

Precision; explaining an idea

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. In the first three paragraphs of *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7, Aristotle argues for a conclusion regarding the final good of action. Diagram (rather than merely stating) that argument. Use exactly three claims – two premises and one conclusion. Remember to include both a numbered list of claims and a picture with an arrow.

Exercise 3. Briefly explain why each of the two premises is plausible. Make sure to remember what you have learned about how to evaluate a conditional claim! Also, to save space, you may simply use expressions like “claim 1” and “claim 2.” (Range: 70-100 words.)

Reading

In this handout, you will begin to learn how to express your ideas precisely, and also how to give illuminating explanations.

Part 1. Precision

An idea may be expressed imprecisely in two main ways: it may be expressed in vague rather than specific terms, or it may be expressed in specific but incorrect terms. It is especially common for students to use imprecise metaphors and prepositions.

Here are some examples of imprecise writing, together with suggestions for revision.

1. Because of this, Nietzsche’s reasoning totally falls apart.

Problems:

- The term “this” refers to a previous claim or idea, but the writer does not specify *which* claim or idea.
- The term “totally” indicates that the reasoning fails in some especially extreme way, but the writer is likely exaggerating.
- The phrase “falls apart” expresses a vague metaphor. The writer intends to suggest that there is an error in Nietzsche’s reasoning, but the nature of the error is unclear.

Revised sentence:

1*. Because Nietzsche’s argument relies on a false assumption, his conclusion is evidentially unsupported.

2. Ibn Tufayl says that God is good. This means that we should do whatever God says.

Problems:

- The writer falsely suggests that the claim that God is good has the same meaning as the claim that we should do whatever God says. Indeed, students often mistakenly use the phrase “this means that” to refer to evidential relations.
- The writer refers to what God *says*, but in the relevant passage Ibn Tufayl does not mention the literal speech of God.

Revised sentence:

2*. Ibn Tufayl reasons that since God is good, we should obey God’s will.

3. For Aristotle, the city shapes our meanings as human beings, but his argument about this is false.

Problems:

- “For Aristotle” is a vague expression.
- The sentence contains metaphors – “shapes,” “meanings” – that are not only incompatible, but also vague.
- The preposition “about” is vague: it does not indicate the precise relationship between Aristotle’s argument and the referent of “this.”
- The word “this” has no clear referent.
- An argument cannot be true or false; only a claim can be true or false.

Revision:

3*. According to Aristotle, someone is fully human only if she lives in a city. But Aristotle’s argument for this conclusion is unsound.

Finally, recall the following heuristic that you have already learned: **you should typically express claims using *that*-clauses instead of prepositional phrases.** For example, avoid saying:

4. I disagree with Mozi's view about music.

Instead say:

4*. I disagree with Mozi's view that musical performances are wrong.

Part 2. Explanation

Here you will learn one method for explaining an idea – perhaps a concept, a theme, an interpretation, or an argument. But let us begin by noticing what *not* to do: **do not explain what is obvious.** In particular, many students confuse *repetition* with explanation. However, merely repeating what an author has said in slightly different language is just a waste of space. Consider:

I will now explain Laozi's claim that "A Way that can be followed is not a constant way."¹ Laozi uses the metaphor of a Way, by which he means to refer to a path or avenue of some sort. His idea is that this path is not constant; instead it is changing, malleable, unfixed.

The "explanation" above effectively has *no substance whatsoever* – it tells the reader nothing that she would not find in a thesaurus – and should be cut. To avoid giving such pseudo-explanations, make sure that every explanation you offer either is itself non-obvious or is helpful for supporting a further non-obvious claim. Cut any explanation that does not meet these criteria.

But if your job is not to paraphrase claims, then what is it? What I recommend is that you explain each of the following (usually, but not always, in this order), while citing evidence for your claims as appropriate:

1. What the idea means.
2. How the idea is supported by assumptions and/or evidence.
3. Why the idea matters in the context of your paper.

Let us see how you might use this method to explain Laozi's remark that "A Way that can be followed is not a constant way."²

Step 1. Identify any terms whose meaning is not obvious: certainly "Way" falls into this category, and *perhaps* "followed" and "constant" do as well. Tell your reader what these terms mean, and give evidence for your interpretation as necessary:

Laozi posits the existence of the *Way*, a mystical principle that has both metaphysical and ethical components. On the metaphysical side, the Way generates all of reality. Thus Laozi describes the Way as "the beginning of Heaven and earth,"³ where Heaven and earth are understood as comprising everything that exists. On the ethical side, however, the Way also determines how all creatures, including human beings, ought to live. It is

¹ Laozi (2001, p. 163).

² Laozi (2001, p. 163).

³ Ibid. [Note: "Ibid" means "same." Use this term to indicate that the current citation is exactly the same as the previous one.]

in this sense that the Way can be followed at all – it makes little sense to speak of following a purely metaphysical principle.

