

How to write

A good philosophy essay

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Stanford University, 2026



Overview

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What is a philosophy essay?

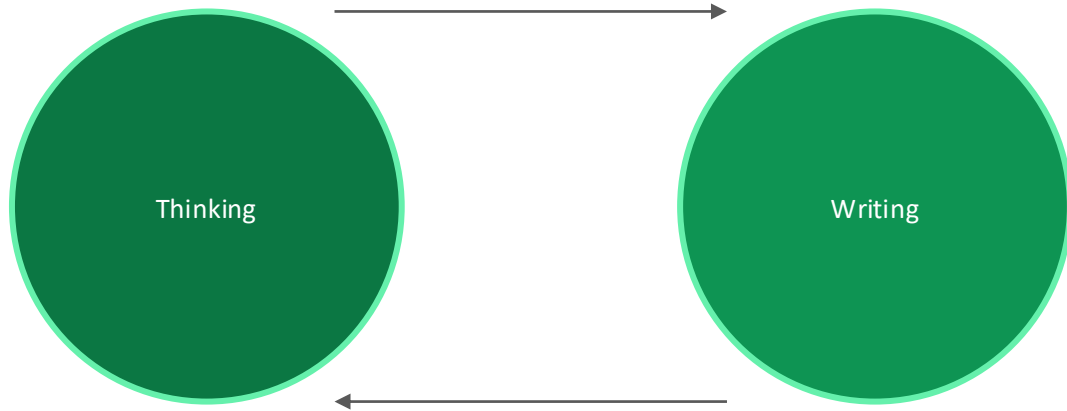
A philosophy essay is a piece of writing that presents **a thesis** and **an argument**.

The thesis is the position you defend, the argument is your way of getting there.

A philosophical essay is both personal and analytical.

What is a **good** philosophy essay?

A good philosophy essay demonstrates your ability to **think** and **write**.



What **skills** are relevant?

A good philosophy essay demonstrates comprehension and philosophical skills.

Comprehension: You understand the material you are working with. You can summarize, paraphrase, distinguish, and prioritize.

Philosophical skills: you can evaluate thoughts and arguments - those of others, and your own.

How to write well: the 5Cs

Clarity: be clear about what you say and how you say it. 🧠

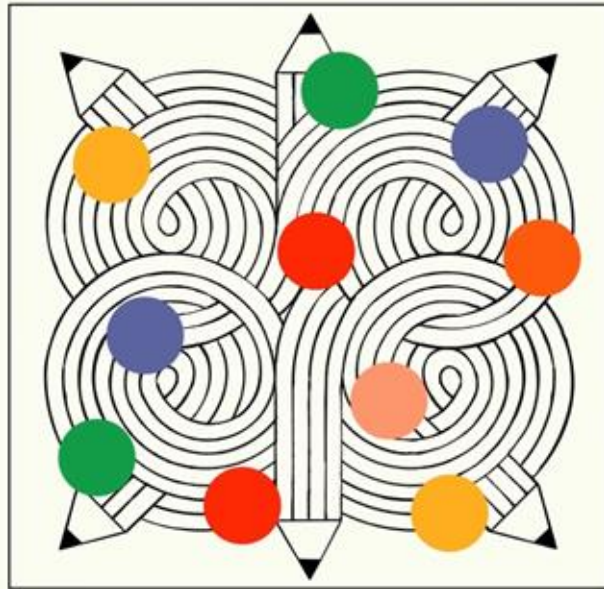
Concision: make your argument succinctly, don't repeat yourself. ✂️

