



Teaching guide: Teaching A-level Philosophy

Contents

You can use the title links to jump directly to the different sections of this teaching guide.

Section	Page
Overview of A-level Philosophy	2
Exam structure and command words	3
Evaluation skills and essay writing advice	4
A-level Philosophy and A-level Religious Studies	10
Additional resources	11

Overview of A-level Philosophy

Our A-level Philosophy specification gives students the chance to explore philosophical terms, claims, theories and arguments relating to four areas of philosophy:

Epistemology

- What is knowledge?
- Perception as a source of knowledge
- Reason as a source of knowledge
- The limits of knowledge

Moral philosophy

- Normative ethical theories
- Applied ethics
- Meta-ethics

Metaphysics of God

- The concept and nature of 'God'
- Arguments relating to the existence of God
- Religious language

Metaphysics of mind

- What do we mean by 'mind'?
- Dualist theories
- Physicalist theories

There are two assessment objectives (AOs) which are set by the Department for Education:

AO1

Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the core concepts and methods of philosophy, including thorough use of philosophical analysis.

AO2

Analyse and evaluate philosophical arguments to form reasoned judgements.

Exam structure

All topics consist of the same AO weightings and assessment structure:

Paper 1 (3 hours, 100 marks, 50% of A-level)				
Epistemology (50 marks, 25% of A-level)				
3 marks	5 marks	5 marks	12 marks	25 marks
Moral philosophy (50 marks, 25% of A-level)				
3 marks	5 marks	5 marks	12 marks	25 marks

Paper 2 (3 hours, 100 marks, 50% of A-level)				
Metaphysics of God (50 marks, 25% of A-level)				
3 marks	5 marks	5 marks	12 marks	25 marks
Metaphysics of mind (50 marks, 25% of A-level)				
3 marks	5 marks	5 marks	12 marks	25 marks

The AOs are assessed in the different question tariffs as follows:

3 marks	5 marks	12 marks	25 marks
AO1	AO1	AO1	AO1 (5 marks) AO2 (20 marks)

Command words/phrases

The A-level Philosophy [command words](#) can be found on our website.

Evaluation skills and essay writing advice

25-mark essay questions in Philosophy are phrased as questions (e.g. 'Does the existence of evil disprove the existence of God?' (Paper 2, June 2022)). The purpose of an essay is to answer the question by giving a reasoned defence of a chosen conclusion ('thesis').

To do so, students need to be able to:

- plan essays effectively
- write essays effectively.

Planning essays

As part of the planning/thinking process for an essay the student needs to do the following:

1. **Identify** relevant content/debates.
2. **Select** content/debates for discussion.
3. Decide the **conclusion** for each debate/overall (ensuring that there is no internal inconsistency).
4. **Structure** the content into a clear logical order.

For example, let's consider the 25-mark question: 'How convincing is indirect realism?' (2018).

First, we need to **identify** the relevant specification content. It may be helpful to structure this content in something like the following green/yellow table where one side of the debate is the 'green' side and the other the 'yellow' side.

- Theories/arguments making or supporting positive claims are green.
- Theories/arguments opposing something are yellow.

Identify relevant content: How convincing is indirect realism? (2018)
Theory: indirect realism
Indirect realism leads to scepticism about the existence of mind-independent objects
Mind-dependent ideas cannot be like mind-independent objects (Berkeley)
Argument from illusion
Argument from perceptual variation
Argument from hallucination
Time-lag argument
Attack on the primary/secondary quality distinction (Berkeley)
'Master' argument (Berkeley)
Argument from the involuntary nature of our experience (Locke)
Argument from the coherence of various kinds of experience (Locke/Cockburn)
Russell: the external world is the 'best hypothesis'

This has the advantage of allowing students to organise the content in such a way that the relationships of support and opposition are clear (also helpful for possible two-part 12-mark questions). Notice that arguments against direct realism are included since they can be seen as lending support to indirect realism and arguments for idealism are included since they can be used to object to indirect realism.

To complete the planning, students can continue to complete steps two to four from the planning process outlined above. This might end up with something like the following:

'Theory' essay: e.g. How convincing is indirect realism? (2018)	
Intended conclusion: <i>Indirect realism is convincing.</i>	
Theory: <i>indirect realism</i>	
Argument in favour/supporting reason: <i>Argument from illusion</i>	Objection/argument against: <i>Indirect realism leads to scepticism about the existence of mind-independent objects</i>
Response	Response: <i>Argument from the involuntary nature of our experience (Locke)</i>
Counter-response	
Conclusion: <i>Indirect realism is convincing because (a) the argument from illusion supports it successfully (despite an attempted objection) and (b) it can respond effectively to the objection that it leads to scepticism.</i>	