Yet Laozi believes that the Way, insofar as it is an ethical principle, is not constant.⁴ In other words, it cannot be expressed in simple rules. It is for this reason, among others, that he compares the Way to unhewn wood.⁵ Unlike neatly chopped wood, unhewn wood has a surface distinguished by countless ridges, bumps, and other irregularities. Similarly, Laozi thinks, the content of the Way *qua* ethical principle cannot be captured in simple rules, such as a blanket prohibition against music.

Step 2. Now that you have explained the ethical principle that Laozi endorses, tell your reader why Laozi finds this ethical principle plausible:

Laozi opposes simple ethical rules partly because he believes that they are inadequate as a response to an extraordinarily complex reality. As Laozi puts it, “Something things lead and sometimes they follow ... sometimes they are strong and sometimes they are weak”⁶ Given that reality itself is not constant, we must attend to nuance: in some situations, music-making (for example) might be an outlet for grief or joy, while in other situations it might be a mere extravagance.

Step 3. Tell your reader why Laozi’s view matters, *in the context of your paper*. If your paper is comparing the ethical positions of various Chinese thinkers, then you might begin by saying:

Thus, Laozi’s position on ethical rules is the diametrical opposite of Mozi’s.

And then you might launch into a discussion of Mozi’s position. Or, if your paper is explaining the connection between the Way, *qua* ethical principle, and the role of the ruler, you might begin by saying:

Laozi’s view on the role of the ruler is an extension of his view of the Way, *qua* ethical principle.

And off you go.

One last tip: use plenty of *concise signposts* to indicate what you are doing at each point of your explanation. Here are some signposts worth remembering:

1. When you are explaining what an idea means: *in other words, that is, for example*.
2. When you are explaining how an idea is supported by assumptions and or/evidence: *for, so, since, because, thus, therefore*.
3. When you are explaining why an idea matters in the context of your essay: *thus, notice that, observe that, from this, this matters because, this is significant because*.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, p. 178. [Note: Here is another way that you can use the term “ibid.” This usage indicates that only the page number has changed from the previous citation.]

⁶ Laozi (2001, p. 177).

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.

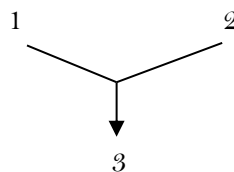
Some exercises include a word limit or word range. On these exercises, strive for concision and simplicity (while still using complete sentences), and **include a word count**. So that I can grade anonymously, **please do not include your name** or any other identifying information.

Warm-up 1. Consider the following imprecise sentences. Revise each one, making sure to draw on your knowledge of the text to add details as necessary. Note that if you have done this well, then your revised sentence(s) will be *much* longer than the original versions! When you are done, check your answers against the sample answers at the end of this handout.

- (a) Mengzi says human nature is innately good. But what about the problem of bad people? (Range: 30-45 words.)
- (b) From this, Xunzi goes on to his idea on ritual. (Range: 18-30 words.)
- (c) Zhuangzi talks a lot about how morality is all over the place because of all the different factors out there. (Range: 24-36 words.)

Warm-up 2. In *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7, Aristotle offers this argument:

1. If something has a final function of doing F , then what is best for that thing is to do F .⁷
2. Human beings have a final function of exercising rationality.⁸
3. What is best for human beings is to exercise rationality.



Brainstorm an objection to premise 1 and an objection to premise 2. Remember to identify the interpersonal evidence for each premise and for each objection, though you should not list these pieces of evidence here. (Limit: 28 words per objection – 56 words in total.)

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

⁷ "... for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function ..."
(Ross 2019, p. 11).

⁸ "... may one lay it down that man similarly has a function ...? There remains, then, an active life of the element that has reason ..." (ibid).

- (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. Consider the following imprecise sentences. Revise each one, making sure to draw on your knowledge of the text to add details as necessary. Note that if you have done this well, then your revised sentence(s) will be *much* longer than the original versions! When you are done, check your answers against the sample answers at the end of this handout.

- (a) Mengzi says human nature is innately good. But what about the problem of bad people? (Range: 30-45 words.)

Mengzi claims that human nature is good. However, something that is naturally good should not usually develop into something bad. Thus, Mengzi's claim is undermined by the fact that there are so many bad people. (35 words)

- (b) From this, Xunzi goes on to his idea on ritual. (Range: 18-30 words.)

After arguing that human nature is bad, Xunzi suggests that rituals are an important means for us to correct our bad natures. (22 words)

- (c) Zhuangzi talks a lot about how morality is all over the place because of all the different factors out there. (Range: 24-36 words.)

Zhuangzi holds that the correct moral theory is too complicated to be expressed in human language, for virtue is a matter of responding to highly context-specific features.

(We will discuss warm-up 2 in seminar. But make sure that you introduced your objection by saying something like, "My objection to premise 1 is that")