

Premise 3: _____

Anticipated Objection (or Counter-Point): _____

Reply to the Anticipated Objection (or Counter-Point): *I reply to this by saying that* _____

Therefore: (Conclusion) _____

Here is a sample argument that uses the outline presented above:

Thesis Statement: In this essay I want to argue that cross dressing is not morally objectionable.

I believe (am convinced that) this is the case because:

Premise 1: Cross dressing harms no one.

Premise 2: Cross dressing is a matter of individual or aesthetic taste.

Premise 3: Many individuals who cross dress lead morally unobjectionable lives which would seem to indicate that how one chooses to dress does not necessarily have a bearing on their moral character.

Anticipated Objection (or Counter-Point): Many individuals will argue that cross dressing is morally objectionable because those who do it, do it secretly, and so they practice deception.

Reply to the Anticipated Objection (or Counter-Point): *I reply to this by saying that keeping certain aspects of one's life private or discreet is not morally objectionable per se (people are entitled to their privacy). The fact that certain behaviors are conducted in secret is simply not a sufficient basis for concluding that they are immoral.*

Therefore: (Conclusion) – Cross dressing is not morally objectionable.

*** NOTE:** Do NOT use the subject matter in this outline for your essay. I do not want any essays on cross-dressing. This is merely a sample outline to aid you in structuring your own argument.

Section 8. Do Not Let Your Outside Sources Do Your Thinking (or Speaking) For You

A good philosophy essay will give you the opportunity to explore, work through, and express your own thinking on an issue. Don't hesitate to use sources to support your reasons or to illustrate a point for your reader, **but the key in short essay writing is to use such sources sparingly and not to use them as a substitute for your own argument on an issue.** Stringing together a bunch of quotations on a subject (or a collection of paraphrased statements) and periodically saying that "you agree with so-and-so" or "so and so states that" is not the same as working through an issue on your own. A philosophy essay should contain "your" argument, which is to say that it needs to contain your own well considered reasons for (or against) an issue. This is not to say that you shouldn't use outside sources, but (again) use your sources carefully and sparingly, and avoid the temptation to include this kind material in place of your own thinking on a particular issue. Again, the rule of thumb here is that for every sentence of non-original content, your essay should have two sentences of your own original analysis.

Section 9. Fallacies

Before writing your essay, take some time to research (or at least Google) some common "informal fallacies" to make sure your writing avoids these common errors. If you have no idea of what the following terms refer to, you might want to spend some time looking them up:

- Fallacy of Unwarranted Generalization.
- Straw Man Fallacy.
- Use of Emotive Language.
- Begging the Question.
- Non-Sequitur.
- Faulty Analogy.
- "Demonizing" an Opponent or a Practice
- Anecdotal "Evidence."
- Fallacy of Equivocation
- Appeal to Emotion
- Argumentum ad Populam.

Section 10. Writing Academically

One of the key challenges in this course will be learn to approach and write about certain topics related to love and sex from an analytical or conceptual standpoint. **The primary goal here is to come to a**

clearer understanding about certain concepts and ideas. Because this course touches on topics that are usually of a personal nature, it is not uncommon for an essay writer to lose a certain degree of focus when it comes to this aspect of writing.

If your essay reads like an excerpt from “advice for the lovelorn” or a section of a self-help book on relationships, then chances are your writing is probably not approaching the subject from a conceptual standpoint. Another test to apply is to see if your thesis statement is in the imperative mood (e.g. People ought to do such and such ... Or the people ought not to do such and such ...). If you find yourself giving advice to your reader on a particular topic, chances are you have already made a judgment on this topic and now you are simply informing your reader of the results.

Do not assume when it comes to controversial issues, especially in a philosophical context, that your reader will necessarily assume the truth of your thesis statement. Even if the truth of your thesis statement seems obvious to you, it is still your main responsibility to present an argument to your reader in support of your position (see Section 6).

Section 11. Argument vs. Explanation

There is a technical difference between an argument and an explanation and it is quite easy to overlook the difference between them because they are frequently expressed in the same terms. This distinction is an important one because the goal of a philosophy essay is to present an argument to your reader.

Here is the difference in brief:

Argument: **explains why** your reader should accept the truth of X

Explanation: assumes that X is true and explains to your reader why or how X came about.

Example 1.

