

Explaining an idea

EXPLAINING AN IDEA

Here you will learn some techniques for explaining an idea – usually a concept or a claim. But first remember 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 explanatory 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.

Step 1: Clarify what the idea means.

Here are some techniques that are often useful for clarifying the meaning of an idea. First, you can *clarify the meanings of any technical terms* (including any apparently ordinary terms that are in fact being used in a technical way). Note that a technical term should be italicized when it is first introduced, but an ordinary font should be used from then on. For example:

A *perceptual experience* is simply a perception, illusion, or hallucination.

Second, you can *illustrate the idea with a concrete example*. Typically, your examples should be brief; they should be ordinary and easily understood; and they should not include distracting details. For instance:

According to Susanna Siegel, some perceptual experiences can be rational or irrational in and of themselves. Suppose, for example, that I have an irrational fear of snakes, which in turn causes me to perceive a garden hose as a snake. Then, according to Siegel, my perceptual experience of the garden hose would inherit the irrationality of my fear; my perceptual experience itself be irrational.

¹ Laozi (2001, p. 163).

Third, you can clarify an idea using both negative and positive terms: first you can explain what the idea does *not* mean, and then you can explain what the idea *does* mean. This is especially useful when there is a natural but mistaken way to understand the idea:

Descartes famously argues that it is certain that the self exists. But the Cartesian notion of the self is not the ordinary notion – it is not the notion of a human being, an animal, or even a material body. Rather, the Cartesian notion of the self is the notion of anything that engages in mental activity.

Of course, you do not need to use all of these techniques every time that you clarify the meaning of an idea. You will need to exercise judgment as to which techniques are appropriate. But bear in mind this heuristic: the more difficult an idea is to understand, the more clarification you should give; conversely, the easier an idea is to understand, the less clarification you should give.

Pulling all of this together, here is how we might clarify the meaning of Laozi's remark that "[a] Way that can be followed is not a constant way."² Look for applications of each of the three techniques just mentioned:

Laozi posits the existence of the *Way*. This is not a literal path; rather, it is 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 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: Explain how the idea is supported by assumptions and/or evidence.

Now that you have clarified 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, "Sometimes things lead and sometimes they follow ... sometimes they are strong

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.]

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.]

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: Explain why the idea 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 clarifying 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 paper: *thus, notice that, observe that, from this, this matters because, this is significant because.*

⁶ Laozi (2001, p. 177).