

# Guide to Writing a Glassen Ethics Competition Essay

Your essay will be evaluated according to the following criteria: quality and depth of thought, organization of ideas, clarity of expression and, importantly, fair-minded consideration of the issues. This guide will help you meet these criteria in your essay.

You are not required to do any reading or research to write your essay. If you do use ideas from other sources, they must be properly referenced. [Give references whenever you directly quote someone. But you also must give references whenever you borrow someone else's ideas or describe her or his view, *even if you do not quote directly*.] Failure to reference someone else's ideas is plagiarism and will result in disqualification.

## 1. THINKING

The outcome of your reflections on your chosen question should be a *thesis* — an answer to the question that involves your taking a stand on the issues it raises. You should be able to encapsulate your thesis in a *thesis statement*, a sentence of the form “In this essay, I will argue that [your thesis here].” You have not yet formulated a thesis if you say something uncontroversial, something that anyone who has thought about the question could say. Your thesis has to put forward your own particular perspective on the relevant issue in such a way that you will have to defend it against those who might disagree with you.

Here is an example of a thesis statement on a question about the moral significance of human cloning: “I will argue that human reproductive cloning is no more objectionable than having genetically identical twins.” Notice that this claim is somewhat controversial; some people might think that there *is* something morally objectionable about cloning human beings. **The author of this claim owes us an argument in favour of her or his position.** But the following is *not* a thesis statement: “I will argue in what follows that Mr. Hopsalot is opposed to any manipulation of genetic material for the purposes of human cloning.” Anyone who reads Hopsalot's argument already knows that this is his position, so it is not at all controversial to say that this is his view. The statement simply describes for us a point made by someone else. A thesis statement must present the essay writer's own distinct view.

In coming up with a thesis, a starting point for your reflections might be your initial reactions to the essay question. But good philosophical writing works to articulate further one's justifying reasons. What is the cause of your reactions? *Why* should people who have different reactions from yours take your view seriously? What could you appeal to in an attempt to convince them to agree with you? Asking these questions may force you to reformulate your initial reactions. Eventually, your thinking should lead you not only to a thesis, but also to an *argument* in support of the thesis.

Coming up with a thesis and an argument in support of it may take time. Think about your first reactions to the issues raised by the question, rather than rushing toward your conclusion.

A clearly presented thesis is the heart of your essay. Only an essay with both a clearly presented thesis and a strong, well- rounded and original argument will receive a high evaluation. Once a thesis and argument have been clearly presented, they need to be examined critically and carefully. What are the strongest and most reasonable criticisms

which could be made against your thesis? What is the best response to these objections? If you consider a number of arguments, which of these do you think present stronger and which present weaker points to consider? Why do you think this way? **Good philosophical writing is, above all, fair-minded and able to anticipate and discuss the quality of arguments both for and against the writer's main thesis.**

## 2. ORGANIZING YOUR ESSAY CONTENT

How should you present your thesis? Organize your thoughts in such a way that someone who doesn't initially agree with you will have reason to come to see things your way. To do this, you will have to lead your reader step by step through an *argument* that supports your claim. To get clearer on your argument, it may help to make a point-form outline of your response to the question before you write. The *logical* organization of ideas is critical to effective communication.

Assume your readers are intelligent people who have some awareness of the issues, but who do not know what question you have chosen for your essay — this means you have to explain to them what you will try to do in your essay and why. *Your introduction should include your thesis statement.* Let the reader know by the end of the first paragraph what you plan to argue for in the essay.

In developing your argument, make sure to consider how a critic might object to your thesis. How would you respond to these concerns? Present your best response to these objections. Conclude your essay with a **brief** summary of what you have taken yourself to have accomplished in the essay.

## 3. WRITING YOUR ESSAY

Finally, you must write your response in careful, clear, concise language. Aim for a formal but conversational tone. Grammatical or spelling errors should be avoided; these sorts of mistakes detract from your argument and can make it harder for your reader to understand what you are trying to say.

There is no need to avoid using the first person. You are allowed to write: "I will argue in what follows that..." or "An objection to my view might be..."

You are encouraged to write several drafts of your essay. Even though the reading-thinking-organizing-writing steps have been described here as if they are always undertaken in just this order, you may not really have a clear idea of what your thesis is until you have tried to write a draft of the essay.

Once you have what you take to be a close-to-final draft, share it with some friends or your sponsoring teacher or librarian to see if a reader can follow your thoughts. This sort of feedback is important because when we write up our own ideas we often take for granted things that others might not find obvious.

It can be very challenging to write a clear, concise, interesting essay. Writing is never easy. Be prepared to work at it. A successful result, however, can be most satisfying. Good luck.