

Developing good objections

Homework

Submit all homework assignments on Canvas as a Word (.doc or .docx) file. So that I can grade anonymously, **please do not include your name** or any other identifying information.

In addition, some exercises include a word limit or word range. For these exercises, strive for concision and simplicity (while still using complete sentences), and **include a word count** for each of your answers.

Exercise 1. Carefully review my comments on your previous homework submission, as well as the answer key.

- (a) What are the most important mistakes that you made? If you did not make any mistakes on the homework, instead tell me the most important mistakes that you made in seminar. (Range: 30-60 words.)
- (b) What specific strategies can you use to avoid such mistakes in the future? Remember to apply these strategies to the rest of this homework! (Range: 30-60 words.)

Exercise 2. Carefully review my comments on your paper, as well as the sample papers.

- (a) Tell me how long you spent reading and digesting my comments on your paper. (You should spend at least 15 minutes doing this.)

I spent __ minutes on this task.

- (b) What is the most important mistake that you made in your paper? What is one specific strategy that you can use to avoid this mistake on your next paper? (Range: 30-75 words.)
- (c) What is one important lesson that you learned from the sample papers? Be as specific as possible, and make sure to focus on a lesson that you can apply to your next paper. (Range: 30-60 words.)

Exercise 3. According to Polemarchus, justice consists in helping one's friends and harming one's enemies. Socrates raises an objection to this definition that runs from 335b-336a. Summarize Socrates' objection. (Range: 22-35 words.)

Note. In seminar, we will also examine Thrasymachus' view that justice is the advantage of the stronger, and Socrates' objection to that view. Thus, I encourage you to read this section of the text very carefully.

In this handout, you will begin to learn how to develop good objections to arguments. In outline, the procedure is this:

1. Diagram the original argument, making sure to identify the argument form and to clarify the meanings of any technical terms.
2. Identify the interpersonal evidence for each premise of the original argument.
3. Write down whatever objection occurs to you.
4. Identify precisely which starting premise or inference your objection targets.
5. Check whether your objection is well-supported by interpersonal evidence. If not, set it aside and return to step 3.
6. Think carefully about whether the argument that you are targeting can be repaired so as to avoid your objection. If so, then write down this repaired version of the argument and return to step 2. If not, then you have developed a strong objection!
7. Use appropriate language to express your objection.

But before we consider these steps in detail, there is a great secret that you should be aware of: *the overwhelming majority of the objections that occur to you will be bad ones*. That is not only because you are a student! I have been doing philosophy for more than a decade, and most of the objections that I develop are also no good.

Thus, when you use the procedure above, you should pay special attention to the steps that winnow away bad objections: steps 5 and 6. Indeed, you can expect to discard 3-5 (or more!) *bad objections* before you arrive at a single good objection. To put the same point the other way around: if you settle on the first or second objection that occurs to you, then your objection is probably no good.

Bearing this in mind, let us examine the procedure more carefully. You have already learned how to do steps 1-2 in previous handouts, so we can move directly to:

Step 3. Write down whatever objection occurs to you.

There is no need to get hung up on this. Your objection does not have to be good! Just get an idea on paper.

Step 4. Identify precisely which starting premise or inference your objection targets.

There are only two fully illuminating types of objections to an argument:

1. Objections to a *starting premise* of the argument – represented in an argument diagram by a number that does *not* have an arrow leading to it.
2. Objections to an *inference* in the argument – represented in an argument diagram by an arrow.

Note that there is a third type of objection to an argument: you can object directly to the conclusion of an argument, or to a claim that is *not* a starting premise.¹ But I

¹ Technically, there are other possibilities. For example, you might select two premises and argue that *at least one of them* is false, without identifying just which premise is false. But we can set aside such complications for now.

encourage you *not* to use objections of this third type. For such objections may reveal that an argument is mistaken, but they cannot show *precisely where the argument first goes wrong*. You can do this, however, when you successfully object to a starting premise or inference.²

But when can you object to a premise of an argument, and when can you object to an inference? Some of the arguments that we will consider in this seminar can be expressed using argument forms that are *logically valid*, meaning that if the premises are true, then the conclusion must also be true as a matter of logical necessity.³ For example, *modus ponens*, *modus tollens*, and argument by elimination are all logically valid forms of argument. When you are objecting to a logically valid argument form, you should only object to a premise of the argument. However, other argument forms that we have studied, including inference to the best explanation, are not logically valid. In these cases, you may still object to a premise, but you may also object to the inference. For example, in the case of inference to the best explanation, you might object that the conclusion is *not* what best explains the premises.

