5-Minute Study Skills

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In the UK, tutors are the main point of contact that undergraduate students have with their philosophy department. Unless lecturers make a point of discussing essay writing technique, then tutorials are the place that they will naturally ask questions.

Because of this, I spend the first 5 minutes of each of my tutorials discussing a key skill that students need to develop for essay writing, and for doing philosophy more generally. This has received good feedback from students and a similar format is now used by many other tutors at the University of Edinburgh.

Below are a series of example handouts, including the topics that I typically use for first year courses. These are courses with 10 x 1 hour tutorials, which are assessed by a mid-term essay of 1500 words, and an end of term exam (the formats of which vary).

I’m very happy for these to be used by anyone that would find it helpful.

# Welcome! .

* Attendance policy
* What is a tutorial?
* What you should expect from me
* What I will expect from you

**This Week .**

We’re discussing [target reading].

# Discussion .

1. Question 1
2. Question 2
3. Question 3
4. Is there anything else from the readings or lectures that you’d like to discuss?

**Next week .**Please be prepared to discuss [target reading].

# 5 Minute Study Skills .

**Essay advice: Part One**

*When planning your essay, think of it like a Scooby-Doo sandwich.*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-orfQAfHxvw4/Tt-KH4KXhzI/AAAAAAAABoA/OmUHKGW7O1g/s1600/DagwoodSandwich.jpg* | Introduction  The Bread:   * Introduction and Conclusion are small, but hold the whole thing together.   The Filling:   * View and Evaluation are the bits that will impress. * Alternate replies and responses |
| > View |
| Objection < |
| > Reply |
| Response < |
| Conclusion |

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**Essay Advice: Part Two**

*All good essays start with a* ***clear explanation*** *(the VIEW part of the ‘sandwich’).*

This is the part where you get to show off your knowledge of the key points of the topic (the ones you’ve been directly taught), and it also makes a big difference to how clear your argument will be.

* Think about which points your reader needs to make sense of the view you are explaining, and the argument you will make.
* Limit how much you talk about the wider implications in the rest of the text (often this won’t be relevant to the question).
* If you use quotes: make sure you *embed* them and *explain* them.

Take your time with this bit, it’s important. And if you nail it, then you’ve already secured a good few marks before the reader even gets to the criticism.

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**Essay advice: Part Three**

*Your argument should have* ***depth*** *rather than* ***breadth****.*

You need to convince the reader of your conclusion using a single, cohesive line of argument. Usually, this means evaluating **one** objection to the view in question. So after the VIEW you need to explain:

* An OBJECTION (which might be asked for in the question)
* A REPLY to this objection (up to you)
* A RESPONSE to this reply (up to you)

On the back of this handout is a grid to help you keep track of the different lines of arguments that arise about the view we’ll be discussing in today’s tutorial. In an essay you should base your essay structure on one of the rows, **not** the first column.

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Fill in the grid with the objections that you discus, and any replies and responses that you can think of. You should base your essay structure on one of the rows, **not** the first column.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| OBJECTION | REPLY | RESPONSE |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

Filling out a similar grid for each topic is a good way to revise.

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**Essay advice: Part Four**

*These are the criteria you will be assessed on (taken from the course guide):*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Clarity | Originality |
|  Is the writing clear?   Is the grammar and spelling correct?   Is the language used appropriate? |  Is there evidence of independent thought?   Is there critical engagement with the material? |
| Structure | Argument |
|  Is a clear thesis or position stated?   Is an argument, or arguments, offered in support of the thesis?   Does each part of the essay/exam have a clearly indicated purpose? |  Is the argument convincing?   Are the inferences valid?   Are obvious objections anticipated? |
| Understanding |
|  Is a sound understanding of relevant issues demonstrated?   Is the exposition of others’ views accurate?   Are technical terms adequately defined? |

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**Exam Preparation: Part One**

Soon you’ll be getting feedback on your essays. This stuff is important.

* Whatever your mark is, read the feedback.
* Look at the grid to get a general idea of which areas you need to focus on
* Look at the comments written on the actual essay to see comments on specific parts (not all of this will have contributed to your mark)
* Look at the comments on the feedback sheet (these directly explain what contributed to your mark)

**Actively** think about what you’re going to improve on for the exam.

Get in touch if there’s anything you don’t understand or want more advice on.

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**Exam preparation: Part Two**

The format:

* The essay will be x hours long
* There will be y questions to choose from; you need to answer z.
* Each question is worth **proportion** of the final mark. If you fail to answer the last question the maximum grade you can obtain is ??). So plan your time, and stick to it.

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**Exam Preparation: Part Three**

In the exam:

1. Read each question carefully a couple of times.

* What **view (**topic/author) does it want you to evaluate?
* Is an **objection** specified, or can you choose?
* What **reply** might be made by defenders of the view?
* What is your **response** to this reply?

1. Double-check that your response can be framed as an answer to the question.

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Revision tips:

* You don’t need to revise every topic
* For the topics you do revise, make sure you can **explain** the key views, and **defend**an opinion on them.

In the exam:

* Tailor your answer to the question. (Don’t just blurt out what you know)
* Focus on clarity.

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**Revision Game: The hot seat.**

I’m going to give you each a ‘topic card’. Write down a term, argument, or idea that you need to revise, or that you don’t understand – don’t show this to anyone else.

Someone will sit in the hot seat, facing away from the board. The scribe will then pick one of the topic cards at random, and write the topic that it contains on the board.

The audience have to explain the topic without using the words on the board (the scribe will make notes) so that the person in the hot seat can guess what the topic is.

At the end I’ll photograph the board filled with notes, and email them to you all as a starting point for your revision.

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