Argument: In this essay, I want to explain why I think adultery is immoral ... or

Explanation: In this essay, I want to explain why people make the mistake of committing adultery ...

Example 2.

Argument: Polyamory is immoral because ...

Explanation: People make the mistake of engaging in polyamory because ...

If it helps, bear in mind that the specific goal of your essay is to explain to your reader **why** they should regard your thesis statement as true. To put this another way, your argument cannot proceed “on the assumption that” your thesis statement is true, nor can it be based on reasoning that assumes that your conclusion is true from the outset **since the very purpose of an argument is to establish that your conclusion is true.**

A good site that has a more detailed explanation of this distinction can be found at:

<http://www.csus.edu/indiv/m/mayesgr/phl4/tutorial/phl4rationalrecon1.htm>

Section 12. Posing Questions to Your Reader (especially of the Rhetorical Variety)

Strictly speaking, when it comes to the content of your essay, it is not your reader's responsibility to answer "your" questions. Your reader's sole responsibility is to evaluate the quality of the argument you present in your essay regardless of their own position on the issue. Consequently, there is usually little to be accomplished in this particular context by asking your reader a literal question in search of information (or a reply) since it is your responsibility to supply the reader with all the information they need to fairly evaluate the argument presented in your essay.

However, sometimes a question is posed not as a means of gaining information. Sometimes, individuals pose questions that appear to be asking for answers that they believe they and their audience already know. So what is the point of asking such questions if you believe that you and your audience already know the answer? The answer to this is that we occasionally ask a question in order to make a rhetorical point. Rhetorical questions are a common device for a speaker to make a point in an indirect fashion. Here are some examples of questions that are meant to apply rhetorically:

1. Only an idiot would believe X, right?
2. Who else but a pervert would disagree with this outlook regarding X?

In both of these cases, the speaker is not looking for an answer from their audience. What they are attempting to achieve indirectly is to state something such as:

1. Anyone who believes X is an idiot.
2. If you disagree with this particular outlook regarding X, then you must be some kind of pervert.

Note: The effectiveness of rhetorical questions rests on the belief that the speaker and their audience are in complete agreement on an issue so that the answer to the stated question is "obvious."

- **If this belief is true**, then the rhetorical question can achieve its desired effect of stating something indirectly. (The rhetorical questions above achieve this effect because most individuals are very unlikely to agree with the suggestion that they are an idiot or a pervert), **but**
- **If this belief is false** and the answer isn't obvious to everyone, then the question is not likely to be an effective rhetorical device.

Imagine posing the following "rhetorical" questions to a room (or a classroom) that is filled with individuals randomly chosen off the street.

1. Only an idiot would believe homosexuals could make good parental role models, right?
2. Who else but a pervert would want to witness the act of childbirth?

Again, these rhetorical questions are an indirect way of suggesting the following:

1. Homosexuals make poor parental role models.
2. Anyone who would want to be present in the delivery room order to witness the experience of childbirth must be some kind of pervert.

The effect of these "rhetorical questions" will be mixed since not everyone will regard these claims as being obviously true (although they once were). This insight applies to essay writing insofar as students

frequently find themselves tempted to use rhetorical questions as a means of driving a point home in their essays. Here are just a few examples I have encountered:

- Who else but a pervert would think anal sex was normal or natural?
- How could someone not see pornography as a degrading experience?
- Why would prostitution be illegal if it weren't immoral or harmful?
- Would you want your daughter (mother, sister, etc.) to be a prostitute?

The problem with the use of these rhetorical questions is that if you are writing on the subject of sexual perversion, or pornography or prostitution, then you have an obligation to provide a clear and cogent argument in support of the truth of your conclusion rather than pose rhetorical questions to your reader that are the equivalent of patently expecting, or assuming, that your reader already agrees with your conclusion. A reader who does not share your belief about what is "obviously true" about a particular issue (or if they strongly disagree with your position) will find your attempt to use rhetorical questions to make your case irritating and possibly offensive (especially if they strongly disagree with you on a particular issue).

For writing purposes, assume that your reader is somewhat contrary (he or she does not agree with your position) and somewhat unsophisticated (the clearer and more straightforward your argument is, the better). In other words, assume that your reader is an intelligent but skeptical individual who will need to be persuaded or convinced with good reasons to change their position on an issue before they will agree with you and accept the truth of your conclusion.

