

Writing an argumentative essay

An argumentative essay should present a thesis and defend it with rational arguments, and constitute a contribution to knowledge (i.e. the argument should be new, rather than just a repetition of something you read or were told in class).

Style

When you write an essay, do not assume that you are writing it for your instructor to read. Someone who is not familiar with the course content (e.g. a friend, a partner, your parents) should be able to understand your essay. This will require explaining/defining what theories and concepts mean, how they are applied, and so on, unless they can safely be assumed to be common knowledge.

Explaining theories and concepts also gives you an opportunity to demonstrate knowledge, particularly if you do it in your own words. The burden of proof is on you to demonstrate knowledge. If you do not demonstrate the relevant knowledge, an essay without a single mistake can have a very poor mark. An example of this is an essay on utilitarianism where the student presents very intuitive arguments but doesn't even mention utilitarianism. A student who does bring up the theory and topics but avoids all the complex issues (perhaps to avoid making mistakes) will also be stuck with a low mark.

Presenting your own view on a topic is not the same as offering your personal opinion, the latter being typically expressed as a description of your beliefs/feelings, with no supporting reasons being offered to believe the position. An essay is meant to be a tool to both share knowledge and try to change someone's mind. In general, unless you are a recognized expert in a topic (e.g. If Elon Musk is voicing his view on where autonomous driving will go in the next five years, many will listen even if he provides no evidence), you need to provide good reasons for the reader to believe you. In ethics in particular, there is no position of ethical authority where we should blindly follow someone's ethical guidance without the need for any support arguments.

Your thesis will of course be a claim you believe in, but it's not *just* an opinion if you support it with reasons (arguments). I do not mind the use of "I" in an essay (it's perfectly fine to say "I will argue that" to clarify who is saying what), but double check with other instructors that may be marking you. Be careful to avoid wording that is often associated with expressing subjective opinion (e.g. "I believe that...", "I feel that", "I agree" - these should never be used in an argumentative essay). These expressions may deceive you into thinking that you can just say how you feel about something without justifying it. Remember not to include unsupported claims, with the obvious exclusion of claims that require no support. "A bit can be either zero or one" is an example of a claim that does not require support as it's not contested and it's widely known to be true, even if a particular person may not know it.

Avoid ambiguity and vagueness. Use simple and clear sentences. Short sentences and paragraphs (3-5 sentences) are usually clearer for the inexperienced writer. Make every argumentative move as explicit as possible and don't mix several in one long sentence. Break things down. Avoid statements phrased as questions ("Isn't this obviously right?"). Rephrase as a claim that you take full responsibility for. Anything that is implied is not as clear as a sentence where everything is explicit.

Components of an essay

A good essay has three well-defined parts: Introduction, Body, Conclusion

Each part has its own function, and should not perform the functions of other parts. Often students get this wrong, so it's important you read this, as it may impact your grade.

Introduction

If you fail in writing a proper introduction your essay may already be compromised. Always include a clear and *explicit* thesis in the introduction. A thesis is not the topic (the topic is what the essay is about), but an explicit statement that communicates your view on that topic/subject. In some cases this is an answer to a essay question, if one is given. It's also common to mention the main arguments that you will use to defend it (but just mention them - don't actually discuss anything in the introduction). This is a promise of what you will do in the essay (you will show that your thesis is true), and you must keep that promise.

Topic: Whether AI will one day be conscious.

Thesis: AI will be conscious one day.

Theses phrased as questions are far less clear. A good thesis is always phrased as a statement that can be true or false. Since it is often the case that your view on the topic will shift slightly or substantially during the process of writing, you will likely need to adjust the introduction after you finish writing the essay to make sure your claim matches your supporting arguments for it. However, it is still useful to prepare a draft of the introduction at the start to guide you during the writing, as a map of what you will do. Go straight to the point, and keep it short (I strongly recommend a single-paragraph introduction, and probably a short one, for a short 800-1000 word essay).

Body

Here you will present all the arguments that you will use to defend your thesis (in the introduction, you just mentioned what they were). You can also use this space to explain any terms that you used in the introduction (this keeps the introduction short and straight to the point). Don't save any arguments for the conclusion, as that's not the place to present any new arguments.

