

Philosophy

These subject guidelines should be read in conjunction with the “Introduction”, “Outline” and “Details—all essays” sections of this guide.

Overview

An extended essay in philosophy provides students with an opportunity to undertake a philosophical investigation into a topic of special interest. The student is encouraged to engage in serious, personal thought, to develop and explore in a disciplined and imaginative way a specific philosophical question appropriate to the subject, and to arrive at a clear conclusion.

Choice of topic

The chosen topic may be stimulated, for example, by work done in class, by current events, by issues of contemporary debate, by discussion, by private reading and/or reflection, or by conceptual features of belief systems not previously encountered by the student.

A precisely circumscribed topic should be selected, so that it can be treated thoroughly. For example, it may be preferable to choose as a starting point a specific hypothesis rather than a general one, certain of the ideas of one philosopher rather than several, or a single text by a philosopher rather than the whole of his or her work.

A topic should be reconsidered or amended if it is interdisciplinary in nature and/or is not directly related to philosophy.

The following examples of titles for philosophy extended essays are intended as guidance only. The pairings illustrate that focused topics (indicated by the first title) should be encouraged rather than broad topics (indicated by the second title).

- “An analysis of John Rawls’ procedure of justifying principles of social justice” **is better than** “Philosophical views of social justice”.
- “The notion of freedom of speech in Spinoza’s *Theologico-Politico Treatise*” **is better than** “Ethics in the 17th century”.
- “Brahman: the ultimate reality of Sankara’s *Advaita Vedanta*” **is better than** “Philosophical implications of the Hindu scriptures”.
- “Change and continuity: a critical assessment of Herbert Marcuse’s views on art” **is better than** “Philosophical aspects of art and aesthetics”.
- “Doing *versus* being: language and reality in the Mimamsa school of Indian philosophy” **is better than** “Language and the nature of reality”.
- “An examination of the role played by reason in Anselm’s investigation of the concepts of predestination and free will” **is better than** “Anselm’s exploration of the mysteries of faith”.

A necessary condition for a sound philosophical treatment of the topic is a well-formulated research question. Previous experience shows that, in essays where the research question is well focused and stated clearly, the arguments seem to unfold of their own accord. Therefore, the focus of the investigation must be narrowed down as much as possible and stated in a concise and sharply defined research question. Students must choose a research question that can be treated effectively within the word limit and is philosophically relevant. The research question can be formulated as a question or as a statement. Some examples with good results in the past include the following.

Title	Do stem cells have moral status?
Research question	What criterion can be identified in order to ascribe a moral status to stem cells?
Approach	An explanation and justification of a criterion that allows a moral status to be ascribed to stem cells.

Title	Asian philosophy of critical thinking: divergent from or convergent to Western fundamental principles?
Research question	What is the nature of the critical thinking that is clearly visible in Indian historical texts such as the <i>Caraka</i> and the <i>Nyayasutra</i> ?
Approach	An exploration and justification of the notion of critical thinking that is found in the <i>Caraka</i> and the <i>Nyayasutra</i> .

Title	Art and politics in Hannah Arendt's <i>The Crisis in Culture</i>
Research question	In Hannah Arendt's essay <i>The Crisis in Culture</i> , art and politics are not opposed but complementary.
Approach	An investigation into the relation between art and politics in <i>The Crisis in Culture</i> .

Title	The roots of wisdom according to the <i>Tao Te Ching</i>
Research question	Does wisdom necessarily imply acting in accordance with the order of nature, according to the <i>Tao Te Ching</i> ?
Approach	An exploration of the idea of wisdom according to the <i>Tao Te Ching</i> .

Title	The scientific character of Freud's interpretation of dreams
Research question	Is Popper's falsifiability an adequate criterion to evaluate Freud's theory of dreams?
Approach	An examination of whether Popper's falsifiability is an adequate criterion to evaluate Freud's theory of dreams.

Topics that are mainly dependent on summarizing general secondary sources (such as textbooks and encyclopedias), those that are likely to lead to an essay that is essentially narrative or descriptive in nature, and general topics that are not well focused or are more appropriate to other subjects, should all be avoided.

Treatment of the topic

Clarity, coherence of ideas and attention to detail are necessary conditions for an effective treatment of a philosophical topic in an extended essay. A lucid understanding of the problem(s) should be demonstrated, and the proposed solution(s) should be logical and well structured. Counterclaims or objections should be envisaged, addressed and, if possible, rebutted.