Section 13. Avoid the Use of Clichés (and Platitudes) like the Plague

William Safire's advice on clichés is a piece of advice that never goes out of style. Clichés are, by definition, trite or trivial insights that over time have been added to a general stock of phrases that remain in our collective consciousness. Since writing in philosophy is a matter of critical assessment that involves expressing certain ideas with precision, the use of well-worn clichés (and platitudes) will likely strike your reader as a bit of intellectual laziness, especially if these are used to support your argument. Here are some common clichés that have been presented to me (usually in support of a particular point or position) that, without serious explanation or qualification, end up representing some rather trivial and even misleading insights:

- "People should be free to do what they want (or be autonomous etc ...)".
- "People have the right to live however they want."
- "Everything is a matter of (mere) opinion".
- "X is simply a social construction."
- "No one knows anything for sure."
- "Who am I (we, us, society) to say if anyone is acting immorally?"
- "Who has the right to judge others?"

(Some of these are rhetorical questions meant to convey certain platitudes. See Section 12)

Try to avoid using these rather broad insights from politically correct sounding "pop philosophy" and "pop psychology" to prop up your argument. Present your argument, support the truth of its conclusion by presenting good reasons, and think carefully about the reasons you are presenting to your reader for their consideration.

Section 14. Eschew Obfuscation (or Why Excessive Verbosity is not Conducive to Comprehension.)

It is frustrating for a reader who is attempting to understand the argument you are presenting in your essay to have this task complicated by having to work through large amounts of overblown and complicated prose, especially if its use is unnecessary. Let the strength of your ideas, not the breadth of your vocabulary, make your case to your reader. When a critical reader reads an essay that begins with such flourishes as:

I will ultimately debate my position on polyamory by revealing the following informed declarations consisting of the following ...

their first concern will be that your primary research tool was an unabridged thesaurus. At this point in your philosophical writing your work should strive for clarity: to present a clear and effective argument through the use of clear and effective prose.

Section 15. Use of the Passive Voice

The correctness of the use of the active and the passive voice in writing is less a matter of right and wrong as it is a matter of using the appropriate approach to conveying your ideas to a reader. If your intention is to convey your ideas to your reader in a manner that minimizes your involvement as a writer (such as presenting clinical or statistical survey results), then the passive voice might be a useful device in your writing.

A philosophy essay, however, is a different type of writing. The general expectation is that **you will present an argument** by presenting **your own sound and well considered reasons** in support of **your conclusion**.

The bold typeface in the previous paragraph is meant to convey the idea that this process does not lend itself to the use of the passive voice. In fact, the use of the passive voice in this instance can serve to frustrate any reader who is struggling to figure out what **you** are trying to say in your essay. Here is an analogy designed to convey how frustrating it can be for someone to figure out *what you are saying* if you insist on using the passive voice.

Imagine you are in a strange town and you need to find a gas station before your car runs out of gas (imagine you're running on fumes). After a quick look around the town square you see two people standing by the main intersection where you see four roads each running out of town. In desperation you ask them where you can find the nearest gas station for directions. The first one says:

"It has been said that the nearest gas station is north of here and others say it is not."

While the second person says:

"The gas station is north of here."

Clearly there is no question which reply indicates what the speaker is thinking and which reply supplies a clear and direct answer to the question being asked. In a philosophy essay where the emphasis is on presenting an argument in support of a position, the most effective use of language usually employs the

active voice as a means of making your points clearly and unambiguously. If your essay is filled mostly with statements and claims beginning with such vague phrases as:

“It has been said that ...”

“It could be stated that ...” or

“It could be argued that ...”

“It has been argued, claimed, or disputed that ...”

then chances are that a reader is going to have a difficult time distinguishing between which statements represent your own thinking on an issue and which statements are simply ideas that you are conveying to your reader in an uncommitted fashion. The effectiveness of using clear and strong statements in the active voice in your essay to convey your ideas should not be underestimated.

Section 16. Using and Citing Readings Accurately.

Make sure that when you are citing or quoting or representing a thinker’s position, that you represent their work and their position accurately (you should also make sure that you are spelling their name correctly also). Some of the readings in this course (McCullough and Hall, and Wasserstrom for example) involve cases where a writer sets aside a portion of their argument *to describe views that they do not personally hold themselves, but which need to be outlined so that they can “respond to” certain ideas in the context of their own argument.* This not only applies to course readings but to journal articles also.