Present just one idea per paragraph (explains X, argues Y, challenges argument Z, ...), and start each paragraph with a topic sentence that identifies to the reader the aim of that paragraph. This also helps you to keep track of what that paragraph does, and where your argument is going. The flow of argument should be fluid and intuitive to the reader. The essay is a presentation.

Do not start paragraphs with quotes or questions - these do not clearly identify what your paragraph will do. Quotes look particularly bad at the beginning of a paragraph. It looks like your essay is driven by ideas that are not yours. Use the ideas of other as tools to support YOUR thesis. It's your essay.

I advise you to write short paragraphs, unless you are an excellent writer and know what you are doing - but no shorter than three sentences.

A good essay should include a discussion of a counter-argument. Many students find it difficult to deal with counter-arguments. Make sure that your wording shows that you have not suddenly changed your mind. What you should be doing is considering

an argument that could be raised against your thesis, and then you deal with it (e.g. you may show that while that position may seem tempting, it ultimately fails). This is not the same as describing pros and cons. A con is when by your own admission, your position has some drawback that you can't quite deal with. More often than not, it's problematic to argue against your own position, unless you simply have to admit to that limitation to show intellectual honesty and awareness of a real problem.

To consider a counter-argument is *not* to show that your thesis could actually be false. This approach wouldn't help to support your thesis and is confusing to the reader. Yes, you should be "open minded" when thinking about an ethical dilemma, but when you are writing an essay you are now just defending your thesis *throughout*. Presenting alternative solutions without clarifying which one is correct makes for an incomplete essay.

Conclusion

Note that essays are not structured like deductive arguments, where the thesis/conclusion comes at the end (these arguments will be discussed in class, and the issue is briefly discussed further down this document). While the conclusion of a deductive argument in effect presents a thesis supported by premises, the conclusion of an essay does not present the thesis (in a properly structured essay, this was done in the introduction), and never presents any new arguments in support of the thesis. The conclusion of an essay merely reviews what was already said, showing that you have kept your initial promise and effectively defended your thesis with the arguments you presented in the body of the essay. All the work arguing for your thesis must have been done before you get to the conclusion. The conclusion just reminds the reader of what was achieved, in light of their knowledge of all the detail of the arguments you presented in the essay (so in that sense it's not a mere repetition of the introduction).

Getting a good mark on essays

When marking a philosophy essay, an instructor will look at the quality of your argument, good understanding of the theories and technical terms, critical analysis and structure. All of these are intertwined, and a good essay must perform well at all these levels.

Argument

Your philosophy essay must have an argument (after you clearly specify a problem/topic, state a thesis, then argue for it throughout the essay - in the essay body) and it must be new. The argument must dominate the essay. To argue effectively, you must use an intuitive structure (the reader should find the steps intuitive, so think of how you break down your supporting arguments, and the order in which they must be presented), and you must show understanding of the course content. This is done by applying theories (showing you understand them), not merely listing features a bunch of features of a theory (this only shows you can read and write!).

Structure

When you describe or explain something rather than argue, the reader must be able to see how that information is necessary for your argument, and ideally they should know this before they read the descriptive section. In other words, don't describe, quote, or paraphrase first, and only explain later what it's for. The reader should be able to know at all times why they are reading that particular sentence.

It is important to use transition sentences to announce what you will do next, or what you have just done, regarding your argument. Otherwise it's easy for a reader to get lost. Remind them that e.g. you have already argued for points 1 and 2, and will now argue for 3 and 4.

Stick to one idea per paragraph. Start every paragraph with a topic sentence.

Make sure you use the Introduction+Essay body+Conclusion essay structure. Each section must perform its job appropriately.

Note that an argumentative essay should *not* be structured like a deductive argument, as you can see below. In an argumentative essay, the thesis comes first (like in a court of law - "My client is innocent! Let me tell you why...")

