

How to Write an Argumentative Essay

Students often believe that writing a philosophical paper involves only the presentation of their opinions or feelings on a given topic. This is a wrong belief. Philosophical papers are all argumentative essays and, as such, they approach the defense of a thesis in a methodical way. This includes (a) presenting reasons (aka premises) in support of the thesis, (b) the application of an ethical theory for morally-relevant arguments, and (c) a thorough logical examination that includes research for both sides of the disputed issue. The good news is that your knowledge of the argument structure obtained in courses such as PHI 103 gives you an advantage in writing argumentative essays.

If you have taken PHI 103, you will remember that in the discussions, the standard form of the arguments was to start with premises and end with the conclusion. In the argumentative essay, however, this structure is reversed such that you start with the conclusion (which is called a **thesis** in the argumentative essay), and then the premises are offered in support of the thesis. In an argumentative essay, there are two additional elements and these are an objection and a rebuttal to the objection.

Whether or not you have taken PHI 103, what follows should provide you with all the information necessary to write an argumentative essay. Below you will find the order and structure of the argument for an argumentative essay, which will include, in addition to the thesis and premises, an introductory problem section, the recognition of the strongest objection to your thesis, and your rebuttal of this objection.

Another common mistake that students make in writing papers is to assume that morally-relevant arguments are easier because they already have an accepted system of beliefs, or a religious framework, that offers solid support for their positions. However, morally-relevant papers cannot be based on your accepted system of beliefs without the presentation of an argument that defends your system of beliefs in the first place. For example, it will *not* be sufficient to claim that you believe capital punishment is wrong *because* the Bible says so. Instead, you will need to explain why *your* interpretation of the Bible is the only correct one (and keep in mind that not all Christians agree on the same interpretation of the Bible or even have the same version of the Bible). After this, you would also have to give some argument for the *existence* of God, and quickly follow this with a strong argument for why you believe that God is communicating only through the Bible and not the Koran, the Bhagavad-Gita, or some other sacred document that also claims to have been directly informed by God. Examinations such as these are indeed daunting, even to philosophers of religion and theologians with several doctoral degrees. So please avoid any such defenses based on Bible or God arguments because they are too difficult, and will involve graduate-school-level research that would demand a research director and months to complete. Instead, if you choose a morally-relevant topic, you should seek support from an ethical theory. These are presented in a variety of courses at Ashford, including PHI 103, PHI 208, and SOC 120 (among others). If you are not in one of these courses, or have not taken one of these in the

past, then we would recommend that you read the descriptions for Aristotle's virtue ethics, Kantian duty ethics (aka deontology), and utilitarianism in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (plato.stanford.edu) and then select one of these as the framework to support the defense of your position.

The extra bonus that you will get from writing a moral argument is that you will have learned a way to defend your moral point of view in a way that does not presuppose a particular religious belief and this will allow you to present your point of view to people of all beliefs. This is not only empowering, but also very practical in the diverse world community of which we are all part.

A few other recommendations when writing your paper are as follows:

- Do not assume that because your instructor is knowledgeable in philosophy that you can leave out explanations with regard to the ethical theory that you have chosen or special terminology in philosophy. Rather, you must write for an audience that does not know anything about what you are writing. So you will need to define every theory or technical term that you present (and cite and reference, employing quotation marks for any language that is not yours). And you need to be explicit in presenting what these theories and concepts mean in the context of what you are arguing.
- If in your research you encounter writing styles that are obscure and difficult, do not emulate these writing styles thinking that this is how philosophy is done. Actually, philosophy is the activity of clarifying ideas. Consequently, the goal must be to make things more accessible to the understanding, not more difficult and wordy with complicated language that is above most people's grasp. The latter is just incomprehensible, not erudite. Although there are philosophers (and some famous ones) who write like this, please note that their recognition as philosophical stars is *despite* such bad writing, *not because* of it.
- Make your train of thought obvious to the reader. This means that you should present transitions from one thought to the other, and explain why you are moving to some new idea, and how all of the ideas are connected. This also means that you should provide examples to illustrate what you mean more clearly. And in general, this means that reading your paper will not make your reader think of questions or objections because you will have foreseen these and addressed them.
- Always be clear to present who is speaking in your paper. If you are presenting your position, then this should be clear. And when you are explaining the position of your opposition, then this should be clear too.
- When you introduce the views of a philosopher or any other author, do not call him by his or her first name as if he or she were your friend. Of course, the exceptions would be those thinkers known by just one name, such as Plato, Aristotle, or Cicero, or those medieval saints such as Thomas Aquinas who are referred to by their first names in philosophy. For all others, use the full name at first mention and then stick to the last name after this. There is no need to add a

special historical explanation or their dates of birth and death. Just focus on their ideas presented in the ethical theory that you are employing.

