

Week 1 Assignment Guidance:

The Purpose of This Paper

- This assignment, along with Assignment 2, is intended to prepare you to write the final paper.
- This is not intended to be an essay, but an exercise.
- The 6 components of the exercise involve important skills to practice in order to be able to write the kind of coherent, well-composed philosophical essay that you will write in later papers.

Specifying the Question

- Essays that address ethical issues are typically most coherent and focused when they are oriented toward answering a specific ethical question. The answer will be your “position” (in the final paper we’re going to call this the “thesis”), and the main body of the essay seeks to explain and justify how your position represents the best answer to the question. So it’s crucial to have a well-formulated, relevant, and focused ethical question to start with.
- The list of suggested questions should serve as a guide if you wish to formulate your own question. If you choose to do so, think of the controversies and debates, the difficult choices and dilemmas, etc., that surround the topic of your choice, many but not all of which are raised by the textbook. Consider some very specific problem, and formulate that as a focused, concrete question. **The more narrowly-focused the question, the better your paper will be.**
- Be sure your chosen question is itself an **ethical** question. An ethical question concerns what is right or wrong, what we ought or ought not to do, what kinds of things are good or bad, honest or dishonest, courageous or cowardly, generous or selfish, etc.
 - Ethical questions should be distinguished from questions of psychology, sociology, anthropology, biology, etc. If you are unsure, please consult your instructor.
- **Example 1:** suppose you were interested in the topic of abortion.

Overly-vague or broad questions that you would want to avoid might include:

- Is abortion moral?
- Should a woman obtain an abortion?
- Should abortions be outlawed?

Better, more-focused questions might include:

- Should abortions be allowed in certain cases, such as when the mother’s life is at risk or when a pregnancy is the result of rape or incest, but not in other cases?

- Should a woman have a right to an abortion if we recognize the fetus as a person?
- Is restricting abortion rights an unjust restriction on a woman's right to make her own reproductive choices?
- **Example 2:** suppose you were interested in the topic of criminal justice, and more specifically the topic of capital punishment.

Overly-vague or broad questions that you would want to avoid might include:

- Is the death penalty moral?
- Should we execute people?

Better, more-focused questions might include:

- Should we execute people convicted of first-degree murder?
- Should we execute convicted murderers that have mental disabilities?
- Is it just to use capital punishment when there is the possibility of executing innocent persons?
- Is the capital punishment system racist?
- In order to hone your thesis to something that is manageable you will need to do research and become familiar with the topic of interest, trying to focus on a specific sub-topic within it.

Constructing an Introduction

- Your introduction should focus on setting out the topic and scope of the discussion in a way that clearly establishes the what exactly you will be talking about and why it is ethically significant, and provides any necessary context such as the background, current state of affairs, definitions of key terms, and so on.
- You want to try to do this in a way that is as neutral as possible, avoids controversial assumptions, rhetorical questions, and the like. In other words, you should try to construct an introduction to the topic that could be an introduction to a paper defending the opposite position from yours.
- Your reader should have a clear sense of the boundaries of the topic, what the crucial ethical questions underlying it are, and the procedure of the paper.
- You should avoid making specific references to the course; write the paper as if you were writing for an audience that is unfamiliar with the course.

Providing a Position Statement

- Aim to have a clear, concise statement of your position that provides a clear answer to the question with which you started. You may end up having to reformulate your opening question to align with the position statement.
- **Don't confuse the position statement with supporting reasons.** The position statement clearly and directly answers the question you raised. It's important to be able to distinguish the claim or position that you want to defend from the reasons in support of and opposed to that, which is why the assignment had you separate the position statement from those reasons.
- After composing your position statement, reread the question and **make sure that the position statement provides a direct answer to the question.**
- The position statement shouldn't simply be a “yes” or “no” on the question, but should be more precise formulation of a position. For example, on the examples question on abortion provided above, a position statement might be, “Abortions should only be permitted when the life of the mother is threatened by continuing the pregnancy, or when she is the victim of rape or incest, since any other reason would unjustly violate a fetus’s right to life.” or “A woman has a fundamental right to determine for herself whether or not to continue a pregnancy, no matter the circumstances.”
- The opposing position statement should be similar to your own position statement, but from the point of view of someone that would disagree with your position in a significant way.
- The opposing position statement need not be the *direct* opposite of your position statement; it may instead focus on a particular aspect of your position. For instance, if your position on physician-assisted suicide is that assisted suicide should be available for anyone with a terminal illness, the opposing position statement could be that it should not be available for anyone at all, but it might also be that assisted suicide should be available for people without a terminal condition as well as those with such a condition.

Supporting and Opposing Reasons

- **Your supporting and opposing reasons should not simply restate your position or the opposing position.** Your focus should be on drawing out those considerations and arguments in support of that position.
- One way to approach this is to imagine yourself in friendly conversation with someone that doesn't necessarily agree with your position (perhaps they disagree, or perhaps they are undecided). When you state your position, they might ask why you think that. They might also

raise a problem with your position, a reason to doubt that your position is the strongest one. These are the kinds of things you will try to briefly articulate.

- A similar approach can be taken to the opposing reasons, but you can imagine what a reasonable person would say in defense of *your* inquiry into why they might hold their view.
- **Avoid providing contradictory statements for your supporting and opposing reasons.** For instance, if your position is that capital punishment is justified and a supporting reason is that it deters people from committing crimes, it would be contradictory to state that capital punishment does *not* deter people from committing crimes as an opposing reason. Or if your position is that abortion is moral and you support that position by claiming that fetuses do not have a right to life, you should avoid opposing reasons that simply state that fetuses *do* have a right to life. Focus instead on the reasons someone may believe that fetuses do or do not have a right to life.
- Remember that we can recognize good reasons why our view might be called into question while still believing that our view is strongest *overall*. Or we might be able to appreciate worries, dilemmas, doubts, and so on, that make the issue complex. The ability to honestly and thoughtfully acknowledge these kinds of reasons is a very important part of ethical reasoning, and a crucial part of the kind of defense of a position that you will undertake in later papers.
- The questions you can ask when trying to identify and express reasons for and against your position might include:
 - what **values** are at stake in this question?
 - **who is affected** by various possible actions or policies?
 - what **features of individual human life** are brought to bear on this question?
 - what **features of social life** are brought to bear on this question?
 - what **common moral standards** might be at risk in different answers to this question?
 - what **other considerations** would have to be addressed when formulating and defending a position on this question?