

Essay writing guidance for Applied Ethics

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In this document, I briefly explain what I look for in a good essay in applied ethics. Please first have a look at the philosophy department's general essay guidance¹ and the marking scheme². The following more informal guide may also be helpful: <http://moreradicalwithage.com/essay-writing-a-journey-to-a-destination/>. The point of the present document is to apply the general marking scheme and essay guidance to the specific kind of essays that are typical in applied ethics.

1 Analysis and argument

- An essay is not a general discussion on a broad topic, but is an answer to a specific question. So, for example, if you are writing an essay on the prompt “Assess Thomas Pogge’s argument that affluent people have negative duties to avoid harming the world’s poor”, you cannot write a general discussion on duties to help the world’s poor. Instead, you have to specifically assess Pogge’s argument. Accordingly, you must ensure, when writing the essay, that every single sentence and paragraph is directed to, and useful for, developing and defending your position on Pogge’s argument.
- One of the most common criticisms of students’ essays reads “asserts rather than argues its points”. It is one thing to say “X”; it is quite another to provide a justification for X. In an academic essay, you are asked to do the latter. Suppose that you are asked to write an essay discussing the following claim: “The affluent in the West are not under a moral duty to help the starving in Third World countries.” A standard justification for this claim is “we have special bonds to our compatriots, through a common culture, common language, etc., and no such bond towards distant strangers.” That justification is not enough, on its own, to make the case. One must in turn provide reasons for denying the existence of such a bond with distant strangers. Moreover, that justification assumes that the existence of such

¹http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/philosophy/undergraduate/exams_essays/essays/warwick_philosophy_guide_to_writing_essays.pdf

²http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/philosophy/undergraduate/exams_essays/marking_scheme/

a bond is a necessary condition for generating a duty to help. But it must show that this is the case. Absent such arguments, the justification is not, in fact, a justification: it is just a assertion which remains unsubstantiated.

- In order to provide a strong analysis and argument, it is essential that your essay has a clear and relatively narrow focus. When you are asked to assess philosopher X's argument for Y, you do not need to evaluate all possible objections and replies with regard to the argument. It is perfectly fine to e.g. focus on only one problem with the argument and then go in depth there, assess possible responses and problems with these responses, concluding whether or not the argument can deal with this problem.
- Let the reader know about your focus: "In this essay, I assess philosopher X's argument for Y. I specifically examine whether the argument can avoid objection Z." It is essential that your reader knows what task you take the essay question to set for you, as your text will then be marked against the goals that you set for it (provided that they are a reasonable reading of the essay question). Do not treat the essay question / title as part of the essay – instead, the first introductory paragraph must make clear to the reader what the topic is and what is going to happen in the essay, even if they never read the question. To achieve this aim, there is no need to explicitly say "The question in this essay means". Instead, simply start with saying what you will do, as in the example above.
- How to select your focus? Start by focusing rather too narrowly than too broadly, and start by writing on the most interesting aspects of the question, e.g. on the strongest objections to an argument. If you find that you have words left after writing what you have to say, then do not fill the remaining words with "fluff" (e.g. embellishments, a longer introduction, data that is not strictly relevant), but revise your focus and include another substantial point in your discussion.

2 Knowledge and understanding

- Any question, whether it specifically mentions and author or not, must be answered with reference to the readings discussed in the lectures plus some further reading from the reading list or beyond. Do not just write your own thoughts into the void.
- Answering questions "with reference to" the readings still requires you to take your own stand: What do you think the answer to the question should be? Do not just list what others have answered. When you mention and explain someone else's thought, always take a stand. For example:
 - "Smith says that Jones argument suffers" does not take a stand, but merely reports what Smith says. Make clear whether you think that Smith identifies a valid objection, or not.
 - By contrast, "As Smith (2014) has pointed out, Jones' argument suffers from the following defect" *endorses* Smith's criticism.

- Quality over quantity: The point of answering with reference to the readings is to inform your own thinking with the thoughts of others. Only mention other texts when you really engage them and need their points in your argument, either to bolster up your position, or as possible objections that you need to take seriously and answer. There is no hard and fast rule about how many texts you should refer to, but as a guideline, anything less than three looks a bit thin (is there really nothing sufficiently relevant in the other readings?), while going above eight will look like you're spreading yourself too thin. It is perfectly possible to write an excellent essay which only refers to three texts if these are well selected and engaged with intelligently and relevantly.
- Engaging an author's text intelligently and relevantly does not mean that you have to comprehensively engage with everything the author says. You do not have to reconstruct the entire text, but only explain to the reader those bits with which you directly engage. For example, an author might tell you first why some debate has been stalled for a long time, in order to motivate her argument which she then presents later on. If your task is to evaluate the argument, then you need not explain to the reader all that the author says about the debate so far, but can go straight to the argument (you can summarize other bits when relevant, e.g. "X provides a novel argument in order to break a stalemate in the debate about...").
- Make sure that you leave space for your own thinking, beyond just endorsing others' arguments. Think of your own answers to objections raised in the literature, or your own objections, and possible responses, to positions advocated by the authors you read. When the essay question has the form "Evaluate X's argument Y", or "Does problem Z mean ...", as a rule of thumb, do not use more than one third of your essay explaining X's argument or problem Z, and leave the remaining space for engaging others' criticism, your assessment of it, and your own evaluation.
- As a rule of thumb, mostly avoid direct word-by-word quotations (Singer says "It is an outrage that we do not give more to help the poor"), and instead paraphrase the views of the authors (According to Singer (1974), current levels of support for the poor are unacceptably low.). Use direct quotations when doing so adds something to your argument that a paraphrase cannot add, e.g. if you need to address the specific way an author phrases a thought. Note that paraphrases still require references, as the thought is taken from and attributed to someone else.
- When you identify an objection to an author's claims that is very quickly stated and easy to come by, make sure that you understood the author correctly and are not attacking something she did not really say.
- Distinguish carefully between discussing someone's **position**, and the **argument** for that position. For example, the position might be a good one, but the argument does not establish it convincingly.