While irrelevance must be avoided, the wider implications of the philosophical issues raised should be explored to an appropriate degree, and an awareness should be evident of the connections between such issues and more universal concerns of human life.

The treatment of the research question must aim towards its philosophical exploration and the construction of an argument, which presupposes a careful, critical analysis of themes and/or texts. This approach, which allows many different ways of philosophical reflection, is based on the emphasis of the Diploma Programme philosophy course on **doing** philosophy. Within this context, the aim of a philosophical investigation is to encourage students to develop the ability to reason and argue, and to learn to take a personal and independent position on philosophical issues. This should result in the construction of a personal philosophical argument, which should be cogent, rational, and economical in expression, and should be supported by relevant and, if possible, original examples. It is strongly recommended that any student considering writing an extended essay in philosophy should first read the current *Philosophy guide* and understand its approach.

Interpreting the assessment criteria

Criterion A: research question

Although the aim of the essay can best be defined in the form of a question, it may also be presented as a statement or proposition for discussion that is clearly philosophical or open to sustained philosophical analysis and argument.

Criterion B: introduction

The introduction should relate the research question to existing subject knowledge: the student's personal experience or particular opinion is rarely relevant here. It should explain succinctly the philosophical significance of the topic, why it is worthy of a philosophical investigation and how the research question fits into a philosophical context (for example, a problem, discussion, tradition, or conception). The introduction should refer to the specific research question or to the argument that is going to be developed. Lengthy background information that is not relevant to the question should not be included.

Criterion C: investigation

When the research question has been established, the student should explore the topic, for example, by making a research plan. The proper planning of an essay should involve interrogating source material in light of the research question. In philosophy, research questions are explored through an examination of themes or texts. Accordingly, the range of sources that could be used is wide, including works of philosophers, dictionaries of philosophy, textbooks and encyclopedias. An appropriate and effective use of sources should take into account the following.

- Descriptive approaches are not adequate for this kind of philosophical investigation. The presentation of information about the issue under discussion should be concise, relevant and directly related to the point that the investigation is trying to make.
- When the research question refers to a source that is not directly philosophical (for example, literature, contemporary issues, cultural or local issues), the examination must be distinctively philosophical.

- If students make use of Internet-based sources, they should do so critically and circumspectly in full awareness of their potential unreliability.
- Absolute reliance on textbooks is discouraged and no extended essay in philosophy should be based exclusively on textbooks. They should only be consulted insofar as they may stimulate ideas, provide guidance and encourage the development of a personal investigation.

Criterion D: knowledge and understanding of the topic studied

The essay demonstrates the student's philosophical knowledge and understanding of the topic when it does the following.

- Identifies and exposes the basic philosophical issues immediately present in the research question
- Presents and discusses philosophical concepts, ideas, arguments, perspectives and positions that are directly relevant to the research question
- Is philosophically well informed and uses the information purposefully in order to broaden the scope of the exploration or to support the argument
- Shows philosophical insight into themes or philosophers' views
- Explores possible ways of understanding the issues or problems discussed
- Shows an awareness of philosophical implications arising from the research question, or the ideas or arguments examined

Criterion E: reasoned argument

Students should be aware of the need to give their essays the backbone of a developing argument: arguments should be focused and sustained. Straightforward descriptive or narrative accounts that lack analysis do not usually advance an argument and should be avoided.

The construction of an argument lies at the very core of a research essay in philosophy. Developing a reasoned argument in philosophy implies at least the following.

- The construction of an argument in a philosophical investigation plays the role of empirical research in empirical sciences, or logical proof in the formal ones.
- Developing a philosophical argument must be clearly distinguished from simply describing or narrating a series of theories or opinions.
- Some students who have not previously written at such length may need guidance about the relation between argument and structure.
- Students should be familiar with the basic features of reasoning necessary to construct personal philosophical arguments in a sound and purposeful way.

Criterion F: application of analytical and evaluative skills appropriate to the subject

Analysis has always been at the heart of philosophical method but it has been understood and practised in many different ways. In one basic accepted sense, it consists of breaking something (an idea, a topic or a question) down into its components. Analysis might also be characterized as disclosing or working back to what is more fundamental by articulating relevant elements and structures, on the basis that more fundamental concepts have a broader explanatory power. In turn, evaluation in a philosophy extended essay should be the result of students developing their exploration and own line of reasoning concerning the research question. However, this must be carefully distinguished from the mere statement of opinions or beliefs that are not the result of the specific investigation. Analytical skills are shown by means of an in-depth and extensive critical philosophical treatment and discussion of themes, basic concepts and arguments; whereas evaluative skills are exhibited when ideas, arguments and perspectives are assessed from a consistently held and well-justified perspective with clear evidence and strong support.