Cogency: convince the reader of your argument, provide compelling reasons. 🙋

Cohesion: your paper is well-organized and hangs together as a whole. 📖

Creativity: ask interesting questions and use innovative examples. 🦜

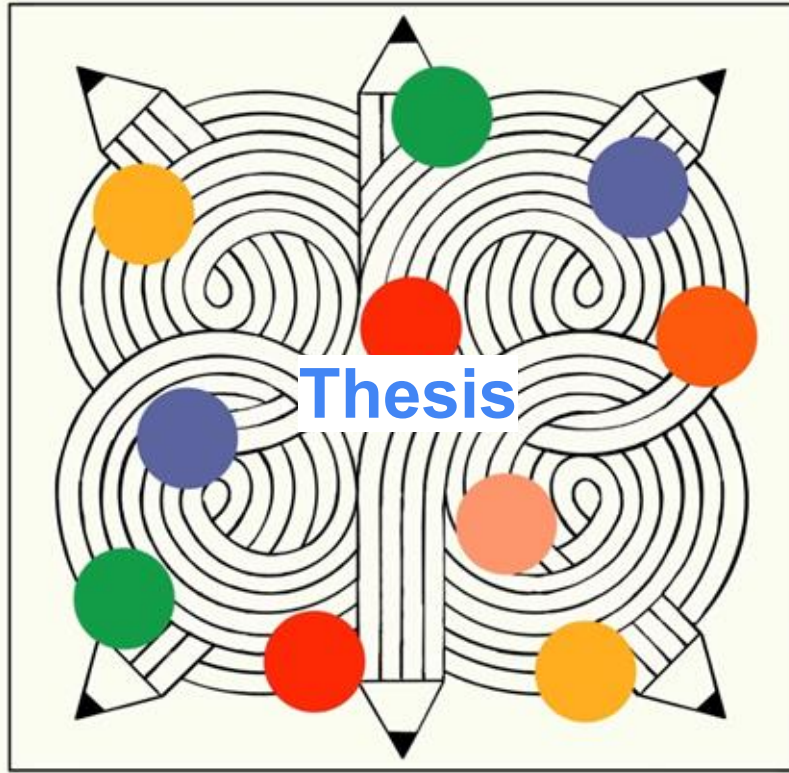
Structuring your paper:
Try Zadie Smith's [Rectangle](#)



Conclusion: wrap up and conclude.

Introduction: thesis, relevance, roadmap

Develop your argument as you said in the intro.



Almost there!
Repeat main points with variations.

Start winding down:
reiterate and summarize.

Consider objections and counter-arguments.

Introduction

→ **What** is *your* thesis?

→ **Why** does it matter?

→ **How** will you present your argument?

Checklist:

Do I clearly state what I'm going to do (and will not do) in the paper introduction?

Have I set out my thesis clearly in a few sentences?

Example Prompt

Many technology companies offer free services to their customers in exchange for personal information. What, if anything, is wrong with this practice?

Example Introduction

Technology companies like to state that they empower users by offering them free services. I argue that this claim is not just misleading, but wrong. Exchanging services for data –what Shoshana Zuboff (2019) calls “surveillance capitalism” – reduces people’s freedom by forcing them to give up their privacy. Drawing on the example of Instagram, I show that this practice is particularly harmful to young users, many of which use Instagram to stay connected with friends. Thus, even though they can theoretically leave the platform, network effects render this alternative practically meaningless, forcing them to accept whatever terms of services the company offers. I conclude by discussing legal implications of my findings.

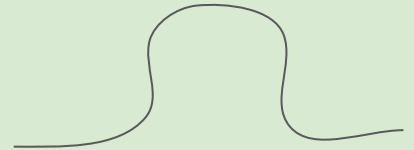
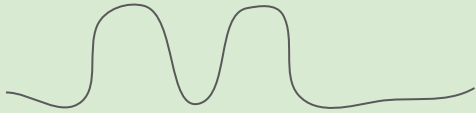
Argument

The argument is how you get from your thesis to the conclusion.

It consists of the **reasons you offer to support your thesis.**

You can use one single reason or multiple independent ones.

This can take many forms:



Body of paper

The body of the paper should consist of a **reconstruction of views** and developing an **original perspective**.

Reconstruction of views:

- Make sure you have reconstructed the the views of those you are discussing accurately, and do so in your own words.
- Do not assume any knowledge on the reader's part.