Using a quotation hastily taken out of context and presenting it to your reader without making sure that it accurately represents the central position presented in the work that it was taken from, can result in an embarrassing mistake that sends a strong message to your reader that you did not pay sufficient detail to the reading in order to fully understand the thinker’s position. In short, it indicates to your reader that your research effort was “less than conscientious”.

Section 17. Labels are Not Arguments.

Simply describing or labeling something as “perverse”, “immoral” or “degrading” is not a substitute for an argument, especially if your reader is not in agreement with your position. Again, it is always safer to assume that your reader is critical and skeptical of your position. Simply describing something in either positive or negative terms will not persuade a critical reader that your argument is sound. If it is central to your argument that your reader recognize the fact that a particular action or activity as “immoral”, then you will have to explain to your reader exactly **why** they ought to regard a particular action or activity as immoral.

Section 18. Anecdotal Evidence

Broadly put, an anecdote is a personal account or story that is used to support a point. It can be true or fictional, within reason of course. The use of anecdotal evidence in a philosophy essay needs to be carefully considered mainly due to the fact that it is somewhat easy to assume that you are using an anecdote to “support or prove” a point when, in fact, it may be doing very little of the sort. On a positive note, I’ll begin by discussing what I think are perfectly acceptable cases of the use of “anecdotal support.” **The best use of anecdotal evidence is usually to illustrate a point that you have already provided independent support for in your argument.** The basic purpose of the anecdote in this case is to help your reader bring to mind an example that illustrates what you have already argued for. Here is an example where a student uses anecdotal support to illustrate a point:

Claim

"I read a study the other day which concluded that people who use Windows programs tend to be more satisfied with the performance of their computers than people who use Linux based programs.

Anecdotal Support that "Illustrates" the Claim

My own experience seems to confirm this conclusion. I use Windows programs and I am very satisfied with their performance. When I tried to use Linux on my computer I found it difficult to install and operate."

I think this student's experience with Windows software and the anecdotal account of their experience illustrates the kind of satisfaction among Windows users that the study above referred to. Problems with anecdotal support arise, however, when anecdotes are used as evidential support for a claim rather than as a means of illustrating the claim.

Imagine the same example as above, except substitute the words:

My own experience seems to confirm this conclusion.

with

*My own experience **proves this must be true because ...***

This is a different sort of claim entirely and the merits of this separate type of claim need to be evaluated carefully. One of the main difficulties of using anecdotes as a form of evidence to support the truthfulness of a claim is that anecdotes actually supply a rather weak form of support. This is especially true in the case of complicated and controversial issues where appeals to supporting anecdotal evidence can produce unclear results to say the least.

This leaves someone who wishes to rely on this line of argument with a difficult choice to make when it comes to the question of whether it is advisable to use anecdotal support as evidence in support of the truth of a particular claim, either:

- A. Anecdotal evidence **does not** provide reliable support for the truth of a claim, or
- B. Anecdotal evidence **does** provide reliable support for the truth of a claim.

As a general rule, philosophers tend to be parsimonious and use option A as a rough guideline for evaluating arguments that rely on "anecdotal evidence." The reasons for this are more practical, I suspect, than they are logical or theoretical. The decision to go with option B seems to open the floodgates with respect to anecdotal evidence.

Going with the example above, if the positive experiences of Windows users have evidential weight, then what are we to say to individuals whose anecdotal experiences with Windows have been negative? What about the anecdotal experiences of people who have had very good experiences with Linux? Should the level of technical expertise that a person has with respect to computers be taken into account? If so, then other anecdotal evidence seems to indicate that more technically knowledgeable computer users have more positive experiences with Linux than they do with Windows software.

In a similar fashion, and on more than one occasion in this course, I have been presented with the following argument:

According to Linda Marchiano's (aka Linda Lovelace) account of her experience in pornography (detailed in her book "Ordeal" and before the Meese Commission) she was forced to have sex at gun point. This is a clear example of how the pornography industry abuses and exploits people.

The problem with reaching a broad conclusion about the pornography industry based on Marchiano's account is that for every Linda Marchiano there is also a Nina Hartley or a Ron Jeremy whose anecdotal accounts of their (considerable amount of) time in the pornography industry contain no such negative assessment. Presumably their "anecdotal evidence" (presuming that any anecdotes "are" evidence) should count also.