Here is an alternative, where the student is arguing for the opposite conclusion:

'Theory' essay: e.g. How convincing is indirect realism? (2018)	
Intended conclusion: <i>Indirect realism is not convincing.</i>	
Theory: <i>indirect realism</i>	
Argument in favour/supporting reason: <i>Argument from illusion</i>	Objection/argument against: <i>Indirect realism leads to scepticism about the existence of mind-independent objects</i>
Response	Response: <i>Argument from the involuntary nature of our experience (Locke)</i>
	Counter-response
Conclusion: <i>Indirect realism is not convincing because (a) the argument from illusion fails to support it and (b) it leads to scepticism.</i>	

Here is an example of a plan for an ‘argument’ essay: ‘Does the ontological argument succeed?’

'Argument' essay: e.g. Does the ontological argument prove the existence of God? (2017)	
Intended conclusion: <i>The ontological argument fails (does not succeed).</i>	
(Type of) argument: <i>Ontological argument/s</i>	
Argument version 1: <i>Descartes' ontological argument</i>	Argument version 2: <i>Malcolm's ontological argument (not susceptible to Kant's objection)</i>
Objection/argument against: <i>It wrongly treats existence as a predicate (Kant)</i>	Response (e.g., <i>The concept is self-contradictory/incoherent (vs what Malcolm claims)</i>)
Response	
Counter-response	
Conclusion: <i>The ontological argument fails in two forms. Descartes' version fails because it wrongly treats existence as a predicate, and Malcolm's version fails because the concept of God is not logically possible (as his argument requires it to be).</i>	

Writing essays

Once planned, there are important skills required as part of the writing process (in addition to clear use of philosophical language and precise/detailed explanations which are required in the ‘descriptive’ question types). The student also needs to do the following in essays:

1. **INTENT:** Indicate their ‘**intent**’ (the side they are taking on a debate/the question) throughout the essay.
2. **ROBUST DEFENCE:** Defend their conclusion ‘**robustly**’ through further justification of points and the use or consideration/rejection of counter-argument(s).
3. **WEIGHTING:** Show awareness (where relevant/possible) of the **weight/importance** to be assigned to various points included in the essay. A theory/argument/idea can be seen as having [more] ‘weight’ [than another] if...
 - a. *...it can respond [more] successfully to an issue/issues or can be [more] successfully supported*
 - b. *...it is [more] important/concerning (a reason/reasons would need to be given)*
 - c. *...it has a great[er] impact (e.g. it undermines the whole of a theory/argument not just part of it)*
 - d. *...it establishes its conclusion with more certainty (e.g. deductive vs non-deductive arguments)*
 - e. *...it can respond to an issue in a way that an alternative can’t.*

The following classroom activities can help students develop these essay-writing skills:

Finding examples of good evaluative writing

Students can look for examples of phrasing/signposting in:

- model essays (using examples from [Answers and commentaries](#))
- each other's work
- the set texts.

Here's some examples of phrasing students might use in relation to the key skills, and some examples from two set texts: *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (John Locke, 1690) and *Sensations and Brain Processes* (J. C. Smart, 1959).

Key skills	Phrasing examples	Set text examples
Intent	At the start of the essay: • I will argue here that... • In this essay I will defend the view that/ the argument for... Throughout: • Although X's logic may seem correct, • This success is short lived because... • At first glance, it seems convincing... • This response overcomes... • At first sight the argument seems plausible, but it fails for two reasons: Firstly... Secondly... • There is, however, a fundamental issue with... • X ignores the possibility of...	• <i>"The suggestion I wish to resist is..."</i> (Smart) • <i>"Some people regard it as settled that...I could show any fair-minded reader that this is wrong if I could show (as I hope to do in the present work) how..."</i> (Locke, Ch. 2)
Robust defence	• This at first seems to solve the fundamental issues raised by...because... However, ultimately... • X can respond in part to this issue by... However, ... • X successfully anticipates this criticism and argues that... • Some might argue that... However, this criticism fails to prove that...because.... • This criticism fails, however, since it ignores the possibility of...	• <i>"I shall now discuss various possible objections to the view that..."</i> (Smart) • <i>"You may object that.... I can perhaps forestall this objection by..."</i> (Smart) • <i>"To avoid this conclusion, it is usually answered that... [However], I answer as follows..."</i> (Locke, Ch. 2)

