

Essay Instructions

You should read this *after* you have already read the handout on how to write an argumentative essay (in this folder).

Make sure that you read this document in its entirety. Essays that do not follow these instructions may get a failing grade. The first part of this document covers general instructions for both essays. Keep reading to see the specific instructions for essays 1 and 2.

You will be asked to write argumentative essays. For word limits, consult the course outline (Orientation folder). Try to write close to the word limit. Going over the word limit, particularly if you go substantially over, may impact your grade (the same is true if you go substantially under, of course, as you won't have space to develop all ideas in full).

The chief aim of each essay will be to:

1. state a value judgement (a thesis/claim about what ought to be done/what was done) regarding an ethical dilemma, and
2. justify your position, attempting to persuade the reader that you are correct (assume that you are writing for an intelligent and reasonable reader who does not currently agree with you - so you don't preach to the choir -, and does not know about ethics)

In doing this, it is crucial that you show thorough knowledge of the course content as appropriate for the argument you are trying to make. You won't have space to show all that you know, of course, so one key piece of advice is: don't include text connected to the course's theories and concepts if it is irrelevant or very secondary to your argument. Use your knowledge to support your view, while showing that you have done a critical reading of the material. Aim to make an *original* contribution, with claims, arguments and examples that are new, rather than just replicate what you were told in class. This course aims to incentivize original thought. It's also easier for

the grader to see that you understood a concept or theory if you use your own words and examples.

Explicit engagement with the course's theories and concepts is essential. The burden of proof is on you to show knowledge. Rather than think that you lose marks for mistakes made, assume that your mark starts at 0% if you show no knowledge of the course material explicitly, or are vague, and goes up only if/when you show knowledge. Knowledge can be demonstrated primarily by (in ascending order of importance, but you should do all of these):

- a) *defining* explicitly all used technical terms and theories, rather than just using the terms correctly. This is a basic requirement to show you have done the reading, and to make your argument accessible to the average reader. Note that it's far more important to define terms and concepts that are *relevant* to your argument, as, again, you don't have the space to say everything about each theory. Also, keep in mind that just taking information from the course notes doesn't do much to show knowledge, in any case - see b) and c)
- b) *applying* terms and theories correctly, using your own words, to the argument and case study. This goes further and shows that you have understood the reading to a degree where you can use the theories. You also need to explain how they are applied (remember the assumed reader doesn't know about ethics)
- c) applying terms and theories *while showing critical analysis*. This shows that you have understood the readings and are now able to think critically about them. For instance, you do a good job challenging theories or finding your own ways to support them. Just make sure you don't challenge your own claims! In an argumentative essay you are not expected to be neutral, so you should be arguing for a particular thesis. You should be sure and sound sure that you are correct. You can and should respond to counter-arguments that could be made against you, however.

Always keep in mind that you should not be stating mere personal opinions (i.e. merely describing personal views - e.g. "I believe that", "It's my personal view that" - without presenting supporting arguments). In other words, don't include any unsupported claims - although of course you don't have to support claims that nobody challenges (e.g. something that is or should be common knowledge).

A little more general advice for both essays

1. It's great if you get excited about your case study, but don't use up all the words just discussing details of the case study. You don't get marks for knowing the case study well. Just say the ***least you can about your case study that allows the reader to understand the moral dilemma.*** If it takes three paragraphs just to explain your dilemma, choose a simpler one. You get marks for engaging explicitly and critically with the course content. Since the burden of proof is on you to show knowledge of the course content, higher marks are not possible without maximum engagement (for instance, engaging with more complex aspects of the theories, rather than just the basics anyone could Google or ask ChatGPT about).
2. On essay 2, you may be tempted to continue to focus primarily on utilitarianism, but don't forget that you also need to show knowledge of Kant, which being more complex may require more space for discussion. Discussing at length what maximizes utility and what won't will not give you any extra marks. There is a lot more to the theory than just saying it's about utility maximization. There are two modules/lectures on it.

