

Lecture Notes



Essay-Writing γ: Communicating

The Important of Good Writing

Mastering your written communication skills

Even if you've written the world's greatest philosophical treatise, that won't matter much if your reader struggles to understand what you're saying.

What we'll go through here:

- Conveying your ideas clearly; explaining key terms, using examples to make points, signposting.
- Expressing yourself clearly; using shorter sentences and shorter paragraphs.
- Using quotations appropriately; not leaning too heavily upon them to do the explanatory work.
- Using correct grammar.
- Working on the quality of your expression; using appropriate verbs/adjectives, making appropriate word choices.

Convey Ideas Clearly

Explain key or technical terms

Philosophy has a lot of technical terminology (think: 'physicalism', 'moral status', 'deontology').

In an essay, you need to explain the meaning of technical terms such as these.

The explanation doesn't always have to be long (though that will depend upon what's being explained), but providing examples can often help to clarify the meaning of a term, and shows that you understand it.

Explaining technical terminology also helps to build further clarity into your essay; there's less potential for ambiguity if you specify exactly what the relevant terms that you're using mean.

A tip: don't describe technical language using *other* technical language—it's not terribly helpful to explain a mystery with another mystery!

Here is a good instance of explaining technical terminology:

SAMPLE (GOOD)

When an entity has moral status, it matters morally; it is important from the moral point of view how we treat it. More specifically, the entity has *direct* rather than *indirect* moral importance. To illustrate this distinction, compare human beings (which many agree have moral status) with rocks (which clearly lack moral status). It may sometimes be *indirectly* morally important how I treat a rock; for example, if a rock has sentimental value for my sister, then it is morally important that I not destroy it. This, however, affords only indirect moral importance to the rock; it matters how I treat it *only because of* its relation to my sister. This reflects the fact that rocks lack moral status and are not of direct moral importance. By contrast, my sister *is* of direct moral importance; it matters in and of itself how I treat her, whether or not my treatment of her would have any effects upon others. Entities with moral status are those to whom we have moral obligations; we must consider the effects of our actions upon them when making moral decisions. In asking whether non-human animals have moral status, then, we are asking whether they are of direct moral importance, and whether we have moral duties to them.

What makes this good:

- A key technical term ('Moral Status') is clearly defined in familiar language.
- The student uses their own example to illustrate a distinction (the example involving a rock and their sister to illustrate the distinction between direct and indirect moral status).

Here is an example of a not-so-good attempt to explain technical terminology:

SAMPLE (NOT GOOD)

A moral status is also known as 'moral standing' or 'moral considerability'. As Isserow defines moral status it "concerns whether or not an entity is of moral importance in and of itself; whether or not it is of moral consequence how we treat it" (Lecture 10). Things that have moral status have importance that's direct rather than indirect. For example, a rock would have indirect moral importance if someone cared about it, but the moral importance of human beings is direct. Moral status connects to moral obligations in various ways; things with moral status give us duties to react to them. Moral status has been debated by philosophers throughout the ages, with Bentham being more open to assigning moral status to animals than others in his time.

What makes this not-so-good:

- A technical term ('Moral Status') is defined using other technical language ('moral considerability').
- The student uses the lecturer's wording to explain the core idea; they should be putting things in their own words to demonstrate their grasp of the material.
- The student briefly hints at an example (involving a rock) to explain a distinction, but doesn't flesh out the example in enough depth to properly illuminate what that distinction amounts to.

Make it crystal clear what you're saying

Ensure that the *relevance* of each point that you're raising is clear to the reader.

One possible way to do this: you might add a sentence to explain why what you're saying, or why the paragraph that you've just begun, is relevant to your overall argument.

Signposting is also helpful here: you might simply *tell* your reader what you're doing.

Or, you might briefly recap what you've said so far and where you're now heading—this can often be especially helpful at the beginning/end of a paragraph.

(Note: there is such a thing as *too much* signposting, whereby you just end up wasting words by repeating things over and over—you'll need to judge where signposting is and is not needed.)

Here is a good instance of signposting:

SAMPLE (GOOD)

As I noted, I will in this essay be defending the position that certain non-human animals have equal moral status to human beings. To build my case, I will begin by providing reasons to reject the idea that non-human animals lack moral status. On this view, animals do not matter morally in and of themselves...

Here is another good instance of signposting:

SAMPLE (GOOD)

At this stage, I have introduced two competing views: (1) the view that humans have higher moral status than non-human animals, owing to their greater cognitive sophistication, and (2) the view that all animals have equal moral status. Singer offers what I take to be a compelling reason to prefer (2) to (1)...

Clarity of Expression

Brevity is your friend

Short, snappy sentences tend to be easier to read.

There's no maximum number of words that a sentence should contain, but you should be able to get a sense of when a sentence is getting too long. (Reading it aloud to yourself can help!)

A general rule (if you want one): try to make sentences no longer than 60 words (even 45 words is getting fairly long).

Shorter paragraphs also tend to be easier to follow.