It is also possible for different people to have completely different anecdotal accounts of their experiences of the same institution. Some survivors of sexual abuse have similar negative anecdotes about their experiences with Roman Catholic clergy as Marchiano did about her experience in the porn industry, but even these anecdotal accounts need to be balanced against the anecdotal accounts of many individuals who have had positive and supportive experiences with Roman Catholic Clergy.

So before you present your reader with a claim, that relates to such issues as pornography, sexual perversion, polyamory or prostitution, that uses an anecdotal account as evidence in support of your position (especially if it is being used to support a rather broad conclusion), please keep in mind the choice of options that are presented above. If your anecdote about the negative experiences of this or that prostitute (or group of prostitutes) counts as evidence against prostitution, then be prepared to be confronted with the fact that the anecdotal experience of some prostitutes does not characterize their experience in a negative fashion, and vice versa.

Note: before you argue that "your" anecdotal evidence deserves to be considered while at the same time arguing that other forms of anecdotal evidence do not "really count" as evidence, be sure to do some extra research on the subject of "*ad hoc* reasoning" otherwise known as "special pleading".

Section 19. A Philosophy Essay is NOT a History Paper (it is also NOT a Medical Paper, a Clinical Study, a Sociology Paper, a Psychology Paper, or any other Social Science Paper)

Make sure that when you write your essay that you carefully review the essay outline in Section 7 of this document. An argument on the issue of pornography does not need to contain a lengthy history of the subject or a lengthy sociological analysis of the impact that pornography has had on society as a whole. I am also not interested in medical essays, or essays reporting on clinical surveys, that describe a particular a medical condition, or how to treat, or live with, a particular medical condition (anaorgasmia, or erectile disfunction) even if it relates to sex.

The point of a philosophy essay, which is what this course is interested in, is to present a focused and sustained argument in support of the truth of your conclusion on a particular issue. The point is usually to reach a better or clearer understanding about a particular concept (love, sex, monogamy, pornography, etc...). Lengthy digressions from this purpose, or essays that appear to be written to satisfy a completely different discipline than philosophy, end up detracting from this effort and they suggest to your reader that your writing suffers from a lack of focus, or that you do not have a clear understanding regarding what kind of essay is appropriate for a course of this nature. If you are not sure whether the argument you plan on presenting for your reader's consideration suits this particular course, ask me.

Section 20. Avoid the “Bait and Switch” Approach to Essay Writing.

The “bait and switch” occurs in the retail business when a seller offers something at a ridiculously low price, but when the customer arrives to buy it they are told that it is “no longer available” but that a substitute is available that may be different than advertised, or “slightly” more expensive etc.... A similar example of this occurs in philosophy essays when an essay starts off by saying that it is going to discuss Topic A, but later on it becomes apparent that what the writer really wants to discuss is Topic B or C.

Here is a common example that frequently occurs. In Section 23 on Arguing for the Obvious (see below) I ask that students not test their critical skills on easy targets such as human trafficking, child pornography and child prostitution since these activities tend to be morally uncontroversial because of the obvious element of undue coercion that is involved in these activities. Nevertheless, I still continue to get essays from students who start their essays by claiming that they are going to discuss prostitution or pornography, but then go on to attack such “straw man” targets as human trafficking, child prostitution, or child pornography. In short, make sure you have a clear thesis statement and a specific issue in mind, and stay on focus throughout your essay.

Section 21. The Use/Misuse of Statistics and Clinical Studies.

I am aware that many of the students who come to this class come from a social studies background or from an academic background that is accustomed to a clinical studies approach to various issues. Without disparaging or denigrating either of these approaches in their own right, it needs to be stressed that philosophy is a unique discipline in that there are few, if any, assumptions (or methodologies) that it is not willing to subject to critical scrutiny.

As helpful as statistical surveys and clinical studies are in bringing certain issues to light in other disciplines, they are forms of data gathering that are not beyond the scope of critical philosophical scrutiny. In a course like CPHL 606, many of the issues are highly controversial and capable of evoking strong visceral reactions in a variety of individuals.

Consequently, many individuals find it difficult to approach such subjects dispassionately and critically and, in such cases, it is difficult to avoid the (frequently unconscious) error of misusing the results of statistical and clinical studies to “advance” a particular viewpoint. Biased statistics, research that is explicitly dedicated to advancing a particular political agenda, selective use of sources, data manipulation and errors such as mistaking correlation for causation are common errors that students bring to their essays in an attempt to “prove” their point with statistics. I believe there is also a Wikipedia entry entitled the “Misuse of Statistics” that covers some of the more common errors involving statistical use and, in particular, misuse.

