

Lecture Notes



Essay-Writing α: Structuring

Getting Started

Answering The Question

Philosophy essays will almost always involve answering a question.

Your job is to provide a well-argued and well-researched response to this question.

Your job is not to:

1. Recapitulate the lecture slides.
2. Summarise the readings.
3. Recap everything that you've learned.

If you do any of 1-3, then you'll be (among other things) covering too much!

You need to focus—try to cover fewer ideas in greater depth.

Before you get started on writing, make sure that you:

- Understand
 - What is the essay question asking?
 - Which particular part of what you've been taught is it directing you to focus upon?
 - What is the issue that you've been invited to explore?
- Identify resources
 - Identify the arguments/considerations/literature directly relevant to this issue.
- Research
 - Work through these arguments/considerations/literature.
- Think
 - Decide (on the basis of your research) what you think is the most plausible answer to the essay question, and what justifies your perspective.
- Plan
 - How will you argue for your answer to the question—for the perspective that you will be taking?
 - What is the best (e.g., clearest, most effective) way to structure your argument?

Essay structure

Structure

The following is a helpful structure for philosophy essays:

- Introduction
- Background Information Paragraph
- 2-4 Paragraphs containing the main argument
- Conclusion

Let's go through these one by one.

Introduction

The purpose of the introduction

The main goals of the introduction should be to:

- Briefly give the reader a sense of the topic or issue under discussion.
- State the stance you'll take on that issue (your answer to the essay question).
- Indicate how you'll be defending that stance; how your argument will proceed—provide a blueprint for the rest of the essay.

We'll now consider examples of introductions that do & don't achieve these goals.

We'll be working with the following sample essay question for these lectures on essay writing:

SAMPLE ESSAY QUESTION

Do human and non-human animals have equal moral status? Why or why not?

Here is an example of a good introduction:

SAMPLE INTRODUCTION

When we ask whether an entity has moral status, we are asking whether (or the extent to which) it matters from the moral point of view—whether it matters morally how it is treated. In this essay, I will argue that *sentient* non-human animals have equal moral status to human beings. In setting out my argument, I will begin by providing reasons to reject the view that non-human animals lack moral status altogether. This perspective runs contrary to deep and widespread moral intuitions. I will then argue that the view that human and non-human animals have *equal* moral status is more plausible than the view which assigns moral status to both but assigns *higher* moral status to human beings. In doing so, I will draw upon the idea that in deciding upon an entity's moral status, we should focus primarily upon the nature of its interests rather than the kind of entity that it is. On the basis of these arguments, I will conclude that human and (certain) non-human animals have equal moral status.

What makes this good:

- It succinctly but clearly introduces the topic of the essay: which entities have moral status.
- It clearly states the answer being proposed to the essay question (and qualifies it): that human beings and certain kinds of non-human animals (sentient ones) have moral status.
- It explains how this answer will be supported, providing a blueprint for the essay.
 - The student doesn't go into *too much detail* when providing this blueprint.
 - But they do go into *enough* detail to give the reader a sense of the main ideas and considerations that will be covered.

Here is an example of a not-so-good introduction:

SAMPLE INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of time, philosophers' have debated the nature of moral status. This essay encapsulates whether all animals have equal moral status. Descartes rejects this view. However, I will conceptualize that his arguments are illogical. I will consider Peter Singers arguments which argue that all animals are equal. This view has some heightened goods over the view that human beings have higher moral status than other animals, even if those animals have moral status. I will also consider Kant and O'Hagan.

What makes this not-so-good:

- The topic is only introduced vaguely; no real insight is provided—it's hard to get a sense of what 'moral status' means and what the issue being explored is from this introduction.
- It contains irrelevant (and inaccurate) statements about the history of the topic; it is simply not true that philosophers have been debating this since the dawn of time—and even if it were true, it's not relevant to anything being discussed (hence, a waste of words!)

