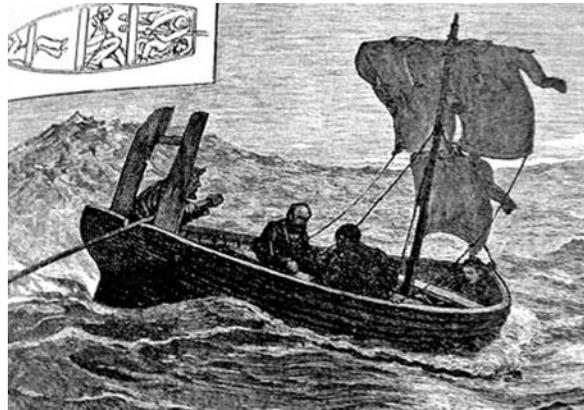


# WRITING IN ETHICAL REASONING 22: JUSTICE

Professor Michael Sandel

**THIS COURSE OFFERS** a critical analysis of selected classical and contemporary theories of justice, but it is not only about the moral reasoning of famous philosophers and political commentators. In Ethical Reasoning 22: Justice we also want to know what you have to say about theories of justice and their applications. You should be able not only to state various positions on an moral controversy, but also to determine, articulate and defend your own viewpoint. The purpose of the writing assignments in Justice is to improve your moral reasoning skills. We encourage you to build on concepts from the course texts in order to deepen your ideas and test your views against the strongest counterarguments.



“Cannibalism at Sea,” September 20, 1884, *The Illustrated London News*

## WRITING *the* TWO ANALYTIC PAPERS

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**IN THE TWO ANALYTIC PAPERS** for this course, you will be asked to respond to a contemporary moral dilemma by taking a position on the issue and defending it. Each paper topic usually includes a brief essay or article that serves as a starting point for discussion of the controversial issue.

*Justice papers are not research papers. You should not do research beyond the readings for the course and the article(s) assigned with the paper topic.*

A good paper examines the moral controversy described in the assignment, relates that controversy to larger theoretical questions, and offers some insight into how to resolve—or at least better understand—the debate. Overall, your aim should be to argue clearly for a well-supported conclusion. The following guidelines are intended to help you understand how to accomplish that goal.

## *the* THESIS STATEMENT

Your thesis should directly respond to the question asked in the assignment. It should clearly and concisely state your main argument. A strong thesis is crucial to a good paper.

*Your introduction should provide the context for your thesis. It can expand on the question that the paper will address and provide some justification for why that question is an interesting one and why your response to the question is worth considering.*

**TAKE A POSITION AND PROVIDE A REASON FOR THAT POSITION.** It might be helpful to test whether your thesis could fit into the following model: (Statement of your position) because (reason for your position). You want to avoid simply restating the paper topic without actually making an argument. If your thesis is an argument it should be arguable, which means that it should be possible for a skeptical reader to disagree with the thesis. There also should be evidence available to support your thesis.

**EVALUATE, DON'T JUST DESCRIBE.** Your thesis should be your argument not merely a description of what the theorists we have read would say about the topic. It is fine for you to take a libertarian or utilitarian position on an issue, but you then need to justify why you think that is the position that should be taken on the issue at hand.

**DON'T BE OVERLY AMBITIOUS.** Make sure that your position is something you can actually defend in a six to seven page paper. For example, you probably should not try to prove that Lockean liberalism is right or wrong, but you might be able to demonstrate that a particular moral controversy reveals a weakness in one facet of Locke's theory. Also be careful about using language that is too broad such as "the free market is always unjust" or "rights may never be infringed by the state." Such sweeping generalizations are usually uninformative and false.

**BE SPECIFIC.** A thesis that uses the general term "rights" might not be as strong as one that uses the more specific terms "inalienable rights" or "natural rights" or "property rights." These more specific concepts can help you focus your paper and keep you from having to discuss all the different versions of rights theory, which would be beyond the scope of the paper. Your thesis should encapsulate the main argument of your paper in one or two sentences so make every word count. A vague thesis is a weak start to your paper.



