

WRITING A VCE PHILOSOPHY ESSAY UNDER EXAM CONDITIONS

As with everything, learning how to write a VCE Philosophy essay under exam conditions is a skill. The good news is that, with practice and patience, you can develop the strategies and techniques you need to write good quality philosophy essays in short periods of time.

THREE KEY WAYS TO PREPARE TO WRITE A VCE PHILOSOPHY ESSAY

1. Familiarise yourself with the texts on the curriculum.
 - Revise each text until you can comfortably summarise what the philosopher is arguing and how they are arguing it.
 - Figure out whether you agree or disagree with the philosopher's argument. If you agree, why? If you disagree, why? Have reasons prepared *before* you enter the exam room – the exam is **not** the time to be wondering whether you agree with Cartesian dualism or not.
 - Figure out where you stand on the *issue*. You may disagree with a philosopher's argument but still agree with their general position.
 - Come up with objections to your position. Ask yourself "How might someone disagree with me?" and then formulate rebuttals to these objections. Raising and addressing objections shows the markers that you have thought critically about the prompt and your position.
2. Familiarise yourself with what the markers are looking for.
 - Ask your teacher or tutor for hints and tips about how to write a VCE Philosophy essay.
 - Read old examiner's reports (these can be found on [VCAA's website](#)).

3. Practice, practice, practice.

- Gather copies of Philosophy exams from past years (these can be found on [VCAA's website](#)).
- Start early – don't wait until a week before the exam to start practicing your essay writing.
- Start by writing untimed essays. This will allow you to practice summarising philosopher's views in your own words and expressing your thoughts.
- Gradually move on to timed essays, practicing expressing yourself clearly and succinctly.

HOW TO WRITE A VCE PHILOSOPHY ESSAY: A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

STEP 1: ANALYSE THE QUESTION

- Look for words that indicate what the question is asking of you, such as “examine”, “explain”, or “evaluate”.
- Highlight any key words/phrases.
- Ask yourself “Why are they asking this?” and “How does this question relate to the content I've learnt this year?”
- Rewrite the question if necessary. Rewriting the question may help you form your thesis statement or structure your paragraph topic sentences.

Example:

'It is unjust that technology benefits only the affluent minority of the world's people.'

Critically respond to this point of view. In your response, draw on relevant

philosophical sources, including at least one of the following: Plato's Gorgias, Aristotle, Nietzsche, Singer. (From 2016 Philosophy Exam, VCAA)

This question tells you that you'll need to talk about: justice, technology, benefit, the affluent minority, and at least one of the named philosophers.

STEP 2: LEARNING HOW TO WRITE A VCE PHILOSOPHY ESSAY PLAN

Take five minutes to plan your essay. By providing a holistic view of your argument, an essay plan allows you to (1) check that you have answered the whole prompt, (2) see where your argument needs to be strengthened/added to, and (3) check that your argument flows in a way that is easy for the marker to follow.

How to write a VCE Philosophy essay plan: Some hints

- Write your thesis statement down. Ask yourself questions like: "What do I need to argue to support my thesis statement?", "If I didn't already believe this, what sort of arguments would convince me this was true?", and "What have the philosopher's I have studied this year said about this topic? Do I agree or disagree with them?"
- When you know what you are going to argue, think about which points you will need to work hardest to establish and which ones you can briefly gloss over. As a general rule, spend more time defending the controversial points rather than the commonly accepted points (though don't make the mistake of assuming a point you readily accept is commonly accepted by all!)
- **Double check that your essay plan addresses all of the essay prompt.** Better to spend 30 seconds on it now than to realise you forgot a key point after the exam is over.

Example essay plan

Topic: 'It is unjust that technology benefits only the affluent minority of the world's people.' Critically respond to this point of view. In your response, draw on relevant philosophical sources, including at least one of the following: Plato's Gorgias, Aristotle, Nietzsche, Singer. (From 2016 Philosophy Exam, VCAA)

Thesis statement: It is unjust that technology benefits only the world's affluent minority.

Paragraph 1: Unjust because we have duties to less fortunate.

- Summarise Singer's view – using technology for trivial pleasures rather than to help developing world is akin to letting the child drown in the pond.
 - Examples: Addressing malnutrition, mass vaccination vs snapchat, online shopping.

Paragraph 2: Humans deserve equality of dignity and respect.

- Not fair that only some receive benefits.
- Developing world harmed by technology – e.g. production of iPhones.

Paragraph 3: Objections

- Objection 1: Those who create the technology (the affluent) should benefit.
 - Reply: Affluent can only create tech. because of history of injustice e.g. colonialism.
- Objection 2: Affluent have no moral obligation to guarantee access to technology.
 - Affluent causally responsible for poverty → Poverty reduces access → Those who are responsible for a wrong should fix.

STEP 3: HOW TO WRITE A VCE PHILOSOPHY ESSAY: YOUR INTRODUCTION

DO

- Let your reader know exactly what you are going to be arguing (“In this essay, I will argue that x, y, z”) and *how* you will be arguing it (“I will begin by showing that x. I will then show that y. I will conclude by responding to the objection z.”).
- Many students prefer to write their introduction *last*, after they have written their essay and know exactly what it includes.

DON'T

- Don't start the essay with a sentence like “The topic of whether it is wrong to kill kittens has been subject to much philosophical debate across the ages”. Get to the point straight away.
- Don't have an overly complicated introduction. Your thesis statement, and how you will argue for that thesis statement, is enough.

STEP 4: HOW TO WRITE A VCE PHILOSOPHY ESSAY: YOUR BODY PARAGRAPHS

- Each paragraph should have a topic sentence that shows the marker how your paragraph relates to the prompt and exactly what you are going to be arguing in that paragraph.
- You must back up any claim you make with evidence or an argument. It is not sufficient to say “I think that poverty is bad”. You must explain *why*.

- Do not use passive voice/write in the third person. It is perfectly acceptable to use personal pronouns. Doing so often makes your argument easier to follow and allows you to claim ownership of your view.
- Define any obscure terms or concepts you use.

Example of a good body paragraph

Essay topic: *Is terrorism worse when committed by states?*

State terrorism is morally worse than non-state terrorism is because, unlike non-state terrorism, it is effectively impossible to justify by the argument of no alternative. The argument of no-alternative states that when an actor is (1) fighting for a just cause and (2) lacks the means to pursue the cause in any way except terrorism, terrorism is justified or its wrongness mitigated. The argument of no alternative could apply to non-state terrorism. For example, non-state group Umkhonto we Sizwe argued that the government had left them with no alternative but violence resistance to end apartheid and obtain equal rights. In contrast, it seems unlikely that a state terrorism could be justified by the argument of no alternative. This is because states have the means to pursue their cause in ways other than terrorism (such as conventional warfare, diplomacy, and sanctions), and thus cannot satisfy (2). While it is possible that a state may lack an alternative to terrorism, it seems unlikely given the

Clear topic sentence that links to the original question

Definition of term

Evidence to back up claim

Explanation of claim

immense resources possessed by even smaller states.

STEP 5: HOW TO WRITE A VCE PHILOSOPHY ESSAY: YOUR CONCLUSION

- If you have already written your introduction, you may simply re-work it to serve as your conclusion.
- Repeat your thesis statement.
- Summarise what you have argued.
- Explain the upshot of your view, if appropriate.