- The answer to the essay question is never explicitly stated; this is something the reader will have to figure out as they go along. This can detract from the essay's clarity.
- It only refers to *the philosophers* whose ideas will be explored, instead of giving any insight into *the ideas themselves*—it's the latter that's centrally important.

Background Information Paragraph

The purpose of the background information paragraph

It is often useful to have a paragraph straight after the introduction where you get the reader up to speed. This can, for example, help you to:

- Explain a core argument that the essay will be evaluating.
- Introduce a controversy; the context of the debate that you'll be entering into.
- Introduce core distinctions or terminology.

This paragraph can also help you to avoid:

- Taking technical terms or vocabulary for granted throughout the essay.
- Failing to give context to the remainder of the discussion.

Here is an example of a good background information paragraph:

SAMPLE BACKGROUND INFORMATION PARAGRAPH

When an entity has moral status, it matters morally; it is important from the moral point of view how we treat it. More specifically, the entity has direct rather than indirect moral importance. To illustrate this distinction, compare human beings (which many agree have moral status) with rocks (which clearly lack moral status). It may sometimes be indirectly morally important how I treat a rock; for example, if a rock has sentimental value for my sister, then it is morally important that I not destroy it. This observation, however, assigns only indirect moral importance to the rock; it matters how I treat it only because of its relation to my sister. This reflects the fact that rocks lack moral status and are not of direct moral importance. By contrast, my sister is of direct moral importance; it matters in and of itself how I treat her, whether or not my treatment of her would have any effects upon others. Entities with moral status are those to whom we have moral obligations; we must consider the effects of our actions upon them when making moral decisions. In asking whether non-human animals have moral status, then, we are asking whether they are of direct moral importance, and whether we have moral duties to them.

What makes this good:

- The student defines key terms in their own words.
- The student uses their own example to explain an important distinction (the rock and sister example, to explain the distinction between indirect and direct moral status).
- The student works through things slowly, addressing a relatively uninformed reader; even someone who was relatively new to this material would likely learn something from it.

Here is an example of a not-so-good background information paragraph:

SAMPLE BACKGROUND INFORMATION PARAGRAPH

A moral status is also known as 'moral standing' or 'moral considerability'. As Isserow defines moral status it "concerns whether or not an entity is of moral importance in and of itself; whether or not it is of moral consequence how we treat it" (Lecture 10). Things that have moral status have importance that's direct rather than indirect. For example, a rock would have indirect moral importance if someone cared about it, but the moral importance of human beings is direct. Moral status connects to moral obligations in various ways; things with moral status give us duties to react to them. Moral status has been debated by philosophers throughout the ages, with Bentham being more open to assigning moral status to animals than others in his time.

What makes this not-so-good:

- The student doesn't explain key terms clearly and carefully; it's not completely clear from this paragraph just what 'moral status' is, or whether they fully understand the notion.
- The student fails to explain key ideas in their own words; instead, they either rely on quotations (whether from readings or lectures) to do the explanatory work, or insert synonyms.
- An important distinction (direct & indirect moral status) is mentioned but never properly spelled out.
- The connections between ideas is never fully explained; for example, the connection between moral status and moral obligations.
- The paragraph contains irrelevant information (the last sentence mentions a historical fact which doesn't help to advance the explanatory aims of the paragraph.)

Paragraphs Outlining Your Argument

The Argument

You've done your introduction and your background information paragraph.

The time has now come to argue for the stance that you will be taking in response to the question!

This may take 2-4 paragraphs, depending upon how you divide things up.

We'll cover the specifics of developing arguments in lecture β .

Here, we'll just go over general tips that apply to this part of the essay.

Tip no.1: stick to what's relevant

Don't talk about things that aren't relevant to your argument.

(Hopefully, you'll have reduced the likelihood of irrelevancies at the planning stage, but keep an eye out!)

Keep in mind: even if idea X was discussed in the same lecture where the topic of your essay was discussed, that doesn't necessarily mean that idea X is relevant to your argument.

