

A Guide to Writing in Ethical Reasoning 15



Harvard College Program
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Introduction

This guide is intended to provide advice for students writing the papers in Ethical Reasoning 15. Most of the paper assignments for the course can be approached flexibly and creatively — there is no single recipe for writing successful papers in the course. But the paper assignments do involve a few common intellectual tasks or operations for which it is possible to provide some general guidance. These common tasks include evaluating an argument (Part I) and comparing arguments or texts (Part II). This guide offers suggestions for approaching both of these sorts of paper assignments. The guide also stresses the importance of entertaining counter-arguments (Part III) in order to strengthen your arguments.

Part I: Evaluating Arguments

Many of the assignments ask you to evaluate an argument (either by using the word ‘evaluate’ in the essay prompt or by asking you, explicitly or implicitly, to state the strengths and weaknesses of a given position). Before suggesting specific strategies for approaching this sort of task, it is worth considering what ‘evaluate’ means in an academic context.

In general, evaluating an argument means providing a critical analysis of the argument’s claims. But what does ‘critical analysis’ mean in this context? A critical analysis does not necessarily imply that you will ultimately disagree or find fault with the argument you are considering. Rather, it suggests a certain questioning or probing stance toward the argument in which you test the argument by introducing various kinds of doubts about it. In other words, your job is to place the argument in dialogue with a skeptic or naysayer and then see how the argument holds up in the light of different kinds of skepticism or doubt. You may find that the argument holds up quite well, or you may find that it does not hold up, or you may find something in between. This sort of critical stance is one of the main way scholars arrive at truths; scholars probe or test ideas to see if they are in fact good ideas.

The Principle of Charity

In order to test an argument in this way, you need to adopt what philosophers call the principle of charity. The principle of charity requires that even when you criticize an argument you still need to present the argument fully, fairly, and sympathetically. The most common error students make when evaluating arguments is presenting the argument in a weak or partial form, all the better to dismiss it. But rather than making their own position more impressive, writers who address weak interpretations of others’ arguments often appear to be hiding the deficiencies of their own position. Instead, you should work to introduce the arguments of others in their strongest or most plausible form. When you evaluate a strong interpretation of someone else’s ideas, you demonstrate your fairness as a writer.

Part I

Evaluating a Single Argument or Text: Immanent Critique

Often you will find yourself asked to evaluate a single text or argument — that is, you only have one source for the paper. You might reasonably wonder: how can I draw on a source to evaluate itself? You can approach this kind of task by offering what is often called an immanent critique. (“Immanent” means “existing or operating within; inherent.”) An immanent critique explores internal inconsistencies, tensions, or slippages within a text as a basis for evaluating the text’s argument.

Forms of immanent critique:

- **Look for internal inconsistencies:** You might find what appears to be an inconsistency in an author’s argument — that, for instance, the author claims *p* but that she also claims *q*, and *p* implies not-*q*. You can then ask yourself: what consequences does this inconsistency have for the validity of the author’s overall position?
- **Look for gaps in reasoning:** Sometimes a writer makes an unwarranted inference. A writer might reason that if *p* is true, *q* also has to be true. But it may be that you need *p* and *r* in order to show *q*, in which case the truth of *p* does not yield the truth of *q*.
- **Look for unfulfilled promises:** Writers often make certain promises, usually early on in their texts, about what their arguments will show or accomplish. Such promises may sometimes not be fulfilled by the argument itself, in which case you are presented with an opportunity for critique.
- **Question assumptions:** All arguments involve assumptions — claims that are assumed to be true but are not explicitly argued for. You may find that an author embraces assumptions that are dubious, and that his argument fails because it rests on a shaky ground.
- **Look for alternative interpretations of the evidence:** Evidence always admits of more than one interpretation. Perhaps there is a better interpretation of the evidence introduced by a writer than the interpretation suggested by that writer.
- **Question implications of the argument:** Sometimes an argument can be questioned because it logically implies something that is implausible. If an argument implies something that is absurd or implausible, perhaps it is not a very good argument.
- **Introduce doubts about the problem or question the argument addresses:** Perhaps the argument purports to address a problem or question that, in your view, is not a real or interesting problem or question.
- **Perhaps the argument is not clear:** Sometimes closer examination reveals that an argument is not persuasive because it is subject to too much ambiguity — it is difficult to see what the author is really claiming.

A note on appealing to your own intuitions: It’s worth considering a caveat about evaluating *ethical* arguments. Whenever you consider an ethical argument, you are likely to have your own intuitions about the moral issue at stake. It might be your intuition, for instance, that it is never morally acceptable to take the life of another human being. Although your intuitions may guide your approach to evaluating a writer’s moral argument, it is crucial that you do not assume that simply because you have a particular moral intuition that intuition must therefore be rational and

defensible. The adequacy of your moral intuitions must be demonstrated with reason and evidence, not simply assumed

Part II: Comparing Arguments

Many of the paper assignments ask you to compare arguments or texts. The crucial first step in conducting a comparative analysis is to make clear that the comparison isn't random: you must establish the reason for the comparison, also known as the grounds for comparison – first by demonstrating the appropriateness of the pairing (that there is a way in which the two texts really do speak to each other), and second by demonstrating a conflict, problem, or question that arises out of looking at these two particular texts together (in other words, that they do not simply say the same thing – you should be analyzing crucial differences of similar sources, or unexpected commonalities of different sources). See the box (“To Be or Not To Be”) for an example of a comparative argument that lacks a grounds for comparison.