Originality:

- Make sure you've drawn new connections, made a new point or suggestion, used an original example, or offered a new criticism
- Don't take this as an invitation to be overly ambitious. Your originality must engage directly with the literature you are writing about

Counter argument and critique

Identify and address alternative or competing perspectives, don't ignore them.

They strengthen your argument and reinforce the validity of your thesis.

What would a strong, good-faith objection look like?

Checklist:



Do I present at least one objection to my argument and respond to it charitably?

Example

Some claim that sharing personal data is a fair price to pay for connection, but these voices ignore that surveillance capitalism makes users pay twice: they pay with their data, and this data is then used to influence them into buying products. Therefore, a company using surveillance capitalism always infringes on people's liberty, irrespective of what service they claim to offer.

Topic Sentences

Topic sentences are a great way to demonstrate clarity, concision, and cohesion.

They set the tone for the rest of the paragraphs.

Tip: If you read only the first sentence of each paragraph, you should get the high-level argument of your paper!

Today, most of us are simultaneously data users and data producers. Whenever we look up the nearest coffee shop, collect some loyalty points, or pay with our credit card online, we leave a small data trail. Individually, these data points do not possess great value. Aggregated and analyzed, however, they become worth a fortune. In the Western hemisphere, this is reflected in the ever-rising value of data-driven companies such as Alphabet, Meta, or Amazon. Their scope and exact business models may vary. But what they share is a focus on extracting, analyzing, and using information about their customers to improve and expand their services. Unsurprisingly, three out of the five richest men in the United States owe their wealth in large numbers to data-driven companies and technologies (ATF and IPS, 2021; Collins, 2021). As our digital and physical worlds become increasingly intertwined, our human experiences are the newest addition to the data pool—be that datafied information about our habits, emotions, or deepest fears (Zuboff, 2019; Cohen, 2019).

Against this backdrop, calls for a better protection of individuals in the digital economy¹ have become increasingly loud. A central aspect of such efforts are data protection regulations, such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (EU 2016/679) or California's Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA). Under the liberal paradigm that continues to inform both law and economic thought (Bentham and Goldenfein, 2020), such regulations tend to operate from an understanding of freedom as the absence of unwanted interference, or more broadly, harm. Acknowledging data protection's essential role in moving us toward an equitable digital economy, this article investigates whether these efforts could benefit from complementary initiatives that go beyond questions of *protection*. More specifically, it discusses how personal data flows could be integrated into a political economy modeled around citizen *empowerment*.

Overall Structure & Focus

Clarity of Structure:

Be sure to check that the structure of your paper is obvious to the reader

→ Make use of signposting and tell the reader exactly what you'll do in certain paragraphs.

→ Ask yourself: Is the function of each paragraph of the paper obvious to the reader?

Focus:

Be sure to focus on arguing for your thesis and follow your plan closely.

→ Avoid tangents and exclude underdeveloped ideas from your paper

→ Do a few things well, not more things poorly!

→ If the prompt doesn't ask for it, you shouldn't try to do it in your paper!

Conclusion

A conclusion can be short or more substantive.

At this point you should **not** introduce new arguments.

But you can reflect on implications and open questions.

Checklist:

Do I clearly state what I have done (and haven't done) in the paper at the end?

Example

In the previous paragraphs I demonstrated that surveillance capitalism is a business practice that is normatively objectionable, as it infringes on people's personal freedom. While older users have established social networks and mostly rely on Instagram for inspiration and entertainment, the app serves as connective tissue for a younger generation, leaving them with little or no meaningful alternatives to sharing intimate information as a way to find and keep friends. This differential price for privacy has so far been underexplored, and deserves more attention from lawmakers, for example through targeted privacy protections for minors.

Editing: Chop, Hack, Prune

Be critical: can you say it better, shorter, simpler?

Be playful: use examples, questions, metaphors

Be diligent: check your sources, cite correctly → try reading out loud!

Be personal: don't shy away from taking a stand.