See essay writing tips in Content> Course Resources > Orientation

Essay outline and submission of the essay outline

You will write your essays in class on paper. For each essay, you need to submit an outline beforehand. You will not have much time to write your essay in class, so the outline is essential for you to use your time efficiently. See the deadline in the course outline and calendar, but don't leave it to the last minute. Because it is very important that you submit this outline by the deadline, there is a penalty of 10 percentage points on your essay mark if you don't (e.g. if you were going to have 73%, you get 63%). The outline must include:

1. a full introduction (must include a clear and explicit thesis, appropriately narrowed so that you can defend it properly) and
2. a brief summary of the main arguments - one idea per paragraph (ideally think of a topic sentence per paragraph)
3. a bibliography. You must provide an electronic link of the news story that you discuss, and the news story must be current, i.e., it must have been written after the commencement of this course. The topic can be a recent development of an

older or ongoing issue. All sources used must be added, including any use of a Large Language Model (remember that appropriate use of AI is completely OK)

This outline is more for yourself, and it's not graded, but if it's clear that very little effort was put into the outline, you may lose the 10 points.

Submit a PDF or Word file, single spaced. Use the appropriate folder in the dropbox

Feedback

You will get feedback in the online dropbox (Activities>Assignments) or possibly only on the essay itself if on paper. Note that argumentative essays in a philosophy course take longer to grade than other assignments you may have in this and other courses. Graders will aim for a 3-week turnaround.

You will get a few relevant examples of issues/mistakes. Do not expect every issue in your essay to be identified as the aim of the grader is not to proofread your work.

Also see the grading criteria document in this folder. You may get an A, B, C score to help you know where to focus to improve your grade, or you can get those on request from your lab instructor.

Note that if you get comments identifying weaknesses in the position you defend, you shouldn't assume that you now need to have a different position (one that you possibly don't believe in) so your grader will agree with it. You don't get a grade based on whether the grader personally agrees with you or not on the discussed moral issue. The grader will point out issues with the argument for you to consider. A more persuasive argument is likely to get a better grade.

Notes on the bibliography

You must have a bibliography (outline only - you don't have to memorize it for the in-class writing session)

You are not expected to do extensive research for the essays. Your only sources can be the course notes, course readings, lecture slides and article you chose for the case study. Feeding these into a LLM and discussing them then can be a great way to get

more interaction time with the material, but remember to double check every AI claim, and talk to your instructor when you're still not sure.

Wikipedia articles are often written by hobbyists who are often not experts. Please don't include any Wikipedia references in your bibliography (feel free to use Wikipedia as a starting point for your research - look up the references provided for each article, as many of those are reliable sources). If you are looking for a reliable source of information about ethics other than the course notes that you can quote from, use SEP (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy - very reliable) or IEP (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy - generally reliable). Note that AI often gets definitions slightly wrong and cannot be relied on too much. Since the beginning of the generalized use of AI, students have been making more mistakes on definitions, not less. Consult the course notes!

Note that any citation style is acceptable in this course, as long as you use it consistently, and most importantly never fail to cite a source. You are not expected to memorize any quotes for the essays written in class.

Structure

I Intro= Present your thesis + main arguments you will present to support it (mention what these arguments are, do not argue here)

II Argue for your position (throughout the essay body)

III Consider counter-arguments and show how your argument accommodates or defeats the counter-argument

IV Conclusion – Review what was achieved (don't introduce new ideas here, show how the essay answered the essay question)

This structure outline is not meant to indicate the number of paragraphs. Write short paragraphs, with topic sentences - one idea per paragraph.

Essay 1 - Essay on Normative Relativism/Normative Objectivism and Utilitarianism

A) Start by choosing an ethical dilemma related to a topic in Computing (see Course Outline > Skills to Develop for a list of topics) described in a news item that first appeared in a newspaper/magazine/video during the running of this course. When choosing the case, keep this in mind:

There should be tension/disagreement among reasonable people regarding what the morally right course of action should be (e.g. if it's immediately obvious to everyone your thesis is correct - suppose that you argue that stealing someone's private health data and selling it for profit is wrong -, you are not making a contribution to our knowledge of ethics). In your introduction, you will have to make it clear that you are describing a genuine moral dilemma, and you must show it's an interesting one, worth discussing. Once again, the solution to the problem of how one should act, and why, should not be obvious to all. On the other hand, it's probably a bad idea to try to argue for a position that is shockingly counter-intuitive just for the sake of saying something new/original. Your arguments will likely not be persuasive.

In this first essay, choose a case in which it may seem tempting for someone to take a relativist stance (so you can alert the reader to the issues of this stance).

Be careful not to choose a case where the issue is legal rather than clearly moral (e.g. if you argue that someone has done something illegal, that is not a moral argument). Although legal and moral issues are often connected, not everything that is legal is moral, and vice-versa. You can of course question whether a particular law is ethical, for instance.