Many of the paper assignments for the course suggest the grounds for the comparison for you by posing questions that are meant to guide your comparison. Consider, for instance, the following essay prompt:

Compare Ivan's moral arguments with those of Job. How are their problems similar? How are they different? What is the role of suffering for each? How does God's response address Job's arguments? Are Ivan's arguments addressed effectively by Dostoevsky?

Here the prompt suggests the grounds for your comparative analysis by directing your attention to the issue of suffering. You are being asked, in other words, to compare the two moral arguments with respect to their treatments of suffering.

The thesis of a comparative analysis should in some way address the relationship between the two texts. The thesis should, however, avoid the compare-contrast see-saw in which you argue that your two texts are the same but different—that claim can be made about almost any related pairing of texts, and so is not an argument (who would disagree?). You should be analyzing the conflict or tension between the two texts or bring a question or problem articulated in one text to bear on the other. Keep in mind, too, that the most interesting and successful theses set up arguments that acknowledge counterargument and allow for complication (see Part III below).

Part II

Part III: Counterargument

A counterargument is a claim that contradicts or is in tension with your thesis or with part of your argument. Counterarguments play an important role both in your writing and in your thought process. In your writing, addressing counterarguments persuasively demonstrates that you have thought through your argument with care, are aware of potential problems, and are able to address them. A paper that ignores counterarguments, shouldering its way to its conclusion, indifferent to potential problems or alternative possibilities, often comes across as intellectually careless. In your thought process, counterarguments help to point out the weaknesses in your position or features that you had not considered, often helping you to see the problem you are addressing from a new perspective and to respond to it with greater intellectual creativity and insight. Whether or not they find their way into your papers, counterarguments are a constant presence in the thinking/writing process.

Part III

From: The Harvard Lampoon. Vol. 185, no. 1 (March 1995). Adam E. Rosen, Harvard '95.

“To Be or Not to Be”

A Comparison of Romeo and Juliet and Hamlet

Romeo and Juliet and Hamlet are two of Shakespeare's greatest plays. Moreover, they are similar in a number of ways. However, in a number of ways, they are different. And yet on some level, they are similar in a number of ways. Let us examine this further.

Both of these plays feature an abundance of characters. A quick glance at Hamlet's *Dramatis Personae* shows fully fourteen different characters -- and a closer look reveals three more. *Romeo and Juliet* goes even farther, weighing in at no less than twenty-three different characters. Significantly, both plays feature a number of characters who say things and a handful who do nothing.

Another striking similarity is the preponderance of implausible names: "Polonius", "Benvolio", and "Reynaldo" are all quite absurd, and I for one have never met anyone named "Gertrude." It seems clear that Shakespeare intended these fanciful names to evoke certain fragments of meaning. For example, Hamlet's name recalls the phrase "If you're not going to eat that ham, let your sister have some," while "Fortinbras" clearly implies "Hello, I am an eccentric old woman; I am looking for tin bras." [...]

Why is Counterargument Important?

1. **Addressing counterarguments strengthens your thesis.** Unlike in math or logic, in most humanistic and social science writing it is impossible to prove categorically the truth of a thesis — the data or texts are usually too complex or uneven to allow for such proof. Instead, your thesis will be successful if it is the most plausible answer to a question among a set of alternative answers to the same question. Such alternative answers can appear in your essay as counterarguments. Each time you address a counterargument, your thesis becomes more plausible, since you have eliminated one of the possible alternative answers to your question.
2. **Counterarguments lend tension and structure to your argument.** Counterarguments, especially initial counterarguments, give your argument a well-defined target — something to push against — and can thereby give your argument focus and structure.
3. **Counterargument can help you refine your thesis.** Entertaining counterarguments often helps you make your thesis more specific and arguable. What you are arguing (your thesis) often becomes clearer and more precise as you come to understand what you are not arguing.

Relationship of Counterarguments to the Argument

Remember that the relationship between your argument and the counterarguments you introduce does not always have to be simple contradiction. Instead, your argument may revise, amend, synthesize, qualify, etc. the counterarguments you introduce. Counterarguments need only to be in some sort of tension with your argument, not necessarily full contradiction.

Positioning of Counterarguments

- **Initial counterarguments:** It makes sense to use an initial counterargument in some situations, including: (1) The counterargument contradicts your actual thesis, not just a sub-claim or implication of the thesis; (2) Your thesis is counterintuitive, or there is a well-known or common-sense alternative to your thesis. In such cases it often makes sense to “start where your reader is” (the counterargument from common-sense or received opinion) and then introduce your thesis as a correction or challenge to the common-sense view.
- **Final counterarguments:** In structuring your paper, it may make sense to use a final counterargument when your argument has implications that might be objectionable to some readers. You use final counterargument to anticipate and discount these objections, thereby strengthening the presentation of your thesis.

Other Resources

Teaching Staff. Your TF will hold office hours to discuss the papers. You should also feel free to discuss your paper with Professor Harris.

The Writing Center. The Writing Center offers individual assistance to students who would like to work closely with trained undergraduate tutors on the structure, focus, and clarity of essays, research papers, and senior theses. Students should access the Writing Center website to make an appointment or call for more information.

<http://fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr>

Barker Center 019

617 495 1655

Harvard Guide to Using Sources. This publication introduces the fundamentals of using sources in academic papers.

<http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu>

House Writing Tutors. Several Harvard houses have resident or non-resident writing tutors who hold regular office hours to help students with their writing. Contact your resident dean to find out if your house has a writing tutor.

Bureau of Study Council. The Bureau of Study Council is a resource center for academic issues and personal concerns. The Bureau offers counseling, consulting, group workshops, peer tutoring, and the Harvard Course in Reading and Study Strategies.

<http://bsc.harvard.edu>

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