*Civil Rights March on Washington, DC, 1963*

*Write in first person. The argument will become more than your personal opinion through the philosophical arguments you use to justify your position. Some students try to distance themselves from their arguments by using "we" or "they" but this will lead your TF to wonder who "we" or "they" are.*

(the **THESIS STATEMENT**, CONTINUED)

**CHECK TO ENSURE YOUR THESIS FITS THE PAPER.** After you have finished writing the paper, you should check to make sure it actually argues for the position you take in your thesis and for the reasons that you give in your thesis. It often helps to rewrite your thesis after you have completed a draft of the paper, since your position may have evolved as you wrote the argument.



*National  
Anti-Suffrage  
Association*

## *the* **ARGUMENT**

In the body of your paper you will provide reasons and evidence that support your thesis, and acknowledge counterarguments to your position.

**OUTLINE YOUR ARGUMENT.** Once you have developed a position on an issue and gathered the support you need for that position outline your ideas. Even a very general outline can help keep your paper well organized as you write.

### **BREAK YOUR ARGUMENT DOWN INTO PARTS.**

If you have trouble with the organization of your papers, then you may want to break down the argument to be presented in the rest of the paper in your introductory paragraph. For example: “In order to argue that Dudley and Stephens acted wrongly in killing the boy, I will first argue that such a killing could only be justified if the boy had given consent, and then I will show that the boy was not capable of consenting to anything given the circumstances.”



*John Stuart Mill*

## **TIPS** for USING THE TEXTS *from* THE COURSE

VERY FEW excellent papers make no mention whatsoever of the thinkers that we discuss, but some good papers use the course texts as a starting point and then move into independent analysis. Other successful papers analyze in detail one or more of the theoretical approaches discussed in class.

DECIDE which theorist(s) might be relevant for your paper. Make sure you understand the theorist(s) you wish to use. It might help to consider some of these basic questions.

- *What is the theorist’s position?*
- *How does the theorist argue for that position?*
- *What are the assumptions that underlie the theorist’s position?*
- *What are the implications of the theorist’s position?*

ASK how does the theorist’s position relate to your argument. Does it help clarify a point you want to make and therefore help support your argument? Does the theorist present a counterargument to your position?

AVOID pure summary of the philosophical texts. It may be necessary to paraphrase or discuss arguments from the texts, but remember that your purpose for including them should relate to your main argument.

DO NOT mention or cite the course texts just for the purpose of mentioning or citing the texts. Make sure that the quotes you use are relevant to your argument.

(the ARGUMENT, CONTINUED)

**MAKE SURE YOU PROVIDE PHILOSOPHICAL SUPPORT FOR YOUR ARGUMENT.** Do not write a policy paper that focuses too much on the practical problems of an issue without defending an moral claim. This kind of paper may make a series of descriptive claims and then state something like “Given the way the world is, the best way to proceed is...” This kind of statement skirts principled claims about whether we shouldn’t try to change the way things work.

**DON’T JUST APPEAL TO AUTHORITY.**

If you rely on a thinker or a school of thought, you should explain why you find that view persuasive. It is perfectly valid to make a utilitarian argument, but you need to offer some reason for why we should be utilitarians. Do not simply appeal to the authority of Locke, or Kant, or Webster’s Dictionary, or even Professor Sandel.

**ACKNOWLEDGE COUNTERARGUMENTS.** You can strengthen your argument by anticipating counterarguments, even if you cannot conclusively refute them. Entertaining counterarguments shows that you are aware of alternative explanations and demonstrates your knowledge and fairness. When selecting counterarguments try to find a balance between which are the strongest and which highlight some aspect of your argument.

**ORGANIZE YOUR ARGUMENT SO THAT IT HAS A LOGICAL FLOW.** It is important that the different stages of your argument are easy for the reader to identify and understand and that the later stages of your argument follow directly from the earlier stages. Start each paragraph with a topic sentence that indicates what point that paragraph will cover. Topic sentences should also help the flow of the paper by connecting the ideas covered in each paragraph. Using transition words can help you connect your ideas (however, therefore, on the other hand, moreover, furthermore). Clear transitions will also help to avoid a laundry list style paper that lists seemingly unconnected points about an issue.