3 Structure and organisation

- An essay is an answer to a specific question. It must therefore introduce the question and outline briefly the answer which you will give to it, in an introductory paragraph. The main body of the essay must provide that answer, and you should finish with a concluding paragraph which summarises the main findings, and, if appropriate, opens up further debate (e.g. by mentioning other issues which are relevant and interesting but which constitutes further avenues of inquiry).
- The introductory paragraph should be very concise. You do not need to give the reader a whole overview over the technical and social facts e.g. about some ethical issue. A simple and effective start is “In this essay, I evaluate Smith’s argument that eating meat is impermissible. I begin by...”
- Many essay questions at least implicitly require you to first explain the views of some philosopher(s), and then to criticise them. Start by writing an exposition of what the respective philosopher thinks (not more than one third of the essay). Often you get ideas for criticism as you explain these views and arguments, so you can start writing that part of the essay even before you have a full idea of what to say in the end.
- If an essay ask a general question without reference to an author, then start it with the argument of a particular author. For example, an essay on the question “Is X permissible?” can start “In this essay, I support the view that X is permissible by examining one prominent argument on behalf of the claim that X is impermissible, and show that it fails”, and end with “I have shown that one prominent argument for the impermissibility of X fails. In order to establish that X is permissible, further arguments need to be assessed, which will be the subject for future research.”
- Use short paragraphs, even if they are only three or four lines long. Each new “move” of your argument should go into a new paragraph, e.g. explaining one new argument for a position, raising a new objection or providing one response to an objection.
- Make the structure visible by using section headings. This helps you when writing, and allows your readers to quickly see the structure of the paper. For example: “1) Smith’s Basic Argument; 2) Jones’ Redundancy Objection; 3) Saving Smith from Jones” Then add a short argument outline to the introduction where you tell the reader what you are going to do: “I begin by explaining ... (section 1). I then explain and respond to two criticisms (section 2 and 3).”
- Make the structure explicit by using signposting: “However, one might argue ...”, “Another argument for this position is ...”, “This objection, however, can be answered as follows:...”. See the philosophy department essay guidelines for more examples.

4 Quality of Writing

- Use short sentences. Sentences should not span more than three lines, at most. It should be possible to read your sentences aloud without them sounding strange.
- Use simple, but not informal, language. You do not need to sound sophisticated or use complicated words other than technical vocabulary that is common in the debate in which you participate.
- Write concisely. For concise essay writing, it is crucial that you focus exclusively on the essay question. Do not use essays to show the whole breath of what you read, but only use the material and ideas that are clearly relevant. You can also develop an eye for using language economically, often you can express the same idea much more concisely. Overall, it is not unusual to spend a substantial amount of time just cutting an essay to size – this is as much part of the work as is writing down words in the first place. The following article gives you a good idea of the potential for space-saving by using economical essay. Have a look and then go through your essay again: <http://chronicle.com/article/Polishing-Your-Prose-Word-by-137327/>.
- Check carefully for grammar and spelling. Automatic spellchecking will not pick out all errors, so it is crucial that you give it a close final read during which you do not make any more changes to the text other than to spelling and grammar. You are also permitted to let someone else read and comment on the essay.
- Consider reading your essay to yourself aloud, as if you were delivering it to an audience (even better if you can find an audience). Again, you will notice overlong sentences, awkward phrasing, or obscure passages, which at normal reading would have escaped your notice.

5 Referencing, word count, and presentation

- You may use any standard referencing style of your choice, see the library's referencing styles page <https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/students/referencing/referencing-styles>.
- The maximum word count includes footnotes, but excludes the bibliography. Harvard referencing style is therefore more economical with regard to word count.
- Please stay strictly within the maximum word count, but do not remain significantly below it, either. If you find yourself with words to spare, do not simply add “fluff” to your essay, but try to think of something substantial to add, e.g. a further objection, a supporting example, or an avenue for future research.
- Have a look at the philosophy guidance on the presentation of essays: http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/philosophy/undergraduate/advice/essays/notes_on_presentation_of_essays_2007.doc