Goals for this Study Sheet

Good writing is the product of proper training, much practice, and hard work. The following remarks should help you determine where best to direct your efforts. We’ll first offer some general comments on philosophical writing, then showcase some ways of structuring and voicing your thoughts.

Getting Started

One of the first points to be clear about is that a philosophical essay is quite different from an essay in most other subjects. That is because it is neither a research paper nor an exercise in literary self-expression. It is not a report of what various scholars have had to say on a particular topic. It does not present the latest findings of tests or experiments. And it does not present your personal feelings or impressions. Instead, it is a reasoned defense of a thesis.

Above all, it means that there must be a specific point that you are trying to establish—something that you are trying to convince the reader to accept—together with grounds or justification for its acceptance.

Before you start to write your paper, you should be able to state exactly what it is that you are trying to show. This is harder than it sounds. It simply will not do to have a rough idea of what you want to establish. A rough idea is usually one that is not well worked out, not clearly expressed, and as a result, not likely to be understood. Whether you actually do it in your paper or not, you should be able to state in a single short sentence precisely what you want to prove. If you cannot formulate your thesis this way, odds are you are not clear enough about it.

The next task is to determine how to go about convincing the reader that your thesis is worth considering. In two words, your method must be that of rational persuasion. At
this point, students frequently make one or more of several common errors. Sometimes they feel that since it is clear to them that their thesis is true, it does not need much argumentation. It’s easy to overestimate the strength of your claim because you have already assumed it to be true. Consider how someone debating you would respond. It is safest to assume that your reader is intelligent and knows a lot about your subject, but disagrees with you.

**Things to Avoid**

**Lengthy Introductions**

These are entirely unnecessary and of no interest to the informed reader. There is no need to point out that your topic is an important one, and one that has interested philosophers for ages. Introductions should be as brief as possible.

**Lengthy Quotations**

It can be easy to rely too heavily on quotations and paraphrases. Direct quotation is best restricted to those cases where it is essential to establish another writer’s exact selection of words. Even paraphrasing should be kept to a minimum. After all, it is your paper. It is your thoughts that your instructor is concerned with. Keep that in mind, especially when your essay topic requires you to critically assess someone else’s views.

**Fence-Sitting**

Do not present a number of positions in your paper and then end by saying that you are not qualified to settle the matter. In particular, do not close by saying that philosophers have been divided over this issue for as long as humans have been keeping record and you cannot be expected to resolve the dispute in a few short pages. Your instructor knows that. But you can be expected to take a clear stand based on an evaluation of the argument(s) presented. Go out on a limb. If you have argued well, it will support you.

**Things Not to Avoid**
Organize Carefully

Before you start to write, make an outline of how you want to argue. There should be a logical progression of ideas—one that will be easy for the reader to follow. If your paper is well organized, the reader will be led along in what seems a natural way. Jumping about in your essay will eventually disinterest the reader and make them less inclined to accept your claim. It is a good idea to let your outline simmer for a few days before you write your first draft. Does it still seem to flow smoothly when you come back to it? If not, the best prose in the world will not be enough to make it work.

Use the Right Words

Once you have determined your outline, you must select the words that you feel will adequately convey your meaning to the reader. A dictionary is almost essential here. Do not settle for a word that (you think) comes close to capturing the sense you have in mind. Notice that "infer" does not mean "imply"; "disinterested" does not mean "uninterested"; and "reference" does not mean either "illusion" or "allusion."

Support Your Claims

Assume that your reader is constantly asking such questions as "Why should I accept that?" If you presuppose that he or she is at least mildly skeptical of most of your claims, you are more likely to succeed in writing a paper that argues for a position. Most first attempts at writing philosophy essays fall down on this point. Substantiate your claims whenever there is reason to think that your critics would not grant them.

In Conclusion

Some final words should be added about proofreading. Do it. Again. And again. After that, have someone else read your paper. Is this person able to understand you completely? Can he or she read your entire paper through without getting stuck on a single sentence? If not, go back and smooth it out.
In general terms, do not be content simply to get your paper out of your hands. Take pride in it. Clear writing reflects clear thinking; and that, after all, is what you are really trying to show.

**Sources Referenced**