

Writing a basic introduction and conclusion

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.)

Note. This reading is especially difficult. Just do your best on the following exercises!

Exercise 2. In his *Gītābhāṣya*, Śaṅkara argues that “Effects such as pots are non-existent because they are not apprehended before or after their production or destruction” (p. 3). Diagram this brief argument. Use an argument form that we have studied, and make sure to use language that is precise, concise, and ordinary. Also remember to include both a numbered list of claims and a picture with an arrow.

Exercise 3. In his *Gītābhāṣya*, Śaṅkara claims that we can always apprehend existence itself. He then considers the objection that “When there is a pot that is destroyed, and there is an apprehension of a pot which fluctuates, the apprehension of existence fluctuates, too” (p. 4). Explain his response to this objection. (Range: 25-40 words.)

Reading

The purpose of a basic introduction is to furnish the reader with all of the materials necessary for understanding what the paper’s central thesis is, what evidence supports it, and why it matters. For example, a basic introduction might concisely outline the philosophical issue at hand and then situate the thesis of the paper in a historical or dialectical context.

I offer you three rules of thumb for writing an introduction.

1. Keep it snappy! Your papers in this seminar are very short, so you should minimize the amount of space taken up by your introduction.
2. Avoid unsupported generalizations, especially those introduced by phrases such as “since the dawn of time” or “human beings have always wondered.”

3. Do not make a historical claim unless you are certain that it is accurate. For example, do not say, “Kongzi was the first philosopher to develop a systematic understanding of the role of ritual in governance.”

Now consider this sample basic introduction built around the thesis (which I do not in fact endorse) that *the purpose of human existence is to pass on one’s DNA*:

What is the purpose of human existence? According to one classic view, endorsed by Kongzi,¹ human beings are essentially social creatures with the corresponding purpose of fulfilling certain communal roles. On an opposing view, however, human beings have a purpose set by a transcendent external source – by the Form of the Good according to Plato², or by the supreme deity Krishna according to the author of the *Bhagavad Gita*.³ In this paper, I reject both of these approaches in favor of a scientifically grounded answer. In particular, I will argue on the basis of the biological theory of natural selection that the purpose of human existence is to pass on one’s DNA. I will then show that since society and any possible transcendent external source are both independent from human biology, they cannot determine the purpose of human existence.

Let’s analyze this introduction carefully. I begin by introducing the central question:

What is the purpose of human existence?

The question does not require much explanation, so I do not waste time elaborating on it. I am especially carefully to avoid pontificating remarks like “Since the dawn of time, human beings have wondered about the purpose of existence.”

To contextualize my thesis, I then briskly review some central answers to this question by other philosophers (of course citing my sources). I sketch only the broad outlines of their positions, reserving nuanced discussion for the body of the paper:

According to one classic view, endorsed by Kongzi,⁴ human beings are essentially social creatures with the corresponding purpose of fulfilling certain communal roles. On an opposing view, however, human beings have a purpose set by a transcendent external source – by the Form of the Good according to Plato⁵, or by the supreme deity Krishna according to the author of the *Bhagavad Gita*.⁶

I then situate my thesis relative to these historical views:

In this paper, I reject both of these approaches in favor of a scientifically grounded answer.

¹ Ivanhoe, P. and van Norden, B. (2001). “The Analects.” In *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett).

² Cooper, J. (2002). *Phaedo*. In *Five Dialogues* (Hackett: Indianapolis).

³ Miller, B. (1986/2004). *The Bhagavad Gita* (Bantam: New York).

⁴ Ivanhoe, P. and van Norden, B. (2001). “The Analects.” In *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett).

⁵ Cooper, J. (2002). *Phaedo*. In *Five Dialogues* (Hackett: Indianapolis).

⁶ Miller, B. (1986/2004). *The Bhagavad Gita* (Bantam: New York).

The remainder of the introduction covers familiar territory. I state my thesis and summarize my supporting evidence, signposting clearly in each case:

In particular, I will argue on the basis of the biological theory of natural selection that the purpose of human existence is to pass on one's DNA.

And finally I signpost that I will critically discuss the views of my opponents, and I outline the evidence that leads me to reject their views:

I will then show that since society and any possible transcendent external source are both independent from human biology, they cannot determine the purpose of human existence.

Now turn to the basic conclusion, which aims to review the central argumentative thread of the paper. Here you should briefly restate your thesis and evidence from a new angle, taking advantage of the fact that the reader has now seen your argument in full detail. As in your introduction, take care to avoid generalizations which you cannot support. Here is an example:

In short, I have argued that evolution plays the role which others have erroneously attributed to society or to transcendent external factors. Human beings owe nothing to society and were not created by any deity. Evolution, however, has shaped the human animal for the end of transmitting genes, an end which gives our lives the only purposes they will ever have.

Remember to display these skills in your final essay!

Warm-up exercises

First complete all but the last of these exercises on your own. Then check your answers against the answer key that is included at the end of this handout, and use what you have learned to complete the last exercise. Finally, submit all of your answers on Canvas as a Word (.doc or .docx) file.

Some exercises include a word limit or word range. On these exercises, strive for concision and simplicity (while still using complete sentences), and **include a word count**. So that I can grade anonymously, **please do not include your name** or any other identifying information.

Note. Again, this reading is especially difficult. Just do your best on the following exercises!

Warm-up 1. According to Śaṅkara, there is no genuine duality; genuinely speaking there is only one thing – existence, which is identical to God. In his *Gītābhāṣya*, Rāmānuja offers a series of arguments against this view. One of Rāmānuja's arguments is this: "... for the supreme being and the current succession of teachers, if we assume that the cognition of difference continues on, despite their certainty about the self's non-dual form, to whom do they teach non-duality in conformity with their own certainty?"

Diagram this argument using an argument form that we have studied. Make sure to use language that is precise, concise, and ordinary. Also remember to include both a numbered list of claims and a picture with an arrow.

Warm-up 2. Explain why each premise of the above argument is plausible. To save space, you may simply use expressions like “premise 1” and “premise 2.” (Range: 40-60 words.)

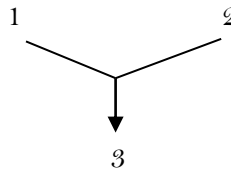
Warm-up 3. Carefully review the answer key for the warm-up exercises. Then answer the following questions.

- (a) What are the most important mistakes that you made? If you did not make any mistakes, then instead reflect on the most important mistakes that you recently made in seminar. (Range: 30-60 words.)
- (b) What specific strategies can you use to avoid these mistakes in the future? (Range: 30-60 words.)

Sample answers to warm-up exercises

Warm-up 1.

- 1. If there is no genuine duality, then God teaches himself that there is no genuine duality.
- 2. God does not teach himself that there is no genuine duality.
- 3. There is genuine duality.



Warm-up 2. Explain why each premise of the above argument is plausible. To save space, you may simply use expressions like “premise 1” and “premise 2.” (Range: 40-60 words.)

Premise 1 is plausible because Krishna (God) teaches Arjuna the metaphysical nature of the universe. But if there is no genuine duality, then Krishna *is* Arjuna, so Krishna teaches himself.

Premise 2 is plausible because Krishna is all-knowing, so he cannot be taught anything. (44 words)