A test: if you can't justify a section/passage/sentence as being useful to the overarching goal of answering the question, or directly relevant to your argument, then you should probably consider deleting it.

Tip no.2: organise paragraphs effectively

Each paragraph should be organised around a particular idea/argument/objection/etc..

Your reader should be thinking to themselves: 'this paragraph is discussing x'.

Your reader should *never* be thinking to themselves: 'what on earth is this paragraph about?'

Don't change the subject matter halfway through; stay on topic!

Tip no.3: Open paragraphs clearly

The opening of your paragraph should set the stage.

The topic or idea that it covers should be obvious to your reader from the first sentence or two.

It can be helpful to do this by 'signposting'; basically, telling your reader what you're about to do.

Here is an example of a good paragraph opening

SAMPLE PARAGRAPH OPENING

As I noted, I will in this essay be defending the position that certain non-human animals have equal moral status to human beings. To build my case, I will begin by providing reasons to reject the idea that non-human animals lack moral status. An argument for this claim was put forward by Descartes...

Here is an example of a not-so-good paragraph opening

SAMPLE PARAGRAPH OPENING

Descartes has various views about human beings being special.

Notice what the good paragraph opening does; it explains to the reader how the paragraph is related to the essay question, and what the student intends to accomplish in the paragraph.

You don't have to explain how every paragraph is related to the essay question (sometimes, this will be obvious), but it's often good practice to make it clear what the paragraph will do. For example:

- 'I will now move on to consider the objection that...' (for a paragraph discussing an objection).
- 'One promising argument for position X is...' (for a paragraph introducing an argument).

Conclusion

Some tips for writing a good conclusion

Your conclusion shouldn't be too short—i.e. it shouldn't be only one or two sentences.

But your conclusion shouldn't be too long either—don't just provide a long summary of everything that you've said in the essay.

The conclusion is a 'wrap-up': drive the point home that you've argued for your thesis convincingly.

Don't introduce any *new* information in the conclusion; if something is important enough to merit discussion, then it should be covered in the body of the essay.

Here is an example of a good conclusion:

SAMPLE CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have argued that sentient non-human animals have equal moral status to human beings. In defense of this claim, I first established, contra Descartes, that it is implausible to take these non-human animals to have no moral status at all. The remaining question was whether they had equal moral status to human beings. In the course of arguing for an affirmative answer, I drew upon Peter Singer's idea that we should take the nature of an entity's interests to decide its moral status. Human and non-human animals are both sentient, and so, both share the same basic interest in avoiding pain. Insofar as both have this basic interest, and this interest grounds moral status, we should assign equal moral status to humans and sentient non-human animals.

What makes this good:

- It clearly re-states the answer to the essay question that has been defended.
- It provides a quick recap of how this answer was arrived at, without rehearsing every single point that was covered—only the main argumentative moves are mentioned.

Here is an example of a not-so-good conclusion:

SAMPLE CONCLUSION

This essay proves that animals and humans have the same moral status. The essay first explains what moral status is. It then refuted Descartes argument that only humans have moral status, by showing that animals are very complex. After that, I showed that the view which says that animals and humans have moral status, but humans have more moral status is illogical because there exists no irrefutable way of this view. To justify a higher status for humans, we need to use abilities like intelligence to justify it but then we exclude humans who are not intelligent from having moral status like we do. A further idea backing up this that I should add is animals' have rights, as we see by many animal rights movements, which are doing something valuable, and are therefore supporting animals having moral importance. Thus, we must henceforth just take sentience to be most important for moral status, supporting the eternal equal moral status of human beings and animals.

What makes this not-so-good:

- It rehearses every (or almost every) single point covered in the essay.
- It introduces new information (about animal rights movements).
- The level of grain makes things unclear; it is too detailed to give a broad picture of the argument, but not detailed enough to give any real insight into the points mentioned.