

Tips for Writing an Argumentative Philosophy Paper (Paul Raymont, RGASC @ UTM, Jan.19, 2017)

One kind of philosophy assignment is the argumentative essay, which typically includes an expository component and a lengthier, argumentative section. Often, the essay's argument consists of a critique (or critical evaluation) of a given author's position together with your own positive argument on the assigned topic. For instance, you might be required to present Descartes' argument for mind-body dualism, critically assess that argument, and then provide your own argument for or against dualism. While some philosophy assignments require only an exposition and critical evaluation of an author's work, the focus of this document is on an assignment in which you must provide exposition, a critical evaluation, and your own positive argument.

(i) **Introductory Paragraph:** This paragraph should be brief, ranging in length from one-third of a page to half a page. In this paragraph, identify your topic and state your thesis claim, which is the conclusion for which you will argue. For instance, your thesis claim might be that Descartes' argument for dualism is unpersuasive due to its reliance on a priori methods; or, to change the example, your thesis might be that active euthanasia should be legalized in order to respect the autonomy of patients. Once you have formulated a thesis claim, briefly indicate your strategy for supporting it (e.g., by considering a given author's argument for legalizing euthanasia and showing how it is superior to another author's argument against legalizing the practice). Indicate your strategy by means of a 'road map', in which you outline the sections of your paper (e.g., "After presenting Y's argument for allowing active euthanasia, I will present X's argument against allowing the practice. I will then argue that Y's reasoning is superior, since it involves a better conception of the duty to respect autonomy and includes regulations for euthanasia that obviate X's worries").

Notice the use of the first-person voice in the above example of road-mapping. The introductory paragraph is one of the few places where it is preferable to write in the first-person, and philosophy professors tend to allow students to do so. For example, a thesis claim may take the following form: "*I will defend Y's argument for allowing active euthanasia by refuting objections to the practice that arise from X's reasoning.*" In the main body of the essay, use the first-person sparingly. Avoid introducing your claims with phrases such as "I believe that...", "I feel that...", and "In my opinion...". These phrases are usually redundant. For example, "I believe that active euthanasia will reduce suffering" conveys no more to the reader than, "Active euthanasia will reduce suffering."

Typically, your thesis will be provisional at the outset of the writing process. It is normal to revise the thesis claim after completing a first draft of the paper. With a completed draft in hand, ask yourself, "What conclusion did I end up supporting?" Capture that detailed conclusion in the thesis claim. For example, suppose that while arguing for the legalization of active euthanasia, it occurs to you that it would be wrong to allow this procedure to be used in a case in which the patient is not mentally competent enough to understand what the procedure entails. This consideration suggests that you should modify your thesis. Thus, instead of arguing for the relatively simple thesis that active euthanasia should be legalized, you may defend the thesis that active euthanasia should be legally permitted for patients who are mentally competent. Next, suppose that you come to the conclusion that euthanasia should not be used when a patient is suffering but is not expected to die from her condition. Instead of

being discouraged by this realization – “Oh no! I’ve found an objection to my thesis, and I agree with the objection!” – take it as an opportunity to make your thesis more nuanced. In this case, your reasons for agreeing with the objection suggest that you should further refine your thesis claim, so that it now reads as follows: active euthanasia should be legally permitted for patients who are mentally competent and who have a terminal condition. In this fashion, your thesis becomes more detailed and more interesting. Notice, also, that each qualification that you add to your thesis must be explained and supported in your subsequent argument.

(ii) **Exposition:** This part follows the introductory paragraph. Distill the essential steps in the author’s argument. What are the argument’s premises? What is its conclusion?

Summarizing the author’s argument seldom requires summarizing her whole paper. The author might have presented her central argument on just one or two pages, with the bulk of her paper devoted to other tasks. For instance, the author might have devoted part of her paper to discussing the history of the topic, or she might have criticized some alternative positions to her own. Also, she might have devoted several pages to considering and rebutting objections to her own position. You need not capture all of this material if you are asked to summarize just her central argument. Still, you may find that what the author says in rebutting an objection (perhaps several pages after giving her central argument) offers an important clarification of one of her premises, which should be included in your summary.

Your work is graded partly on the basis of whether you display good judgment in identifying what is crucial to the author’s argument. For this purpose, it can help to make two notes for each paragraph in the author’s paper. In the first note, summarize the main claim of the paragraph; in the second note, state why the author included this paragraph in the paper (e.g., to introduce her second premise, or to give some historical, background information, or to present an objection).