Here is a not-so-good sentence, one which is a little long and not so easy to follow:

SAMPLE (NOT GOOD)

It is therefore neither fair nor just to have some human beings with the privilege of having higher moral status than other humans because they have higher cognitive faculties, since this idea conflicts with the commitment to human equality, which says that all human beings must have equal moral status, and which is central to our moral ideals.

Quotations

Use quotations carefully

Try to keep quotations to a minimum.

To the extent that you do use quotations, don't let them do the explanatory work for you!

When you do use quotations, be sure that you are also (whether before or after you use them) *elaborating upon* what they say; you need to demonstrate that you understand their content.

Here is a good instance of using quotations:

SAMPLE (GOOD)

In order to account for these intuitions, those who believe that non-human animals lack moral status usually argue that we often have *indirect* moral reasons not to harm animals. Torturing another person's cat, for example would involve wrongfully damaging their property. Alternatively, it may lead to the corruption of our moral natures; we may risk breeding insensitivity to human beings if we are cruel to animals (Kant 1997, p.212). However, I find this line of response unconvincing. Even if it's true that we shouldn't disrespect others' property or corrupt our moral natures, there seems to be a *further reason* not to harm the cat—a reason that has to do with the cat itself rather than the effects of one's actions upon oneself or others. As O'Hagan (2009, p.541) notes, "...the suffering of animals seems morally relevant and seems to be what is most glaringly absent from the indirect duties view." I think that this perspective is a plausible one to take. This becomes especially apparent if we imagine that the cat is a stray (nobody's property) and that the torturer will receive a memory wipe straight afterwards (preventing the potential for corruption). Even if this were so, we would surely still condemn the person for torturing the cat. Moreover, we would plausibly appeal to the cat's suffering when doing so, which suggests that this is of greater moral importance than the owner's property rights or the corruption of the torturer.

What makes this good:

- The student states and explains an idea (that there seems to be 'a further reason' not to harm the cat, which the view under consideration cannot accommodate) clearly and in their own words.
- They also attribute this idea to a philosopher (O'Hagan) and quote them, but notice that they're not using this quotation to explain the idea *for them*; they *also* explain it in their own words.

Here is a not-so-good instance of using quotations:

SAMPLE (NOT GOOD)

However, philosophers have a response to this apparent appearance. This response argues that the reason we treat animals like they possess moral standing is because of other reasons, such as property rights or corrupting our natures. As Kant argues, "If a man shoots his dog because the animal is no longer capable of service, he does not fail in his duty to the dog, for the dog cannot judge, but his act is inhuman and damages in himself that humanity which it is his duty to show towards mankind. If he is not to stifle his human feelings, he must practice kindness towards animals, for he who is cruel to animals becomes hard also in his dealings

with men” (1997: 212). But as O’Hagan (2009) points out, “the suffering of animals seems morally relevant and seems to be what is most glaringly absent from the indirect duties view”. Thus, this response fails, and view that non-human animals lack moral status is wrong.

What makes this not-so-good:

- The student relies far too heavily upon quotations to explain key ideas and arguments for them.
- (Indeed, the paragraph is basically just a tapestry of quotes!)
- What’s being said in the quotes is never properly elaborated upon by the student, and so, they do not demonstrate that they understand the ideas or arguments that these quotes express.

Grammar

Some common mistakes to avoid

Be sure to use possessive apostrophes when they’re needed, and not to use them when they’re not!

Learn the difference between ‘its’ (possessive) and ‘it’s’ (a contraction of ‘it is’).

Learn the difference between ‘their’, ‘there’, and ‘they’re’.

Learn the difference between ‘then’ and ‘than’.

Quality of Expression

Use verbs and adjectives appropriately

Example: don’t describe an argument as true or false.

- An argument *isn’t the sort of thing* that *can* be true or false.
- Arguments can be valid or invalid, good or bad, sound or unsound.

Example: don’t say that an argument ‘infers [insert claim being inferred]’.

- People infer things, arguments don’t.

Example: don’t say that an argument or theory ‘believes [insert claim]’.

- People have beliefs, whereas arguments / theories / positions / etc. do not.

Be careful with your choice of words

Choosing the wrong words to express yourself can impact upon the clarity of what you say.

Make sure your sentences express *exactly what* you’re using them to express!

SAMPLE WORD CHOICE (NOT GOOD)

This essay encapsulates whether all animals have equal moral status.

- (‘Investigates’ or ‘explores’ would have been better than ‘encapsulates’.)

SAMPLE WORD CHOICE (NOT GOOD)

This view has some heightened goods over the view that human beings have higher moral status than other animals.

- (‘Advantages’ would have been better than ‘heightened goods’.)

SAMPLE WORD CHOICE (NOT GOOD)

However, I will conceptualize that his arguments are illogical.

- (‘Argue’ would have been better than ‘conceptualise’ and ‘unconvincing’ likely would have been better than ‘illogical’.)

Note: the point here isn’t about differences in writing-style; people may very well have different ways of expressing themselves, and that’s fine!

The point is rather about choosing the right words to express your points; if you don’t think that an argument really is *illogical*, for example, then don’t say that it is—use a word that better captures what you mean.