*Philosophical arguments marshal concepts, ideas, or theoretical principles in support of conclusions--as distinguished from arguments based on empirical studies, textual analyses, or emotional responses.*



*Women’s Suffrage Pageant in Washington, DC, 1913*



*“A Slave Auction in Virginia,” Illustrated London News, February 16, 1861*

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## the CONCLUSION

The concluding paragraph of your paper should remind the reader what your position is on the issue.

**MAKE A FINAL IMPRESSION.** Remember that the conclusion is the last piece of the paper that will be read.

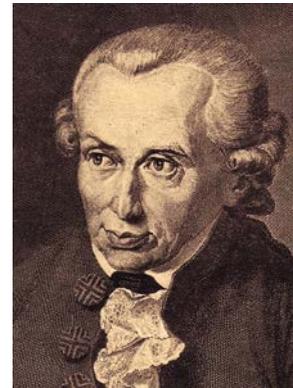
Don't waste the opportunity to make a final impact on your reader by simply summarizing your introduction again. Good conclusions often draw out interesting implications of an argument.

**REFLECT ON WHY YOUR ARGUMENT IS STRONG.** You might remind the reader why your position is strong despite the counter-arguments you discussed.

**AVOID GRANDIOSE STATEMENTS.** Do not end with claims that go beyond what you have proven in your paper. Do not speak for everyone or make sweeping claims about human experience or society or history or philosophy. Your position should be backed by philosophical argument not common experience.



John Locke (left);  
Immanuel Kant  
(below)



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## TIPS for POLISHING YOUR PAPER

**IN A PAPER** with a clear writing style, the reasons and evidence for the position are presented in a well-organized and concise fashion. Sloppy presentation or muddled language can undermine the force of your argument. Here are a few stylistic tips based on common mistakes.

**SIMPLE LANGUAGE IS GOOD.** If you tend to use long sentences, try to at least vary them with shorter sentences. When using synonyms, be sure that the words really mean what you want them to mean. Usually, synonyms have slightly different meanings.

**AVOID LONG PARAGRAPHS.** If you find yourself using long paragraphs it is often because you are including too many different thoughts into one paragraph. Try breaking up long paragraphs into shorter ones that each develop one main idea.

**CHECK YOUR GRAMMAR.** One common mistake is to start with a singular noun and then use a plural pronoun. “Is it common for a *student* who is not admitted to claim that *their* application was rejected because of *their* race?” The correct way to write this sentence is “Is it common for a *student* who is not admitted to claim that *his or her* application was rejected because of *his or her* race?” If you don't want to use “his or her,” either pluralize the original subject, in this case, changing “student” to “students” or just use “his” or “her” but then vary the use throughout the paper.

**WATCH OUT FOR MISSPELLINGS.** In particular, search through your paper for those that the spell checker does not catch. Also it is good to double check that you are spelling the philosophers' names and key concepts correctly.

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## METHODS *of* CITATION

### CHECK WITH YOUR TF.

In-text parenthetical citation with a works cited page or footnote citation is acceptable. Ask your TF if he or she has a preference for how you should cite. You can use the *Writing with Sources* booklet available at <[www.fas.harvard.edu/~expos/sources](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~expos/sources)> for help with citing sources.

### BE CONSISTENT.

Once you have chosen a citation method, then use that method, and only that method, throughout the paper.

### CITE PRIMARY SOURCES.

In this course, there are certain primary sources with standardized forms of citation that can enable readers to locate citations in different editions. In Locke, for example, there are paragraph (§) references and in

Aristotle there are line numbers noted in the margins. When citing sources like this use the standardized citation method rather than page numbers, which can differ across different editions.

