

Essay writing: things to keep in mind

Planning and preparation

- (1) Make a plan. It is hard to overstate how important this is.
- (2) Read the question (multiple times!) and make sure you are answering it. An excellent essay that does not address the question will not score well.
- (3) Choose an author you are comfortable with. Don't make the writing harder than it needs to be.
- (4) Speak to me in my office hours about your idea. Ask questions.
- (5) Think, plan, write, edit/plan/redraft, think, edit/plan/redraft, edit.
- (6) Before starting, read this: <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>
- (7) Also seriously consider reading this: http://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e_polit

Writing

- (8) Be honest with yourself about your arguments. Leave enough time to redraft if you realise that the original position that you wanted to defend is wrong.

(9) Essays should demonstrate careful reading of the required text and some secondary literature. Excellent essays will demonstrate critical thinking about the topic/text. Do not just write a book report.

(10) Make sure your essay has a clear structure. Let the reader know what that structure is. “In this essay, I will argue...”

(11) Include sections. “1. Locke’s argument [...] 2. Nozick’s Criticism [...] 3. A Lockean Response [...]”

(12) The introduction should be a fairly concise. The conclusion should restate the main findings of the paper. Do not overstate what you have done in the paper.

(13) Define key terms. This can be done when they first appear in the paper or you can get them out of the way early on. But don’t leave your reader guessing what you mean when you use a term that is central to your paper. Footnotes are a good place to provide less central definitions.

(14) Clarity is important. Try to write in short sentences. Do not use words that you do not fully understand. Do not worry about repeating words if they are the right words for the sentence. It is better to write with a dictionary than a thesaurus.

(15) The person grading your paper cannot read your mind. Explain all the moves you are making in your argument as explicitly and clearly as possible. Having someone else read your paper before you submit it (preferably a non-specialist) is very helpful for catching unexplained jumps in your reasoning.

(16) Remember that you are meant to be arguing for a point. Don’t just tell me what you think. Tell me *why* you think it. “Rousseau is unable to devise a form of government in which no one is dominated by anyone else because ...”. “Locke’s defence of a natural property is convincing, since it is able to overcome the most powerful objection to it. This is the objection that ...”.

(17) Think, plan, write, edit/plan/redraft, think, edit/plan/redraft, edit.

Miscellanea

(18) Don't plagiarise. It is definitely not worth it. If you are worried about this, read the handbook.

(19) We don't expect you to be experts on the authors. You are responsible for knowing the material covered in the essential readings and the lectures. Given the amount of time you have, it definitely won't help to try to read everything you can find on an author. Just read the central primary text, and some select secondary sources.

(20) If you go over the word count by 10 percent or more, there will be a grade penalty. Stay in the limit.

(21) Think, plan, write, edit/plan/redraft, think, edit/plan/redraft, edit.