- When you address the views of a philosopher or any other author, do not present him or her as stupid even if you disagree with his or her views. Always keep in mind that if these authors were stupid, then we would not be examining their ideas in courses and writing papers about their views. If you cannot understand the points that they are making, then you should consider that perhaps the problem is that you do not have much experience thinking about the view being presented. Above all, you must have the humility to assume that *you* have something to learn and it is *your* responsibility as a student to try to figure out what these authors are trying to say so you, too, can understand what they mean.
- We recognize that impartiality is particularly challenging when presenting a view opposite to yours. To help in this direction, philosophers live by a principle that you must also adopt and it is called the philosophical ***principle of charity***, which means that one must always aim to find the strongest view for the opposition and avoid the temptation to attribute logical fallacies, irrationality, or falsehoods to the opposition when a coherent and perfectly defensible interpretation is possible.
- This does not mean, however, that you cannot criticize a position. It only means that you must understand it and justly present it *before* you criticize it. If you do not do this, then you are not doing philosophy, meaning that you are not seeking the clarification of ideas. Instead, you are just presenting dogma and this closes the door to any kind of dialogue about an issue. Remember that all social conflicts start from this perspective, which does not lead to harmony but, instead, fuels hatred. This is not a fruitful direction and, as university students, you must learn to engage in conflict by the application of reason, and with the goal of seeking truth instead of only trying to demonstrate that you are right and everyone else is wrong.
- Although you should think of your paper as if you were talking to a person, never address the reader by “you.” It is tempting to want to ask the questions such as: “What would you think if this happened to you?” Resist this temptation because it is bad form to address the reader directly. And asking questions in papers is a weak rhetorical device because the reader may answer in his or her mind something that is completely opposite to what you are hoping, and you will have lost the reader’s attention right then and there.
- Instead, your essay should be written **in the first person**, and for any questions that you raise, you must offer an answer.
- Be consistent in your terminology. If you use the term X, define it at first mention if it is a technical term of philosophy or any other discipline, and then stick to the same term throughout. Do not add new terms for the same thing just to add variation because this only causes confusion. Be consistent instead. So, for example, if you address Aristotle’s view of the *soul*, then do not refer to it as the *mind* later on in your paper, even if you mean the same thing.
- A clear exposition of a well-supported and compelling argument is not an easy task. But it is not impossible to achieve, and you are all equipped to do this. However, this takes time. Argumentative essays are perhaps the most difficult

form of essays to write and this is because they demand reflection, tightly researched points, attention to detail, and time for the maturation of ideas to come together. As such, an argumentative essay cannot be written all in one sitting. You must start with an outline, then go through several drafts before you can feel satisfied that you have arrived at a final product. Every time that you look at your paper, try to see it with new eyes and edit ruthlessly. Once you are satisfied with the content, still check for precision in language. It is thus impossible to write successful argumentative essays the day before they are due, so do not take this chance regardless of how good a writer you think that you are.

- Finally, your paper must be free from spelling errors, sentence construction problems, and grammatical mistakes. Word will help you with the spelling and grammar generally, but it will not catch all problems. So make sure also to proof read your paper out loud. If you proof read only by silent reading, then there is a high probability that you will overlook errors because you know what you are writing and your mind will fill in what is not in the paper. But when you read out loud your mind will not be able to trick you into glossing over something that is not stated or not stated clearly. If you have someone around, it is also a good tactic to have them listen to your reading. They will be sure to point out aspects that were ambiguous or places that had faulty grammatical construction.

The body of your paper should have the following elements:

1. The Introductory Problem Leading to Your Thesis

Before stating your thesis, your paper should introduce the problem that concerns you in order to present the context for your thesis. Introduce not only the topic at issue but also the characteristics that distinguish the arguments on both sides of the issue. This section should take one or two paragraphs at most, and end with your thesis.

2. First Premise and Support

The best way to identify premises is by putting the thesis in the form of a question. Suppose that your thesis is this: The legal drinking age should be reduced to 21 years of age. In order to find the best reasons in support, start by asking yourself: Why should the legal drinking age be reduced to 21 years of age? Once you have a good list of reasons, then select the top two and these will be part of your argument. The first reason will be your first premise in your argument. Your research and reflections will be the basis for the support for your first premise.

3. Second Premise and Support

Same as above but make sure that your second thesis is altogether different than the first, and not just an extension or variation of the first. If your second premise is the latter, then it will not count as a separate premise.

4. The Strongest Objection

In this part of the paper, you need to present not just any objection but the strongest objection to your thesis. In other words, you need to present the objection that could be the most challenging to your position. In addition, this objection should be presented along with a brief argument that supports it. Your research should thus include sources that support your opposition, not just your own position.

5. Rebuttal

In this part of the paper, you respond to and refute the objection. This response, called the rebuttal, should present a strong reason (e.g., similar to another premise) that shows why the strongest objection does not present a serious challenge to the thesis. If, however, you cannot think of an adequate rebuttal and thus the objection stands, then one of two things is happening. First, it could be that you have not done sufficient research or sufficient reflection. The solution for this is simple: research more aggressively and exclusively in scholarly journals (not news journals, the Internet, or blogs). Second, it could be that your thesis is indeed assailable and, thus, you will need to revise your thesis and argument as a whole. If the latter is the case, do not feel bad, part of being a rational thinker is to recognize when one's position is not as strong as one thinks that it is, and then to have the open mind to be willing to reconsider the position for one that is more defensible.

6. References

The references should be presented in APA (6th edition) format. If you are unfamiliar with APA notation or would like a refresher, please refer to APA samples and tutorials in the Ashford Writing Center (AWC). You can access the AWC within the course page, in the Learning Resources tab in the left navigation bar.

Above all, have fun writing your argumentative essay because the process will reveal to you a lot about yourself and your views, and this experience will be very valuable.