

Writing Argumentative Essays

[CN: Suicide/Euthanasia]

Johnson describes what she calls the “dialectic method” as a philosophical way of “doing” ethics (*Computer Ethics*, pp. 28–35). Johnson seems to think of it as an open-ended process of trying out different reasons for doing this or that. This can be useful if you’re trying to have a friendly discussion about ethics, or if you’re reflecting on what your opinion on an ethical issue is. But when you’re trying to defend a specific decision about right and wrong—as in an argumentative essay—you need to modify the process slightly, so that it leads to and attempts to justify the position you’ve taken.

Here are the steps:

1. Identify the issue.
2. State your claim.
3. Provide reasons.
4. Consider objections.
5. Reply to the objections.
6. Repeat 3 or 4–5 as many times as you wish.

Throughout, you must remain logically **consistent**. For example, you can’t respond to an objection by changing the claim you’re trying to defend, or by saying something that contradicts an argument you made previously. Think of maintaining consistency as “Step Zero.”

Your **essay assignments** will ask you to use this method to write a longform argument on an ethical issue in computing and information technology.

Step 1: Identify the issue

What is the moral conundrum? What is at stake? What is the scenario that raises ethical questions?

Give the necessary details to the reader, so they know the general topic you’re going to be discussing. Give all the details you’ll need when making your argument, but don’t spend too many words here.

For example:

Euthanasia, or physician-assisted death, is when a patient asks a medical practitioner to end their (the patient’s) life, usually by administering a lethal dose of a drug.

Step 2: State your claim

What are you trying to argue? What are you trying to convince the reader to believe? And what value or principle are you going to use? (This is your “thesis statement.”)

You need to **take a side** in this kind of writing. It’s not enough just to explore the different options. You have to defend a specific claim.

In doing so, you have to decide which ethical **values** or **principles** you’re going to use to justify your claim. This will lead you to different **theories** you can use to make your argument.

For example:

I will argue that euthanasia is morally wrong. Human life has the highest moral value, and should never be intentionally ended.

While you are required to take a specific stand on the issue, it is fine to include some *nuance*. You might want to argue that something is *usually* morally wrong, but sometimes admits of exceptions. ***Just don't fall into the trap of presenting several opposing views without taking a stand yourself.***

Step 3: Provide reasons

What reasons are there to believe your claim? Which ethical theories can support your view?

Now you move from stating what your claim is to trying to *justify* it. Ethical theories can go a long way to helping you with this.

Depending on space, you might spend a lot of words developing one reason to believe your claim, or you might repeat this step multiple times, elaborating on several reasons. Both are good, but having lots of quickly stated reasons is usually less persuasive than a smaller list of well-explained reasons.

For example:

Human life has the highest value because human beings are autonomous, rational creatures. As Rachels argues, following Kant, "because the moral law is the law of reason, rational beings are the embodiment of the moral law itself...if there were no rational beings, the moral dimension of the world would simply disappear" (Rachels 14). Because moral value only exists because human beings create it in the world, humanity must always be respected as an end in itself. Ending someone's life is clearly a way of disrespecting someone's humanity. A murderer treats their victim as merely a means to their terrible ends. But notice that Kant tells us to respect humanity as an end in itself both in others and *in ourselves*. Ending your own life is to treat yourself as merely a means to your end of living comfortably. It is, therefore, morally wrong.

Step 4: Consider objections

What are some reasons why someone might argue that your claim is wrong? Are there any problems that someone might identify with any of the reasons you used to justify your claim?

In philosophy, an *objection* is a claim (or a complete argument) that someone who *disagrees* with your claim (or your reasons) might make against you. An objection suggests a problem with one of your arguments, or adds a complication that casts doubt on your position.

For example:

It might be objected that in deciding to end your own life, you *are* respecting yourself as an end in yourself. You make this decision as an autonomous, rational creature, and are thus exercising the very capacity that Kant praises as valuable beyond price.

Step 5: Reply to objections

How can you argue against the objections? Can you show that the problems they identify with your reasons are not problems after all?

An essay that considers and *replies* to objections will be more persuasive, because it predicts how the reader might try to push back against your claim or your reasons. In replying to objections you not only answer criticisms your reader might be thinking, you also provide further reasons to support your claim.

For example:

But this objection is mistaken. It is a contradiction to suppose that you could both respect the humanity in your own person as an end in itself, while at the same time destroying that same thing. Euthanasia cannot be defended by appeal to the value of humanity.

Cleaning it up

Going through these five steps can give you some of the pieces you need to write the essay. Depending on how many words it takes to work through each step, you could repeat steps 3–5 to add more reasons in favour of your claim, or to consider and reply to more objections. However, don't overdo it. ***An essay that develops a few arguments in detail and replies carefully to objections is usually more persuasive than an essay that rapidly outlines many arguments.***

After going through this process, you should have the body of your essay drafted, or at least outlined. You should then edit your work and present it as a professional essay. In addition to putting your arguments into prose, you should add a title, an introductory paragraph, and a concluding paragraph.

The **title** should very briefly state the point of the essay. In the above example, possible titles include: "Why Euthanasia is Wrong" or "A Kantian Argument Against Euthanasia." You can get a bit creative if you like: e.g. "Value Beyond Price: Against Euthanasia." But *don't be obnoxious*: e.g. "3 Reasons Why Euthanasia Is Wrong That Will Have You Reconsidering Everything About Medicine."

