

Three Goals of Philosophical Writing

It will be helpful to begin by stressing three fundamental goals of all philosophical writing:

1. *The aim of an essay is to **communicate** something.*

Half the task in philosophy is communication. No matter how good your ideas, if you cannot present them in a way such that others can understand them, and see why they should believe them, you will not be doing good philosophy in the sense that is required within the academic discipline.

2. *The aim is to **defend** a particular position.*

The aim in writing a philosophical essay on a specified topic is to *defend* a particular view of the matter; or, if you cannot decide what the answer should be, to show what considerations you think support the different possible answers. Think of yourself as trying to convince somebody who takes the opposite view. (Or if your answer is 'Don't know' think of yourself as trying to convince those who think they do know that it is not as easy as they suppose.) What is wanted is not, as such, a report of what others have said on the topic. The question 'Can we have knowledge of the future?' does not ask whether Bertrand Russell believed we could have knowledge of the future. It is true that he was pretty clever and thought pretty hard about this, so what he said is almost certainly worth serious consideration; you may well decide there is good reason to present his arguments in your essay, either because you think they are good arguments or because you want to show what is wrong with them. The point, however, is that they are only relevant in so far as they help you to defend *your* answer to the original question: 'Can we have knowledge of the future?'. (Sometimes you will be asked to discuss a particular philosopher's views on some issue. In that case, of course, presenting his or her views is, in itself, relevant.)

3. *Make sure that what you say is **relevant** to the question.*

Make sure that everything you say is relevant to the question; and if there is any possible room for doubt about its relevance show how you take it to be relevant. It is important here to notice just how *specific* in what it asks the question is. For example, the question 'Does death rob life of meaning?' is *not* the question 'Is life meaningful?' It raises a *specific* issue about the meaningfulness of life: that concerning the bearing which death has on it. The question 'Is the question "Does God exist?" answerable on the basis of empirical evidence?' is not the question 'Does God exist?' Nor is it the question 'Is there empirical evidence that God exists?'. The question is more specific than either of those: it asks whether a *particular* question -- namely, "Does God exist?" -- can be answered, positively or negatively, on the basis of evidence of a *particular* kind. It is not always easy to see whether a given point is relevant to a question; an important part of your work is to distinguish what is and is not relevant.

Relevance

Much – in a way, everything – in this module will bear directly in one way or another on the first two of these three points. Right now, I would like you to reflect a little further on the third.

You will probably have noticed that politicians generally answer the question that they wish they had been asked -- which is often different from the question they have actually been asked. Here is a nice example of a politician trying valiantly, in the face of stiff resistance, to do just that:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KHMO14KuJk>

While you are writing you will not have a Jeremy Paxman to keep pulling you back to the essay question. So you must take on this role yourself. Before settling on a particular essay title be sure that you are absolutely clear what it is asking, and that this is something on which you want to, or at least are prepared to, write. And while you are writing your essay keep going back to the title – perhaps after each paragraph you have written - to make sure that you are still on track.