By the way, be warned that students often have trouble identifying precisely which premise or inference their objection is targeting. Students often identify the wrong premise or inference. They also sometimes think that their objection targets multiple premises of an argument, but that is very rarely the case. So take your time when you attempt to identify the precise target of your objection.

Step 5. Check whether your objection is well-supported by interpersonal evidence. If not, set it aside and return to step 3.

Especially when you first begin to develop objections, you will find that you often rely on evidential claims that are difficult to verify. But this is not helpful, since it is not clear that such claims are true. Thus, make sure to rely on evidential claims that almost anyone can verify.

Also make sure to avoid wimpy objections. For example, avoid saying that a premise “is not necessarily true,” “might not be true,” or “cannot be proved.” Strong evidential support, not proof, is the proper standard. Thus, as a default, try to give substantial evidence that a premise is *false*, or that an inference is *poor*.

To repeat something said above: this is one of the two steps that students often skip. But, if you are doing things properly, then carrying out this step will take you a great deal of time and will cause you to discard many of your objections.

Step 6. Think carefully about whether the argument that you are targeting can be repaired so as to avoid your objection. If so, then write down this repaired version of the argument and return to step 2. If not, then you have developed a strong objection!

Philosophy is very different from debate: your primary interest is not to win the argument, but rather to discover the truth and to understand your opponent’s perspective. Thus, you should not stop when you discover a good objection to a particular version of your opponent’s argument. Instead, you must make sure that you have engaged with the *best* version of your opponent’s argument.

² Of course, an argument might also contain several independent errors.

³ The term “deductively valid” means the same thing.

To repeat something said above: this is the second of the two steps that students often skip. But, if you are doing things properly, then carrying out this step will take you a great deal of time and will cause you to discard many of your objections.

Step 7. Use appropriate language to express your objection.

Students often express their objections by saying, “Just because x does not mean that y .” But this locution is inappropriately colloquial for academic writing.

To appropriately express an objection to a *premise*, you might instead say:

- “Premise 1 is false because ...”
- “There is strong evidence against the claim that x . In particular,”

To appropriately express an objection to an *inference*, you might instead say:

- “The claim that x is poor evidence that y . For/After all,”
- “The claim that x provides little reason to believe that y . For/After all,”
- “Even if x , y may very well be false. For/After all,”

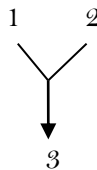
Opportunities for practice. It takes a lot of practice to become fluent with this procedure. But do not worry! You will get regular practice in seminar. In addition, some homework and warm-up exercises will allow you to develop your own objections. These are excellent opportunities for you to practice using this procedure.

Warm-up exercises

Complete the following exercise and submit your answer on Canvas as a Word (.doc or .docx) file. Some exercises include a word limit or word range. For these exercises, strive for concision and simplicity (while still using complete sentences), and **include a word count** for each of your answers. So that I can grade anonymously, **please do not include your name** or any other identifying information.

Warm-up 1. From 353e-354a, Socrates offers the following argument:

1. Justice is the defining characteristic of an excellent person.
2. If justice is the defining characteristic of an excellent person, then a just person will be happy.
3. A just person will be happy.



(Notice that I have substantially rephrased this argument for readability – you should do the same!) In this exercise, you will practice the procedure for developing good objections.

- (a) I have already completed step 1 of this procedure for you, so move directly to step 2: identify the interpersonal evidence for each premise. Make sure to carefully reread the relevant section of the text before attempting this. (Limit: 25 words per premise.)
- (b) Per step 3, brainstorm two objections to Socrates' argument. For the sake of concision, you may use expressions like "premise 1" and "premise 2." (Limit: 25 words per objection.)
- (c) For *each* of these objections, complete the remainder of the procedure for developing good objections. Concisely write down your reasoning at each step. (No word limit.)

I estimate that this exercise should take you 45-90 minutes. If you have spent less time than that, then you have almost certainly been too hasty!