The **introduction** should very briefly summarize what you're going to argue. Provide a few light details about the ethical issue you're going to discuss, tell the reader explicitly what your claim is, and outline the arguments you're going to make and objections you're going to consider, in order. Importantly, your introduction should not go on too long, and should avoid being grandiose. So, don't start with grand-standing phrases like, "From the dawn of time..." Keep it simple. Keep it focused.

The **conclusion** should briefly recap the same points you make in the essay. Remind the reader what you argued and how you did so. The same recommendation to keep it simple and focused applies here. You can *very briefly* comment on the wider significance of your argument, but don't go too far from the material you've already presented.

If you take a point from other texts, whether you quote directly or paraphrase into your own words, ***you must cite your sources***. (Not doing so is plagiarism, a very serious academic offence.) Use a common citation style, such as Chicago, MLA, or APA, and include a comprehensive ***list of references*** at the end.

More tips

For more help, you can visit the professor or TA at their office hours (or, email to make an appointment). You may also send questions, outlines, or rough drafts by email for feedback.

You can find a collection of handouts written by philosophy professors for their students here:

<http://dailynous.com/2019/01/15/write-philosophy-paper-online-guides/>

You can also visit the University Writing Centre for tips, feedback, advice, and workshops:

https://www.dal.ca/campus_life/academic-support/writing-and-study-skills.html

Examples of Plagiarism

Suppose an essay assignment asked for an answer to the question, “Should access to the Internet be free for everyone?”

A student wants to draw on this passage in their essay (from this article: Reglitz, Merten. (2019). “The Human Right to Free Internet Access.” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* Early View: 1-18. DOI: 10.1111/japp.12395):

will argue) Internet access.

I argue that free Internet access should be considered a universal moral and human right because in a digital age it is essential for the protection and promotion of other well-established human rights. As such, the justification of this human right rests on its importance for realising, in particular, Article 19, §2, of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which states that

Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression: this right shall include

The following are examples of plagiarism, contrasted with the correct presentation.

EXPLANATION	PLAGIARISM	CORRECT
The passage from Reglitz has been copied but not attributed to the author. This presents Reglitz’s writing as if it was the student’s own. This is a kind of theft.	In this essay, I will argue that free Internet access should be considered a universal moral and human right because in a digital age it is essential for the protection and promotion of other well-established human rights.	In this essay, I will argue that everyone should have free access to the Internet. I will draw on Reglitz’s argument that “free Internet access should be considered a universal moral and human right because in a digital age it is essential for the protection and promotion of other well-established human rights” (Reglitz 2019, 3).
Paraphrased ideas must be correctly attributed. The highlighted passage is presenting Reglitz’s ideas as if they were the student’s own. This is a kind of theft.	In this essay, I will argue that everyone should have access to the Internet for free. My argument is based on the idea that other human rights, familiar from both existing charters of rights and the philosophical literature, can be better protected by granting a right to Internet access.	In this essay, I will argue that everyone should have free access to the Internet. I will draw on Reglitz’s argument that that other human rights, familiar from both existing charters of rights and the philosophical literature, can be better protected by granting a right to Internet access. (Reglitz 2019, 3).
The text copied from Reglitz has been correctly attributed, but is presented as if it was a paraphrase in the student’s own words. This is a kind of fraud.	Reglitz (2019, 3) argues that free Internet access should be considered a universal moral and human right because in a digital age it is essential for the protection and promotion of other well-established human rights.	Reglitz argues that “free Internet access should be considered a universal moral and human right because in a digital age it is essential for the protection and promotion of other well-established human rights” (2019, 3).
The cited text is too close to the original; changing only a few words is not the same as paraphrasing the author’s ideas into your own words. This is a kind of fraud.	Reglitz (2019, 3) argues that free access to the Internet is a universal moral and human right because in the information age it is necessary for the promotion and protection of other important human rights.	According to Reglitz, we should have a right to access the Internet. He argues that granting this right would enable the protection of other human rights, familiar from both existing charters of rights and the philosophical literature. (Reglitz 2019, 3).
The passage quoted from Reglitz has not been properly attributed, because the complete citation is missing in the body text and in the bibliography. An incomplete attribution is negligence.	Reglitz argues that “free Internet access should be considered a universal moral and human right.” According to Jones, a human right is [...] Works Cited Jones, A. (1987), ‘Human Rights: A Primer’. <i>The Rights Journal</i> 1.1: 1–15.	Reglitz argues that “free Internet access should be considered a universal moral and human right” (2019, 3). According to Jones, a human right is [...] Works Cited Jones, A. (1987), ‘Human Rights: A Primer’. <i>The Rights Journal</i> 1.1: 1–15. Reglitz, Merten. (2019). “The Human Right to Free Internet Access.” <i>Journal of Applied Philosophy</i> Early View: 1-18. DOI: 10.1111/japp.12395

Any of the above is a kind of *academic offence*. Your instructor is obligated to report these offences for investigation by an Academic Integrity Officer (see the [university’s discipline procedures for academic offences](#)). These examples are not exhaustive; other academic offences include having someone else write your essay (whether you pay them or not), or unauthorized collaboration.

For more information on academic integrity, see the [Libraries’ guide](#), or the [Writing Centre’s module](#), and the [university’s guidance](#).