

THE NIGHT-BEFORE PASS

The Last-Minute Checklist.

Ten final checks, pulled directly from what JLI judges and past winners say actually matters – to run before the essay leaves your hands.

Read each check slowly. Mark the box only when you can answer *yes* with a real example from the essay in front of you. If a check fails, the fix is almost always smaller than it looks: a sentence moved up, a paragraph cut, a definition sharpened. Save the hardest one for last – Check 9 is the one to linger on.

1 Does the thesis appear within the first 150 words – and is it genuinely *arguable*?

A winning entry states a precise, contestable thesis within the first 150 words. **If the thesis could live in paragraph 3, move it up.** If a reasonable person couldn't *disagree* with it, it isn't arguable enough – and a thesis no one would contest cannot be defended, only described.

2 Does every body paragraph logically build on the one before it?

The most common failure judges describe is independent rather than layered body paragraphs – each paragraph makes a separate point with no logical connection to those around it. The essay reads as a list, not an argument. **Check:** does paragraph 3 *need* paragraph 2 to make sense? If you could shuffle them without loss, you have a list.

3 Is the essay *arguing*, not summarising?

A student who explains what philosophers have said is doing something fundamentally different from a student who uses those philosophers to build a new claim. The first essay summarises. The second argues. **Only the second wins.** Underline every sentence that exists only to report a view; if there are more of those than there are sentences advancing your own claim, the balance is wrong.

4 Does the counterargument engage the *strongest* possible objection?

If the counterargument is easy to defeat, it's the wrong one. The objection should make you nervous to write down. The Institute is direct about this:

"Essays which ignore or fail to address the strongest objections and counter-arguments are unlikely to be successful."

JOHN LOCKE INSTITUTE · GUIDANCE FOR CANDIDATES

-
- 5** **Does the conclusion open a new door – not just close the essay?**
The best conclusions leave the reader with something to think about. They don't close the argument – they open a door to a larger question. **That quality, more than any other, signals that the writer is thinking at the level the John Locke Institute is looking for.** A conclusion that only restates the thesis is a missed opportunity, not a finished thought.
-
- 6** **Are the key terms in the question defined – in a *surprising* or precise way?**
Deconstruct philosophically what is meant by each key term. It is the first stage of proper essay structure. For this topic: what counts as a *wrong reason*? What counts as *the right thing*? **These definitions should drive the argument** – not appear once on page one and quietly disappear. A surprising definition is itself a small thesis.
-
- 7** **Is the perspective genuinely *original* – not a view a thousand other students would take?**
Judges look for fresh insights and innovative perspectives, so avoid common or cliché viewpoints. **Ask:** if you read 50 essays on this topic, would this argument stand out? If the answer is "maybe not," push the thesis one more step. The interesting essay is usually one revision past the obvious one.
-
- 8** **Does every sentence earn its place?**
Edit unnecessary phrases, sentences, and ideas out of the essay. Every sentence should serve a purpose. **No filler. No restatements. No "since the dawn of time."** If a sentence doesn't prove the thesis or set up something that does, cut it. Tightness is not a stylistic preference here – it is what a 2,000-word ceiling rewards.
-

CHECK 09 · LINGER HERE

Is the essay capable of *changing* a reader's mind?

"The very best essays are likely to be those which would be capable of changing somebody's mind." – JLI

Read the essay as a skeptic. Does it actually *persuade*, or does it just present? Read it out loud together. At the end, ask her one question, and listen for the honest answer:

"Did anything I just read make you think differently about the question?"

If the answer is yes – even a small yes – she has a real shot. If the answer is no, the next hour is better spent on the argument than on the prose.

10 Are all submission requirements technically correct?

The last check is the cheapest to pass and the most expensive to fail. Do it twice – once now, once after the final save. A disqualification on a formatting rule erases every hour spent on the argument above.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Body text is under 2,000 words (footnotes and bibliography excluded). | <input type="checkbox"/> Writer's name does not appear anywhere in the essay. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Filename matches: <code>FirstName-LastName-Philosophy-1.pdf</code> | <input type="checkbox"/> Submitted as a PDF – not <code>.docx</code> , not Google Doc link. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Academic referee listed: Rachel . | <input type="checkbox"/> No footnotes – in-text citations or endnotes only. |

R If Check 9 lands, send it. The last hour before a deadline is rarely the hour that wins a prize – it's the hour that loses one. *Trust the work you've already done.*

– Rachel

SOURCES & FURTHER READING

- 1 John Locke Institute, *Guidance for Candidates: 2026 Global Essay Competition*. johnlockeinstitute.com/essay-competition.
- 2 John Locke Institute, *Frequently Asked Questions – Essay Competition*. Sections on judging criteria, originality, and counter-arguments.
- 3 John Locke Institute, *Submission Requirements & Formatting*: word limit, filename convention, PDF format, referee declaration, citation style.
- 4 John Locke Institute, *Past Winners' Essays* (Philosophy category, 2019–2024). Reviewed for thesis placement, paragraph layering, and conclusion treatment.
- 5 Selected judges' commentary on prize-winning essays, John Locke Institute newsletter archive.
- 6 Strunk, W. & White, E. B., *The Elements of Style*, 4th ed. – on sentence economy (Check 8).
- 7 Williams, J., *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace* – on argumentative structure vs. summary (Checks 2, 3).
- 8 Rachel Writing Lab internal notes, *Patterns in Disqualified Submissions, 2021–2025* (Check 10).