### A NOTE on PLAGIARISM

*Plagiarism is the attempt to present someone else's ideas or writing as your own. Examples include submitting someone else's paper or a professional article for a grade, copying paragraphs out of a book or article or website and incorporating them into your paper without crediting the source, using someone else's ideas or argument without attributing them to that person, and quoting from an article without using quotation marks, even if the article as a whole is cited properly. These cases vary in degree of seriousness, and university penalties vary accordingly. But academic dishonesty in any form is unacceptable. For further guidance, see Writing with Sources and Writing with Internet Sources, available on the Expository Writing Program website.*

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## WRITING RESPONSE PAPERS

Most Justice students find that Kant and Aristotle are the two theorists who, initially at least, are the most difficult to understand. For the sections on Kant and Aristotle, you will be asked to write a short paper responding to a particular passage or aspect of the theory you read. The purpose of the response paper is to give you a chance to try out ideas before you have to write the analytic paper. It will also enable students to ensure that they understand the key arguments of Kant and Aristotle for the final exam.

**READ THE TEXTS CLOSELY.** The emphasis in these papers is on your understanding of concepts from the text. There is less focus on your particular view and more on interpreting the textual passage or concept.

**TRY TO BREAK DOWN THE PASSAGE OR CONCEPT.** You should start off by explaining what the passage means or defining the concept. It might help to then consider some of the following questions. What are the assumptions the theorist is making? How does this particular passage connect to the philosopher's broader theoretical claims? How does the idea compare to other concepts or ideas we have studied?



*Engineers for the  
8th New York State  
Militia, 1861*

## GENERAL CRITERIA *for* EVALUATION

### ANALYTIC PAPERS

- Topics will be announced on the course website.
- You will have one week to complete the assignment.
- Papers must be 6 pages minimum and 7 pages maximum.
- Papers should be formatted using 12 pt. font; 1-inch margins; double-spaced; page numbers.

### LATE PAPER POLICY

A late paper will be penalized 1/3 of a grade for every 24 hours it is late.

### EXTENSION POLICY

Only Head TFs can grant extensions. They will only be given for the most compelling reasons (such as severe illness or death in the family) and should be requested in advance, if possible. A heavy workload, or another assignment due the same day is not sufficient grounds for an extension.

### EVALUATION

*Your TF will consider the following questions when evaluating your paper:*

- Does the paper take an arguable position on the issue and offer a thoughtful defense of that position?
- Does the paper demonstrate an understanding of the relevant philosophical theories and concepts?
- Is the writing effective? Does it clearly communicate the writer's argument?
- Does the paper anticipate and reply to the most important objections to its thesis?

### RESPONSE PAPERS

- TFs will assign the topics in section.
- The paper should be 1 page minimum and 2 pages maximum.
- Your TF will set the due date.
- You will receive a  $\sqrt{+}$ ,  $\sqrt{}$ , or  $\sqrt{-}$ .
- The response papers are considered as part of your overall class participation grade.



## GETTING HELP

### FRIENDS

You are encouraged to discuss the paper topics with other students and anyone else of your choosing. Remember, however, that your work must be your own.

### TEACHING FELLOWS

Your TF has office hours where you can discuss the papers. Your TF will look at your introductory paragraph or a one page outline but not a rough draft of the paper.

### THE WRITING CENTER

[www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr)

Barker Center 019

617-495-1655

The Writing Center offers individual assistance to students who would like to work closely with trained undergraduate tutors on the structure, focus, and clarity of essays, research papers, and senior theses. Students should access the Writing Center website to make an appointment or call for more information.

### BUREAU OF STUDY COUNCIL

[www.fas.harvard.edu/~bsc](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~bsc)

5 Linden Street

617-495-2581

The Bureau of Study Council offers students academic and psychological support through counseling, consulting, and other services. The Bureau offers group workshops, peer tutoring, and the Harvard Course in Reading Strategies.

### HARVARD GUIDE TO USING SOURCES

<http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu>

This website offers students information on integrating sources into a paper, deciding when to cite, choosing a citation style, and avoiding plagiarism.

### HOUSE WRITING TUTORS

Several Harvard houses have resident or non-resident writing tutors who hold regular office hours to help students with their writing. Contact your resident dean to find out if your house has a writing tutor.



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