Students also need to be aware that a fair amount of clinical research that is conducted with respect to controversial social issues (pornography, prostitution) is driven by a specific political, social, or religious agenda. The results of this kind of agenda driven research, like studies produced by cigarette companies such as Phillip Morris who set out to study the effects of smoking, are fairly predictable and somewhat questionable, given the likelihood of bias.

The truth is that at this level of study, a 8 to 10 page philosophy essay is simply not a broad enough medium to incorporate a broad and even handed survey of the statistical evidence on both sides of a controversial issue needed to present a cogent case for or against pornography, or prostitution, or any controversial issue that may arise in CPHL 606.

What should also give many students pause for thought is that I frequently get equal numbers of essays arguing for opposing sides of an issue on the basis of statistical or clinical “evidence” that pornography or prostitution is (or isn’t) morally problematic. If you are used to making a case for or against an issue by amassing clinical studies and statistical arguments that “prove” your point, then my advice is to challenge yourself to move away from your comfort zone and work toward presenting your own clear, cogent and concise argument in support of your position.

Section 22. Moralising and Sermonizing (or Why a Philosophy Essay Makes a Poor Soapbox and an Even Worse Pulpit)

There is nothing wrong with taking a stance on an issue. But if you want to argue philosophically that a practice is immoral, then you need to present a cogent argument in support of this conclusion. If you start your essay by saying that you are going to argue that X is unethical or immoral, but proceed to state throughout the rest of your essay that:

- “X is simply wrong or immoral”
- “I believe that X is wrong or immoral”
- “Everybody just knows that X is wrong or immoral”
- “I can’t imagine anyone who would think that X is not immoral”

then you are not arguing your case as much as simply reiterating your conclusion in a different form.

To put it another way, if your reader were not already convinced that your thesis statement were true to begin with (that X is wrong or immoral), then simply reiterating your point (or describing it in negative terms) will not supply them with sufficient reasons to help change his or her mind (cf. Begging the Question and Arguing in a Circle).

Section 23. Arguing for the Obvious (or why referring to “Children” and “Coercive Practices” tends to result in “Straw Man” Arguments)

The general rule of thumb when it comes to writing philosophy essays is that uncontroversial issues tend to make rather poor thesis topics for a philosophy essay. If you are arguing against something that most reasonable people would not disagree about, then chances are you are not presenting a philosophically interesting argument, no matter how personally satisfying it might feel to rail against the evils of “child pornography” or “child prostitution.” In this particular area of philosophy, arguing against the sexual exploitation of children or coercive sexual practices (or both) tends to represent a classic “straw man” attack on an easy target.

The point of writing a philosophy essay is to develop or improve certain skills with respect to critical thinking and reasoning. Taking shots at an easy target or a “straw man” does not serve to improve a student’s skills in this area, in fact the opposite can be said to be the case. By picking an easy target for criticism, students end up giving themselves the misleading impression that their arguments are much better than they actually are. This causes many students to overlook the fact that their argument may be based on rather weak reasoning that does not get recognized as such (although to a critical reader it might be quite obvious) instead of presenting an argument based on sound reasoning that can withstand objective and critical scrutiny.

If you really want to impress your reader, then you will want to put your argument up against a strong opposing case. If you want to test your critical skills by arguing against the practice of prostitution (or

pornography, or polyamory), then test your argument by applying it to these practices as they are practiced by consenting adults, and if you want to make sure that your argument is focused on a worthy target, apply it to forms of these practices that are not practiced under coercive conditions. If your argument against these practices is compelling and persuasive, it shouldn't need to restrict itself to taking easy shots at the most deplorable cases of these practices which tend to serve as rather weak examples of the practice itself.

I also have counseled (challenged) more than one student to test their critical thinking and reasoning abilities by taking a position **that they do not agree with** and presenting a cogent argument in its defense. It can be an eye opening exercise (formal debaters adopt this tactic regularly) that forces a person to clearly assess the case for a view they personally oppose. If it helps, remember that a philosophy essay is an intellectual exercise (like formal debate); it doesn't have to be a manifesto of your personal outlook on an issue (See Section 26).

