

## HOW TO RESPOND TO CASE STUDIES: A BRIEF GUIDE

Case studies are meant to help you practice how to engage in “real life” ethical deliberation: the problems they present are often tricky, and solving them requires that you consider the needs and interests of multiple stakeholders (including patients, staff, the government, various companies, etc.). With this in mind, remember that the goal is NOT just to say what you “think” or “feel.” Instead, you want to find a way to propose a solution that you think you could defend/explain to all those affected by it. (So: put yourself in the shoes of these medical professionals! Do your best to figure out a workable solution). While the details of each case will require a somewhat different response, you generally go through something like the following FIVE steps:

**Step 1: Identify the Problem(s) and Describe the Morally Relevant Features of the Case.** Before starting to say what should be done, it’s important to get clear on what exactly the problem(s) is. With this in mind, take some time to describe the main points of the case study in your own words, and identify what you think are the main ethical issues at stake (i.e., those you’ll be addressing later in the case study response). You should make sure to clearly identify any *assumptions* about the case you have made. You’ll also want to make clear who the various **stakeholders** in this case are (these are all the people/organizations who have a stake in the outcome). This will often involve reviewing the **sources** that are referenced within the case study.

This step is often overlooked, but it’s a hugely important one, as many “disagreements” about ethical issues are often a result of different people having wildly different views of what the “facts” are. Taking the time to make this clear ahead of time can save a world of trouble. In general, this should be no more than 15 to 20% of your essay (so, a half page of a three-page paper). You should NOT simply repeat the case study back to me—the goal in this step is to really narrow in on what is important.

**Step 2: Identify MULTIPLE Possible Solutions or Approaches.** After you are done with step 1, you should have identified one or more specific questions that need to be answered. For example, our question might be “What is the morally right thing for X to do?” or “What should the law/policy about Y be?” Now, we need to identify *more than one* possible answers to this question. In some cases, we’ll already know what X did (and we’re trying to figure out whether it was the right thing to do); in other cases, we’ll be starting from scratch. You should make sure to include both (1) obvious solutions (the ones you know people will bring up) and (2) “creative” solutions (ones that occur to you as you work through the problem). Make sure you describe each of these solutions/approaches in enough detail so that a reader can understand what each would entail.

**Step 3: Determine Which Ethical Principles or Ideas Might Be Relevant, and Explain Why.** As you start trying to solve the problem, you’ll want to think about what ideas might be most relevant. These might be general ideas (e.g., the idea of autonomy, or beneficence), specific policies (e.g., regarding things like abortion, euthanasia, etc.), or even a different case study with which you see similarities. Now, clearly and succinctly explain *why* these ideas are relevant. Don’t assume your audience will automatically know what you are talking about—take your time to explain, even if it seems obvious to you. This is a great place to bring in class material (from the notes, textbook, etc.), or from outside resources (though be sure to cite this).

**Step 4: Argue for Your Chosen Solution.** Now, go to work! Use the ethical ideas/concepts you’ve identified in step 3 to argue for ONE of the solutions in step 2. This is the “heart” of your response (and it may take up 50% or more of your essay), but you shouldn’t start on this step until you’ve worked through steps 1 through 3. While this doesn’t occur until relatively late in the process, you’ll want to make sure your **thesis statement** (that is, a statement about what your conclusion is re: this case) comes early in the essay.

**Step 5: Consider Objections to Your Solution.** To close, try to think about possible objections to your solution. These might include (1) potential misunderstandings (which you can answer by clarifying) or (2) genuinely bad things about your solution (here, you’ll have to argue that your solution is still better than the alternatives, despite these problems). When doing this, you’ll be trying to take the point of the view of someone who favors one of the *other* solutions to the case study. When it comes to the exams, a failure to adequately deal with objections is often the difference between an A-level response and a B- or C-level response.