A-LEVEL PHILOSOPHY – 7172 – TEACHING A-LEVEL PHILOSOPHY

Key skills	Phrasing examples	Set text examples
Weighting	• This argument is fundamentally wrong because... • The argument is not cogent/strong because... <i>[for non-deductive arguments]</i> • The argument is not sound/valid because... <i>[for deductive arguments]</i> • The fatal flaw in this theory is.... • P3 is not true, so the argument fails to show that... • X's argument is more convincing than...because... • This is a more critical issue than... because... • X offers a stronger argument by highlighting the importance of... • X is more successful than Y in responding to...because...	• <i>"Though, for the reasons given above, I am very receptive to..., I do not feel that it will quite do the trick..."</i> (Smart) • <i>"In reply to... it may be said that ... I freely acknowledge that... But..."</i> (Locke, Ch. 2)

Further activities

Structured debates

- Structured debates can help students develop their subject knowledge, intellectual confidence and ability to articulate their thoughts in relation to arguments, counter-arguments and responses to criticisms.
- At the end of a topic, put students in small groups or pairs and ask them to debate a question.
- This debate can be oral or on paper and each student takes a side (perhaps by impersonating a key philosopher!). The aim of this task is to help students understand the importance of responding to criticisms, develop a robust judgment, avoid juxtaposing arguments and avoid being too descriptive.
 - Example: Imagine that Jeremy Bentham and Immanuel Kant have a dinner party and are discussing whether it is ever morally right/permissible to steal. One of you will impersonate Bentham, the other Kant. You must stay silent and communicate solely through writing. You will share one piece of A4 paper, writing in different colours and taking it in turns to write and respond to each other.
 - Example: Two students separately plan essays with opposing conclusions but using the same discussion points. They then argue with each other over each discussion point (verbally or written), seeing how the debate can perhaps be taken further.

Question time

Students volunteer to be a specific philosopher while the class asks specific questions.

- Example: Bentham Mill, Kant and Aristotle are running a question time event where they respond to questions from an audience. While the students impersonating the key philosophers get ready, the rest of the class prepares questions; this could be focused on specific issues on the specification for each theory, or connected to the four applied ethics issues on the specification or it could focus on areas of interest for the class (current affairs for example).

Practical tasks

In order for students to fully grasp the impact of theories and arguments, teachers could also set specific practical tasks.

- Example: Students could volunteer to be a Kantian for a day (and only act on categorical imperatives) or consider Aristotle's list of virtues and aim to develop their moral character in relation to a specific virtue for a day. Students then write or discuss their experience and reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of each view.
- Example: Students could be tasked to research a topical issue (perhaps one relating to those issues named on the specification) and explain what ethical theory best solves the issue at hand.
- Example: Students could be asked to attempt to persuade a family member or friend (without a philosophy background) of their proposed view/conclusion using the structure of their essay plan.

A-level Philosophy and A-level Religious Studies

Comparison of the focus

While some of the content between A-level Religious Studies and A-level Philosophy overlaps, the **focus** differs:

- The focus of the A-level Religious Studies content is to consider the meaning and significance of specific philosophical and ethical arguments and their influence of individuals, communities and societies, including religious beliefs.
 - For example, arguments for the existence of God (cosmological, teleological and ontological arguments) are evaluated in relation to their status as proof and are assessed in relation to their value for religious faith and the relationship between reason and faith.
- In contrast, the A-level Philosophy specification solely focuses on the logic and form of each argument: the strengths of the conclusions (God does exist, God must exist etc) and the nature of God assumed or defended by the argument.

Comparison of specification content

Areas of overlap

Moral philosophy

- Normative ethics: *Aristotle's virtue ethics, Kantian ethics, Bentham's utilitarianism.*
- Metaethics: *naturalism, non-naturalism.*

Metaphysics of God

- Concept of God: *God's attributes.*
- Arguments for God: *design, ontological and cosmological.*
- The problem of evil/suffering: *moral vs. natural evil; logical and evidential problem of evil; the free will defence and the 'soul-making' theodicy as responses.*
- Religious language: *verification and falsification; responses from Hick and Hare.*

Metaphysics of mind

Dualism: *Descartes' arguments in favour; the relationship between the mind/'soul' and the body.*

Additional resources

- The Royal Institute of Philosophy has developed A-level guides covering the four sections of the A-level Philosophy course. This can be used by teachers and students. It also offers video masterclasses on key areas of the specification:
 - [A-level guides](#)
 - [A-level video masterclasses.](#)
- The following online ethics textbook covers section B of Paper 1 (ethics).
 - [Dimmock M, Fisher A, *Ethics for A level*, Open book publishers.](#)
- Other useful resources:
 - [Wireless philosophy video collection](#)
 - [Jeffrey Kaplan lectures – a collection of YouTube videos](#)
 - [Kane B – a collection of philosophy YouTube videos](#)
 - [Philosophy Tube – a collection of philosophy YouTube videos](#)
 - [A-level Philosophy: Getting started](#) AQA Course.