

Exam Advice for Philosophy and Political Theory

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What to do:

1. **Answer the question!** This might sound simple, but it's rarely done well. Break the question down into sub-questions. (Think: what questions do you need to answer to fully address the question at hand?) Use the exact wording of the question repeatedly to ensure your answer remains focused.
2. **Structure your answer.** In your introduction, you should *state a thesis* that you will defend, outline how you will argue for this thesis, and define any key terms. All subsequent paragraphs should fit into one of three categories: (1) arguments for or against the thesis, (2) objections to the previous argument, (3) replies to the objections. (See Rachel Fraser's 'How to Write a Philosophy Essay'.)
3. **Plan.** Don't start writing straight away – take 5-10 minutes to think about how you can write an original and well-structured argument.
4. **Be original.** Try to be original – this is not a risk! The challenge is to *say something interesting* to the examiner.
5. **Cite the literature.** While it's important to be original, your essay should explicitly engage with the scholarly literature. Try to bring in several different authors' ideas to showcase a breadth of knowledge.
6. **Sprinkle pixie dust.** Add an intriguing quotation, fact, or implication of your thesis in your introduction and conclusion to make your essay stand out from the crowd.

What *not* to do:

1. **Lose track of time.** Be very strict with yourself regarding how you divide up your time between the essays. If you run out of time, ditch the conclusion!
2. **Rewrite a practice essay.** If you find that you are rehearsing an essay you've written before, then you have probably misread the question.
3. **Write a 'for' and 'against' piece.** You should not simply present two sides of an argument and then plump for one side. Instead, you should clearly argue for a thesis, while acknowledging and adequately responding to objections.

Three-step process for exam preparation:

1. For a given topic, identify the key issues about which scholars disagree. These are the 'choice points.'
2. Evaluate the plausibility of different scholars' views on each of these choice points.
3. Work out your own considered view on each of these choice points. (Questions to consider: How does your view relate to existing views? Why is it better? What are the biggest objections that could be levelled against it?)