When summarizing someone’s argument, do not engage simply in narrative writing. That is, avoid telling the reader that the author first says this, and then says that, and then says so-and-so. Instead, focus on the *logical structure* of the argument; indicate how the author’s claims are related to each other. For instance, “Together, these two premises are intended to yield the author’s conclusion”; or, “Recognizing that his second premise is controversial, the author adduces the following evidence in support of it.” Identify any interesting, implicit premises that the author’s reasoning presupposes.

Define technical terms. For instance, in a paper in which the introductory paragraph contains the italicized thesis statement in section (i) (above), there should be a definition of ‘active euthanasia’ shortly after the introductory paragraph. When defining terms, do not rely wholly on direct quotation. Instead, put the definition into your own words (and cite the source that you are paraphrasing). Putting things in your own terms demonstrates that you understand the relevant concepts. Note that in philosophy, ordinary words (e.g., *intentional*, *ostensive*) are sometimes used with special, more technical meanings. For that reason, it is best not to rely primarily on general dictionaries (e.g., *Webster’s*) when interpreting an author’s views. Ideally, the author will have defined his crucial terms. If not, a reference librarian can help you to locate a philosophical dictionary.

(iii) **Critique** (evaluation): Are the author's premises true? Even if they are true, do they provide adequate support for the author's conclusion?

A critique may involve identifying some vagueness or ambiguity in one of the author's crucial terms. More generally, it may involve giving a *negative* argument, in which you pinpoint a flaw in the author's reasoning. Even if a negative argument succeeds, it is important to see its limitations. For example, even if you convincingly refute an author's *argument for* banning active euthanasia, you do not thereby establish that this practice should be allowed; for there might be other, more persuasive arguments for banning the practice that you have not yet considered.

If one of your objections to an author's reasoning represents her as having made an obvious, silly mistake, then your objection is likely to be based on a misunderstanding of the author's position.

Once you have presented a *plausible* objection to the author's reasoning, you may then proceed in one of several directions. For instance, you may decide that the objection succeeds in exposing a fatal flaw in the author's reasoning. By contrast, you may decide that the objection, though it seemed plausible, fails to discredit the author's argument. In this latter case, you may treat the objection in question as an instructive failure; that is, you may treat it as an occasion for appreciating more fully the subtlety or power of the author's reasoning. In this way, explaining why an objection fails can be a good strategy for scratching beneath the surface and giving a deeper analysis of the author's reasoning.

(iv) Positive Argument: If you are arguing for a conclusion, be clear about how many arguments you are giving. Are you presenting two arguments for allowing euthanasia that are independent of each other (in the sense that the failure of one would leave the other argument unscathed)? Are you, instead, developing one long argument with many steps? If you opt to give several, independent arguments for your conclusion, it is generally preferable to limit yourself to no more than three arguments (in a paper that is 2500 words in length). Otherwise, you will not have enough room to go into sufficient depth in your development of the arguments.

Reflect on the points from the lectures and required readings that are relevant to your reasoning. Does one of these ideas seem to pose a problem for your reasoning? If so, then you should address the difficulty and explain why it has not persuaded you to abandon your argument. For example, if you argue for permitting euthanasia, and the professor dwelt in class on the 'slippery slope' argument against euthanasia, then you should have something to say in your paper about why you are not persuaded by the 'slippery slope' argument.

You should indicate what sort of support your reasoning provides for your conclusion. Thus, you might intend your reasoning to show that your conclusion *must* be true. To use another example, you might argue that, given the existence of evil, there *cannot possibly* be a good and all-powerful deity. Alternatively, you might take your reasoning to establish only that your conclusion is *probably* true, establishing (e.g.) that while it is at least possible for there to be a good and omnipotent deity, the amount of evil renders such a thing's existence very unlikely.

Finally, keep in mind that one of the main purposes of an argumentative essay in philosophy is for you to explore the relevant ideas and demonstrate your understanding of them. Consider the following analogy. Suppose that Pat can name some of the more familiar parts of a car (e.g., the steering wheel, the hood, the doors) and provide a rough account of what they do. By contrast, Lee identifies the main components of the engine and explains how they function in order to keep the car operating. Lee also spots a flaw in the engine and fixes it. Clearly, Lee has demonstrated more understanding of the car than Pat has. Similarly, in an argumentative essay, you take apart some arguments and identify their parts (their premises and conclusions); you may then identify an argument's weakness and explain how it prevents the argument in question from moving forward. On this basis, you may then build your own argument in support of your thesis claim.

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