The exploration of the research question implies the development of analytical and evaluative skills, which is usually carried out through an examination of themes and texts. The following statements suggest an approach that may enable students to research themes or texts in a consistent way. They are not the only directions that can be taken into account but they provide a starting point from which students can develop into independent researchers in philosophy. Students should adopt a similar approach when they examine a philosophical issue or when they investigate a philosophical argument presented in a text. In the case of themes, students should:

- identify the research question
- ask themselves what they think about the question asked or the hypothesis stated, taking into account their own and other perspectives
- present reasons that support their position
- put forward possible objections or counter-arguments that could be levelled against their position
- suggest strategies for overcoming these objections or counter-arguments
- illustrate their position and counter-positions with supporting examples and relevant cases
- offer a possible and consistent answer to the question asked or a relevant exploration of the hypothesis stated, evaluating strengths and weaknesses.

In the case of texts, students should adopt the same approach. Students should always be careful not to refer to the text or the author as an authority. In addition, students are expected to:

- identify the philosophical issue raised by the text
- identify the author's standpoint in the text
- state what they think about the author's standpoint
- develop and explore their own position on the author's standpoint by:
 - acknowledging alternative approaches to the text
 - considering how different approaches to the text enable them to progress their own thinking about the question posed.

Criterion G: use of language appropriate to the subject

An appropriate use of language in a philosophy extended essay implies at least both of the following.

- A well-informed knowledge of the terminology of basic philosophical concepts and of the specific fundamental concepts relevant to the themes, authors or texts at work in the investigation.
- A clear and effective communication of the exploration undertaken or a precise formulation of the argument presented.

Moreover, it could be useful to take into account the following.

- The analysis and use of philosophical language should be directly related to, and functional for, the specific investigation.
- Many expressions belonging to philosophical terminology (definition, concept, thought, experience, perception, world and so on) are also part of everyday language. A clarification of their use, for example, the definition of a philosophical context, should be provided when needed for the investigation.
- Many thought processes implied in philosophy research are directly related to the use of language. Descriptions of what activities such as “formulate”, “examine” and “define” mean can be found in the “Glossary of command terms” section in the current *Philosophy guide*.

Criterion H: conclusion

“Consistent” is the key word here: the conclusion should develop out of the argument and not introduce new or extraneous matter. It should not repeat the material of the introduction; rather, it should present a new synthesis in light of the discussion. Students should reflect on the argument that they have presented and draw conclusions from it.

Criterion I: formal presentation

This criterion relates to the extent to which the essay conforms to academic standards about the way in which research papers should be presented. The presentation of essays that omit a bibliography or that do not give references for quotations is deemed unacceptable (level 0). Essays that omit one of the required elements—title page, table of contents, page numbers—are deemed no better than satisfactory (maximum level 2), while essays that omit two of them are deemed poor at best (maximum level 1).

The layout, organization, appearance and formal elements of the essay should help the organization and presentation of the philosophical argument. For instance, the contents list should indicate specific issues that are relevant to it. The division of the essay into generic “Introduction”, “Development” and “Conclusion” sections does not help to identify and elucidate the purpose and structure of a particular argument. Subdividing the essay into sections with specific names tends to tighten up the structure and make clearer the transitions in lines of thought.

The bibliography should contain all sources used, with details of the author, title of publication, publisher and date of publication, which should be in alphabetical order (by author’s family name). Any material that is not original must be acknowledged.

Criterion J: abstract

The abstract is judged on the clarity with which it presents an overview of the research and the essay, not on the quality of the research question itself, nor on the quality of the argument or the conclusions. The result of a philosophical investigation is the argument that is presented and developed. Therefore, the abstract must be focused on the argument, its structure and content.

Criterion K: holistic judgment

Qualities that are rewarded under this criterion include the following.

- Intellectual initiative: Ways of demonstrating this in philosophy essays include the choice of topic and research question, skillful use of conceptual tools (such as examples), finding adequate resources (such as theories relevant to an analysis of the research question) and new approaches to familiar topics.
- Insight and depth of understanding: These are most likely to be demonstrated as a consequence of detailed research, in reflection that is thorough and well informed, and in reasoned argument that consistently and effectively addresses the research question. Furthermore, they can be shown by means of an honest, open-minded, careful engagement with philosophical ideas that are deemed to be important, no matter what school or tradition they are derived from.