B) It can be very helpful for you, as a writer, to explicitly formulate a clear essay question (primarily to yourself) that you will answer. Let this question guide your answer. Unless you have answered the essay question, by providing a solution/thesis (e.g. in the form of an action that you argue is moral, and reasons why it is right) your essay will not have done its job. Note that it's not required to have an essay question. For many writers it will suffice to focus on a very clear, explicit and narrow thesis statement. When writing the actual essay, it's **best to formulate all points as statements rather than questions** (questions with implied answers are not as clear as a statement).

C) Engage with relativism and objectivism explicitly. In your essay, you must show that while someone may find it tempting to take a relativist stance, it's important that we are objectivists instead. Make an explicit case for objectivism, showing your grasp of

the concept. Keep in mind that being an objectivist is not the same as being objective. Discuss the risks of relativism. Optional: relate to conventional ethics and Kohlberg.

D) Regarding your use of utilitarianism, there are two possibilities for arguing in defense of your thesis on what do do: either 1. Use utilitarianism to make your moral arguments or 2. If you happen to disagree with what utilitarianism recommends, you can still show your knowledge of the theory by arguing that its recommendation fails, and of course explain why utilitarianism fails. Keep in mind that purely intuition-based arguments (common sense ethical arguments of the kind you or others typically engage in before taking an ethics course) don't by itself give you marks, unless you use them while engaging with details of the theory. In other words, you can show knowledge of utilitarianism and its limitations of utilitarianism by arguing and trying to show it's counter-intuitive, but make sure you do show knowledge of the course content and don't simply rely on common sense arguments. An essay that is primarily composed of such arguments will likely get a failing mark.

E) Consider and respond to at least one interesting objection (by a real or imaginary opponent) that could be raised against your thesis. The wording should make it clear you haven't suddenly changed your mind and you are now arguing against your own thesis. You must defend your thesis at all times, and it should always be very clear who claims what.

Essay 2 - Essay on Utilitarianism and Kantian ethics

For this second essay, you should revise the argument you presented in your previous essay, as appropriate, to reflect your recently acquired knowledge of Kant and the feedback you got from your grader.

Note that this is not merely a revision of the first essay, so you can and should probably start working on an outline before you get feedback for essay 1. There are now different requirements, although you will be able to use as much of the same material as is appropriate for these requirements. In other words, you don't get penalized for submitting the same work twice (you can keep some of the same sentences, or even paragraphs), but you only get a good mark if this work is appropriate for the specific requirements of essay 2.

As a reminder, when considering the feedback from your grader, note that any comments you get about weaknesses of your argument don't mean you must or should drop it, change your mind or pretend to change your mind. These comments do not reflect their personal views on the issue, but only whether your arguments properly support your thesis as they should.

In light of your newly acquired knowledge about ethics, you may have changed your mind about what ought to be done. In some rare cases, you may want to choose a different case study and start from scratch. Most students will find it easier to just add to and edit the first essay as appropriate. Here's what you will need to do:

- A) Regardless of whether you want to stick with a utilitarian argument (or your argument against it, as you may have argued that utilitarianism gets it wrong), now you need to show knowledge of Utilitarianism and Kant. You must discuss what answer would be suggested by utilitarianism and Kantian ethics, and explain why, showing deep knowledge of each approach. Make it clear why only the theory you used to justify what you believe is the right course of action gets it right. Note that their justifications (e.g. why an action should be performed) are strictly speaking mutually incompatible so you can't really use more than one theory to justify your recommended action, even when their recommended actions (i.e. what to do) match.
- B) In the introduction, your thesis should both identify what ought to be done in response to the moral dilemma, and which approach to ethics you will use to justify this course of action.
- C) As mentioned above, you can reuse any of the original material for your first essay, as you see fit, as long as you fulfill the requirements for this second essay. There is no need to still discuss Kohlberg, objectivism, and relativism, unless you deem it appropriate. You may have also changed your mind about utilitarianism, so revise as appropriate.
- D) Consider and respond to at least one objection (a counter-argument to your thesis by a real or imaginary opponent)
- F) Submit your course outline for essay 2 and also include an informal 200-word (maximum) Revision Report to accompany it. Explain in this report how you departed from and improved on the first essay by considering the feedback and the new knowledge you have acquired about ethics since then. For instance, if you were

convinced by utilitarianism at the time of your first essay, explain why you departed from utilitarianism in this second essay, or explain why you still believe that utilitarianism is convincing, despite what you learned about other theories. This report is not graded, but it will help you focus on what you now want to achieve, and will also help your instructor in knowing what to look out for in terms of changes to the original argument.