

### **Some Questions to Ask Yourself about Your Paper**

Before you turn in a paper, review your writing with these questions in mind:

#### Organization

Does my introduction give the reader an accurate picture of the issues I will discuss and the conclusions at which I will arrive? Does it set up an interesting problem that I will address in my discussion? Have I stated my thesis?

Is my thesis a response to the paper topic? Is the thesis clear and substantive, rather than vague and trivial? Do I directly address the issues raised in the topic?

Does my division of the material into sections and paragraphs reflect the way in which the material naturally is divided into separate ideas and topics? Would it help to divide the paper into sections?

Does each paragraph have a clear point? Do the other sentences in the paragraph have a clear bearing on that point? Do I sometimes do too much or too little with a paragraph?

Is it clear how each paragraph relates to those surrounding it? Do I supply the reader with transitions to ease the passage from one idea to the next?

Does the conclusion adequately summarize the point I am making? Does it merely repeat what I have said already, or does it end on an original note?

#### Evidence

Have I supplied convincing evidence and argument for the different points I wish to make? Am I relying too much on assertion without defense?

Who is my audience? Have I adequately explained the concepts I am relying on for that audience?

Are there assumptions I am making that my audience may not share? Should I acknowledge this?

If I am using the texts of others, have I supplied quotations and citations to show that I am interpreting them correctly? Are the relevance and meaning of the quoted material explained in my own words?

Are there plausible objections to my argument? Should I consider some objections and provide my response to them? Should I modify my conclusion/thesis given these objections and my response?

#### Style

Have I presented my ideas in the form of an *argument* for my conclusion? Have I avoided writing a book report on someone else's ideas?

Are my sentences clear and easy to follow? Are they so complicated or convoluted that the reader will have a difficult time following them? Could I shorten some of the sentences and still express the idea?

Do I use awkward phrasing? Do the sentences sound right? (Here's where reading aloud helps.)

Have I avoided passive voice constructions ("It is argued that...")? Are my verbs active and interesting? Do I use forms of "to be" too much?

Is my personality reflected in my writing? Does the work sound impersonal, like anyone could have written it?

Is my style repetitive? Do I use the same words or the same sentence structure repeatedly?

Have I avoided clichés (e.g. "Throughout time philosophers have argued...")?

**Assignment: Assess the following argument:**

1. In every voluntary action the agent acts on his or her own motive.
2. All motives aim at the attainment of some good.
3. In every voluntary action, therefore, the agent aims at the attainment of his or her own good.
4. An action in which one aims at the attainment of one's own good is a selfish action.
5. Therefore, every voluntary action is selfish.

**Bad Paper Example**

Since the beginning of time, man has searched for the answers to the most deep philosophical questions. One deep question is the nature of selfishness and human motives. Many philosophers have asked, "Is every voluntary act selfish?" Some have even given arguments for this conclusion. One argument is the one given in our paper assignment. But this argument is false and wrong. It can never work because the premises are false.

I believe that not all people are selfish. People often do good things and are caring for one another. My parents raised me to be caring and taught me the difference between right and wrong. One thing which I learned is right is that people should not be selfish. People have the capacity to help each other and helping is always unselfish. If people were selfish, how could we live together as we do in harmony with people doing such good things for each other? Humans were not made to always be selfish! I believe that the argument is wrong because of the reasons I have stated.

The premises must be false in this argument since as I have just shown the argument is wrong. Also, premise (b) is faulty. The dictionary tells us that a motive is "An impulse, as an emotion, desire, or psychological need, acting as incitement to action." Nowhere here does it say that motives aim at the attainment of some good. Why would someone think that? It is ludicrous and crazy, and shows that probably the author is selfish.

I believe that people are good and I believe that people are unselfish. As we walk through life, we cannot be convinced of these untruths, or let them sway us. A person will always be good, and will not submit to the temptations of their desires, which are to satisfy their own needs.

**Good Paper Example**

The purpose of this paper is to show that the argument for the thesis, "every voluntary act is selfish," is unsound. The paper is divided into two main parts. First, I will show that the argument is invalid. Second, I will examine the truth of premise (d).

Let us begin by asking whether (c) really follows validly from (a) and (b). From these two premises it is reasonable to conclude that any voluntary action attains to some good. Specifically, if in every voluntary act the agent acts on her own motive, and all motives aim at attaining some good, then every voluntary act aims at attaining some good. But notice that premise (c) in the argument is not the same as the conclusion we have just inferred. Premise (c) states: every voluntary act is an act such that it aims at the attainment of the *agent's own good*. But this proposition does not follow from premises (a) and (b). It is too specific. The good that is aimed at when an agent acts is not necessarily the agent's own good. Another way of putting this is as follows. It might be true both that in acting voluntarily, I have a motive, and that my motive necessarily aims at the attainment of *some* good. But it could, at the same time, be false

that my action aims at the attainment of *my own* good. It could aim at the attainment of someone else's good. Thus, the argument is invalid.

Next, I will focus on the truth of premise (d). This premise is a poor definition of what it is to be selfish. Let me explain how. Although it is true that aiming towards the attainment of one's own good is a necessary condition of being selfish, it is not sufficient. In other words, in order for an action to be selfish, the agent must be aiming at her own good. But that alone is not enough to make an action selfish. A selfish act is an act where one attains her good at the expense of another person's good. For example, beating up one's Philosophy instructor for a decent grade is selfish. On the other hand, a catnap under an olive tree is an action that attains to the agent's good without significant loss to another's. The catnap satisfies the definition of a selfish act given in (d), but we cannot correctly consider that action to be selfish. Therefore, premise (d) is false.

In conclusion, we have seen that the argument for the proposition "every voluntary act is selfish" is neither valid nor has all true premises. For both these reasons, therefore, this argument is not sound.

Adapted from Scott Hendricks (Clark University) and Scott Labarge (University of Santa Clara).  
Found at: <http://oak.cats.ohiou.edu/~lebar/writing.html>