Conventional deductive argument structure - premises come first

P1. A byte has 8 bits

P2. A KB has 1000 bytes (since 1998, it's no longer 1024)

Argument's Conclusion (in practice, this is a thesis): A KByte has 8000 bits

Essay structure - thesis comes first

1. Essay thesis (in introduction): I will argue that a KB has 8000 bits based on arguments a) and b) (arguments are identified)

2. Essay body then presents the actual arguments in support of the thesis:

a) A byte has 8 bits

b) A KB has 1000 bytes. Since 1998, it's no longer 1024, as proposed by the International Electrotechnical Commission

3. Essay's Conclusion: "I have successfully shown that a KB has 8000 bits based on arguments a) and b). "

Note that this only mentions conclusions already arrived at in the essay body – as it should. No new facts or arguments are added here.

Understanding

The burden of proof is completely on you to show that you understand what was taught in this course. If you don't say it, your instructor will not assume you know it. In order to demonstrate understanding you need to explicitly engage with the course content and go into an appropriate amount of detail for the essay length. This means you need to explicitly use the theories and technical terms learned in the course correctly. Keep in mind that some technical terms are used in everyday language too, but they may mean something quite different. You need to use them accurately in the way they are defined in this course. An example is "objectivism", which some students Google, to discover that it's the philosophy of Ayn Rand. It isn't! Not in the context of this course.

Showing that you understand a theory well involves showing that you understand its many facets, so resist the temptation to just focus on a basic definition of a theory, even if it's an important aspect of it. For instance, don't reduce utilitarianism to the

idea that we should maximize utility. If your essay on utilitarianism just says that about the theory, expect to get no more than 30-50%.

Critical analysis

Don't just recite what you are told. True understanding involves remaining critical of the theories you are taught. One way of showing good critical analysis is by showing that you are aware of counter-arguments to a theory. Even better if they are your own. If you are defending it, you will need to respond to these counter-arguments, either to show they fail, or to accept that this is an actual drawback of the theory you are defending.

If you are asked to defend a position using a theory you don't agree with, do it. But to show understanding of the theory, show that you have knowledge of drawbacks, and deal with counter-arguments.

Three typical issues that result in low marks

1. Almost all of the essay is about a case study you chose. Little to no explicit engagement with the course materials. You don't get any marks for knowledge of your chosen topic (e.g. a particular company's progress in quantum computing), as that's not part of the course content. The argument may be decently structured and it may even be impressive and clever, and you do get some marks for that, but if you don't engage sufficiently and explicitly with the course content you are unlikely to get more than 60%, and you may get under 50%.

Solution: use most of your word count in engaging directly and explicitly with the course content, and go into detail, revealing the full complexity of the theories. Show critical analysis.

2. The mere inclusion of a paragraph or two describing/defining what e.g. utilitarianism is, or what Kantian ethics is, but not in your own words, and/or not directly applied to the case study. The rest of the essay doesn't engage or barely engages with the course content. This superficial engagement with the course content only shows to the instructor that the student can read. While definitions are of course useful, you need to do more. You need to show that you have a full understanding of the course content and are capable of critical analysis. You are likely to get under 60-65%.

Solution: Use your own words. Apply the theories to solve the problems. Show how details of the theories impact the resolution of this particular problem.

3. No thesis, or implied thesis. You cannot just say "Here's an ethical problem. Nobody knows what to do. It's complicated, but I will discuss it". You are expected to do more than "discuss" a problem. Be confident. You must present an ethical problem/dilemma and solve it. If it's too hard (this humility is healthy), then choose a different problem that you can solve. Narrow down your thesis to something that you can indeed support. The solution must be presented in the introduction, and then you argue for it in the essay body. You are not supposed to remain neutral about the ethics. Depending on what else you do in the essay, you may get below 50% if the thesis is absent or just implied.

Solution: You should present the hard facts in a neutral way, of course (i.e. don't lie about the facts, or present them as favouring your position when they don't, etc), but you must take a clear stance on the ethical issues. This position must be expressed clearly in your thesis (in the introduction)

Final note: Obviously any instructions that I can include here are but a very short summary of what writing a good essay involves (BCIT offers whole courses exclusively on academic writing). If you want more detail, there are plenty of online manuals on how to write good academic essays. Look for a manual by a major research university (e.g. UBC, Toronto). If you want to investigate further, look for information on argumentative/argument/persuasive essays.