Be proud: You pushed yourself to write and think more clearly—this is a hard thing to do!

Checklist



Does your paper respond to the prompt?



Is your thesis clearly stated?



Can the reader follow your argument?



Have you dealt with possible objections?



Do paragraphs hang well together?



Are you citing relevant literature?



Does your conclusion follow from the reasons you provided?

Questions & Examples

Additional Resources:

[Stanford Hume Center](#)

Individual Appointments available
six days a week; try to book in
advance!

Jim Pryor's **guidelines for philosophical writing**:
<https://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>


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Example

In 2011, when Sebastian Thrun, the father of self-driving cars, claimed that “It’s a no-brainer that 50 to 60 years from now, cars will drive themselves” [Allen, 2011], he clearly did not foresee the rapid pace at which the technology would advance. Merely 9 years later, companies like Cruise, Waymo, Aurora and others have already received permits to transport passengers in fully automated robotaxis in the state of California. [Dickey, 2020] While the industry pushes ahead, it is important that not only do regulatory frameworks keep pace with technological advancements, but also that these regulatory frameworks are underpinned by thorough ethical analysis.



In this essay, I explore two influential schools of thought in normative ethics — utilitarianism and contractarianism — that have had tremendous staying power in contemporary society and analyze how well they translate to the autonomous vehicle (AV) era. In particular, I use the following two policy questions — whether AVs should optimize for passenger safety or global human welfare and whether AVs that jeopardize the welfare of certain groups of road users while increasing global human welfare should be deployed on roads — as vehicles to illustrate the relative merits and pitfalls of the aforementioned frameworks. I find that while utilitarianism is appealing intuitively, it is inadequate as an ethical framework for two reasons: it leads to contradictions when employed in the real world situations that autonomous vehicles face and that it fails to take seriously the distinctions between persons. I then argue that these flaws are resolved more adequately by Rawlsian contractarianism and hence the latter theory should serve as the framework within which AV regulators operate.

Example

As is in the case of WhatsApp's continuation of end-to-end encryption, tech companies must value the costs of security, the company's subsequent role as a tacit contractor for the government, and the value of its consumers' privacy. An entity like WhatsApp must choose who its constituents are, and then secondly decide what impact this lack of encryption will have on the security and privacy of global citizens, be it positive or negative. I will begin by determining why this is the natural structure in which an ethical framework must be constructed and transition into a discussion how to evaluate the moral role of a technology company. To sum out the central thesis, I will illustrate how the company can potentially evaluate the eventual impact of a universal store of consumer data and private information.

Example

It is rare to drive around Silicon Valley without seeing a white Waymo minivan, decked out with dozens of sensors and a human relaxing in the “driver’s seat.” These autonomous vehicles (AVs) hold immense promise to both eliminate accident-causing human error and raise fuel efficiency when deployed on a large scale, benefitting most people in society.¹ Nevertheless, these innovations are not without cost. Pedestrians have already been killed in the testing of AVs, indicating that safety for some may come at the expense of others.² And some worry that AVs will render human driving obsolete, resulting in the loss of livelihoods and a cherished pastime.

At the heart of both these concerns lies a question: When most people in society stand to gain from a decision, how should we prioritize the interests of minority groups who fare worse? In this paper, I will use John Rawls’s ideas of justice as fairness and the veil of ignorance to argue that we cannot sacrifice the disadvantaged in the name of the “good of society.” Specifically applied to AVs, I argue that if AVs harm cyclists while protecting pedestrians and drivers, the technology should not be deployed because cyclists are already a disadvantaged group and it would be unjust. People who enjoy driving are not, in practice, a disadvantaged group, so their preferences should not be inherently prioritized. Meanwhile, in the case that AVs do not disproportionately harm cyclists or others from a disadvantaged group, it is acceptable to limit the freedom to drive by disabling a “human pilot mode” for some drivers, although only to the extent that safety is improved substantially and consistent with the demands of value pluralism.

