

Tips and Traps

[Excerpted from: Lawrence M. Hinman, *Ethics: A Pluralistic Approach to Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Harcourt Brace, 1998). ©Lawrence M. Hinman 1998]

Choosing and Defining a Topic

Choose a topic you're interested in. Papers are simply a lot easier to do if you're interested in the topic you're working on, and—all other things being equal—you will do a better paper as a result.

Choose a topic that you'll get something out of. Your time is too valuable to do things that are not worth your while. If, for example, you are already clear about your position on a particular moral issue and have already thought through the arguments on both sides, you will probably learn more by doing a paper on some other moral issue that you are still perplexed or uncertain about.

Choose a topic that you can cover within the time you have available and space limits of the assignment. Don't, in other words, bite off more than you can chew.

Sit down and figure out what you believe. Sometimes it's difficult to know what your own views are, especially when you see a lot of different arguments for and against a position. If this happens, you may find it helpful simply to sit down and start to list (a) the things you think are true in regard to your topic and (b) the claims you think are false. It gives you a starting point for developing your own ideas.

Develop and continually refine your thesis. In most cases in ethics papers, you will be developing and refining a thesis, that is, a claim which you are defending through reasoned arguments. In the course of working on your thesis, you will usually find yourself narrowing it down and making it more precise, more finely textured. You might begin, for example, with some general claim that euthanasia is wrong, and gradually refine it to a much more specific thesis about the role of physicians in voluntary euthanasia for persons with very painful non-fatal diseases.

Consider the objections to your thesis. Your thesis is developed and refined through a dialogue with other thinkers about your topic. The process of considering objections to your own position and developing replies to those objections is an essential part of the intellectual life. Through this process, your own ideas become clearer and sharper. Remember to choose your topic carefully. Your time is valuable, and it is not worth doing things in life that you do not care about.

Finding Sources

There are a number of helpful sources for gaining information about material on your topic.

Talk with your reference librarians. They are often delighted to help.

Quote as little as possible. In general, when instructors are reading your paper, they are trying (among other things) to reach as informed a judgment as possible about how well

you have mastered the material under consideration. If you are able to accurately paraphrase difficult ideas instead of quoting them directly, this is much stronger evidence that you have mastered the position. If you give a long quote, the evidence that you understand it (especially if you don't then discuss the interpretation of the quote after you give it) is very weak. The longer the quote, and the shorter your discussion of it, the less likely it is that you will convince anyone that you understand it.

Some Common Pitfalls

Avoid rhetorical questions. Often we use rhetorical questions as a way of dismissing an idea. If the question is worth asking, it is worth answering. If you find yourself asking a question such as, "Who's to say what is moral?" try to answer the question. This transforms it from a question into an assertion which can then be assessed on its merits.

Avoid clichés. Sometimes we resort to stock phrases that we have heard time and again—but perhaps not really thought about. How often have you heard someone say reject an idea by claiming that "it's like saying that the end justifies the means." If you think about it for a minute, you will see that the end often justifies the means. Indeed, for pure consequentialists, it is the only thing which justifies any means. Similarly, "You can not legislate morality."

Styles of Argument

Different disciplines are characterized by different styles of writing. Most work in ethics is argumentative, sometimes even combative, in character. The usual structure of such writing is straightforward.

Show why the issue you are considering is interesting and important.

State the thesis you are defending.

Present the initial arguments in support of your thesis.

Present the major possible objections to your thesis.

Give your replies to those objections, refining your thesis in the process.

Conclude with a more refined version of your thesis and an indication of its significance.

Although a strong ethics paper will usually contain all of these elements, there is no need to follow this order rigidly.

The basic movement of this type of paper will usually be the back-and-forth movement of argument objection reply. The more precise and finely tuned that movement is, the better the paper will be. The process of presenting and replying to objections is crucial to this type of paper, for it is precisely in this dialogue with opposing viewpoints that your position is articulated.

Remember that writing papers is a process of discovery. The ultimate goal is to learn more than you knew before, to become clearer about an issue that was puzzling to you. Use your writing as an opportunity to do work that you will benefit from and to address issues that are important to you.