Section 24. Tone

Writing a philosophy essay is a like giving a public speech in an academic forum: in a class, an assembly, or at a conference. It is a formal exercise in expressing an extended argument either for or against a particular point in writing. Unless you are an experienced academic writer with several articles already under your belt, it's best not to resort to either humor or sarcasm to make your point in a formal essay. It is also unseemly to let your tone do your arguing for you. For example.

- “any idiot who would believe X”
- “it is obvious that only a sick individual would do X”
- “these depraved individuals who do X”
- “anyone who adopts position X lacks moral sensibility”

Phrases such as these are only slightly removed from crass name-calling and it is an insult to your reader's intelligence. It is possible to express firm disagreement in a civil and intelligent fashion without resorting to crass rhetoric or sarcasm to make your point. Let the strength of your argument, rather than your tone, make your point for you. Also, try to avoid the temptation to make an impression on your reader through the use of witty or clever essay titles (believe it or not, these actually send the wrong signal to your reader).

Section 25. Consider Your Audience

The general rule when it comes to writing for an audience's appeal is, the broader your audience, the stronger your argument. Students who argue that X is wrong “because God, or the Bible, or the Koran, or the Bhagavad-Gita says so” or that “X is wrong because it is the result of undue patriarchal influence” or that “X is wrong because it involves a class dynamic based on socio-economic inequality” end up weakening their argument by limiting the scope of their argument only to those individuals who already share their specific religious or political outlook.

Strictly speaking, this type of an appeal does not falsify an argument, but in a society that is moving toward pluralism, arguments that are directed toward a narrowly focused audience tend to be seriously weakened because of their rather limited appeal. Another way to look at this particular issue would be to ask yourself (honestly) whether you would be willing to accept a controversial claim on the basis of a source of authority that is different from the one you are presenting your reader. In other words, before asking your reader to accept a controversial claim on the grounds that it appears to be supported by what

is written in the Bible, for example, you may need to ask yourself whether **you** would accept a controversial claim on the grounds that it appears to be supported by what is written in the Koran, or the Bhagavad-Gita, or the Upanishads.

The challenge here is, as it was back in Aristotle's time, to develop arguments that could appeal to the sound and critical judgment of any reasonable person, not just to those who share your specific religious or political outlook. A clear and cogent essay should strive to set the bar for success higher than simply "preaching to the choir" as it were.

Section 26. On Personal Bias

Unlike many courses offered in a university curriculum, this course presents special challenges that can trip up the unwary. One common error that students have been known to commit is to pick an essay topic that they feel very strongly or passionately about. While there is nothing wrong with arguing forcefully in support of a particular position, the concern here is that the presence of strong emotions can serve as a strong source of bias that can render your argument much less effective by compromising your ability to approach the topic objectively and dispassionately.

These same emotions can also serve to blind someone to valid considerations on the other side of a genuinely controversial issue, and they can also blind someone to certain subtleties and distinctions surrounding an issue that may need to be addressed in a fair discussion of the issue. Consequently, this tendency frequently results in students using only those research sources that reflect their own viewpoint or bias on a particular issue (see the next point on Balanced Research).

If you're not confident that you can approach a topic dispassionately and give some kind of fair consideration to both sides of an issue before picking your thesis topic, think twice about writing on that particular topic. A philosophy essay is not a good vehicle for working through "personal issues" or "venting" ones personal feelings on a particular sensitive subject that you happen to feel strongly about (see Section 22 on Moralizing).

If you are still compelled to write on a particular issue that you know you feel so strongly about that it may compromise your ability to be objective, then please make very sure that you find a proof-reader who can provide you with some objective feedback concerning the quality of your argument, and listen to what they tell you. If this is not possible, seriously consider selecting another topic.

Section 27. Balanced Research (or Why It Is Good to Address a Well Chosen Counter-point in Your Essay)

A quick look at the sample outline in Section 7 (above) will indicate that a thorough argument will at least make an attempt to present a counter-point to which your argument can provide a response. This requirement is designed to get you to look at both sides of an issue which is an important part of the process of constructing your own argument. A robust argument will contain a "well chosen" counter-point designed to present a serious challenge to your argument, and it will give you a chance to respond to it, thereby strengthening your argument as a whole. If all your research comes from one perspective on an issue, chances are that the counter-point to your argument will not be as challenging as it could be (see the point above on Personal Bias), and this will result in a weaker argument in general.

When it comes to research, try to make an effort to look at some sources that support the other side of the issue you are writing about in order to select the strongest and most challenging counter-point to your argument that you can creatively and critically respond to (cf. Straw Man argument). If you can't

bring yourself to conduct any research into the other side of the issue you have chosen to write about, or if you can't imagine any other position on an issue than the one you have chosen to write about, then seriously consider picking another topic (or go back and re-read the previous section On Personal Bias).

Section 28. Dicto Simpliciter and Sweeping Generalization (or How Not to Argue Like a Bigot).

Have you ever listened to a bigot give you an opinion about a group of people that you knew was unfair, but you had a hard time putting your finger on exactly what was wrong with their reasoning? If so, here is a chance to figure out where their reasoning leaves the tracks and improve your own reasoning in the process. Bigots, as a general rule, tend to engage in the fallacy of making "sweeping generalizations" (this is also known as "stereotyping").

The difference between a valid generalization and an invalid or "sweeping" generalization depends a great deal on the composition of the set (or collection) of individual cases being referred to.

- If the composition of the set is homogenous (all the members of the collection are very similar or identical), then making valid generalizations is fairly straight forward.
- If there is a significant amount of variation, or if there are significant differences between the individual members of the set that is being referred to, then it will be much harder to make accurate generalizations about this group.

For example: Generalizing about porpoises and penguins is likely to be fairly uncomplicated because the individual members of these groups tend not to exhibit a great deal of individual variation from one case to the next. What is true of one porpoise or penguin is likely to be true of the other members of this collection.

But "marriages", "relationships", and other collective nouns denoting groups of people such as "men" and "women" are much more complex collective entities.

Asserting (or more to the point - advancing a claim) that "marriage" or "relationships" are "subordinating or exploitative", or that a particular gender is "manipulative" or "insensitive" or "stupid" or "lazy" runs the risk of being considerably less than accurate since there will be a fairly wide range of variation within these groups and, therefore, there is a high probability that there will be a significant number of individual cases to which your assertion (or your claim) will simply not apply. This is why bigots who presume to tell people what they think about "blacks", "jews", and "gays" etc ... end up sounding unenlightened (because they tend to present over-simplified generalizations about a set whose individual members are complex and varied).

Section 29. The Phenomenology (or Experience) of Sex

One of the chief pitfalls in discussing topics that involve sex is that many of these discussions frequently touch upon the "experience" of sex which (if not approached with some precision) can lead to a variety of confused ideas. Broadly speaking, sexual activity can be viewed as consisting of two elements.

1. There is the physical and psychologically complex activity of engaging in sex and,
2. There is the subjective psychological experience that accompanies sexual activity, or the phenomenology of sex.

What further complicates this issue is that it is difficult for many of us to acknowledge that our subjective experience of sexual activity (a particular phenomenological experience) is heavily influenced by our individual psychological makeup. In other words, it is difficult for us to appreciate the fact that “our” individual and subjective experience of sexual activity tends to “conform to” our thinking about sex and sexuality in general (and vice versa).

A lack of awareness regarding this reciprocal influence between “our experiences” and “our ideas” with respect to our experience of sex has a tendency to mislead us into assuming, sometimes unconsciously, that our subjective experience somehow provides us with some kind of unmediated or unbiased perspective on this issue. This, in turn, has a tendency to lead us to assume that our own experience of sex or sexual activity (from a subjective first person perspective) represents a more “normal” or “objective” perspective on this issue.

For example, I frequently get essays from students to argue that they cannot “conceive” or “imagine” how this or that kind of sexual (or romantic experience) could ever be seen as satisfactory or non-dysfunctional. This is understandable, but an argument that claims that a particular experience is dysfunctional needs to rise above the claim that this kind of sexual activity is so foreign to a person’s personal experience that they simply cannot “imagine” that it is normal or non-dysfunctional. The mere fact that a person cannot imagine themselves engaging in satisfactory plain sex, or engaging in sex with a gender other than the one they usually prefer, or participating in a sexual or romantic relationship of a non-dyadic nature, or including non-standard elements in their sexual activity (pain, domination, etc ...), is not a decisive argument that these alternatives are not possible, and it is not decisive argument (in and of itself) that these alternatives are inherently dysfunctional or immoral either.

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Last Revised: January 11, 2016