

# How to Write a Good Argumentative Essay

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## **Introduction**

In this lecture series we're going to be looking at the process of organizing and writing a GOOD argumentative essay.

An argumentative essay is sometimes called a "persuasive" essay. It's an essay that tries to persuade the reader to accept some thesis or conclusion. It does this by providing the reader reasons to accept the thesis.

So, an argumentative essay is really just an ARGUMENT. In other lectures I've talked a great deal about recognizing and evaluating arguments, but I've never talked about essays or essay writing. So in this lecture series we're going to focus on how to write arguments in essay format.

In this introduction I'm going to say a few words about what makes an argumentative essay an *essay*, rather than just an argument. But what I really want to talk about is why it's important that you know HOW to write one. And finally I'll say a bit about how we're going to proceed in the lectures that follow.

### ***i. What Makes an Argumentative Essay an Essay?***

What makes an argumentative essay an *essay* is that it has a certain *conventional structure*. We're all familiar with the basic elements of this structure — an essay will have, minimally, an *introductory section*, a *main body*, and a *concluding section*. There's a lot more to it than this, but these are the main elements that everyone will recognize.

This structure is just a convention — it's not the only way you can present an argument — but it's an established convention.

Why? Because it has proven to be an effective and efficient means of communicating complex ideas and arguments to readers who may not know much about the issue to begin with, and may not even know whether they're interested in the issue.

We're going to talk a lot more about the functions of the various parts of an essay in later tutorials, so I won't say any more about this here.

## **ii. Why is it Important to Learn to Write in This Style?**

Why is it important to learn how to write in this style?

Well, for starters, many classes in high school, college and university *require* you to write argumentative essays. If you happen to be bad at this then you're going to be penalized for it over and over.

Second (and this is a frustrating point for many students) in MOST classes you're *expected* to know how to write in proper essay format, *before you come to class*. Unless you're taking a composition class where essay writing is the subject of study, your teachers aren't going to spend much time lecturing on essay writing technique. So you end up learning, if you ever do, by trial-and-error, and the error usually comes at the price of a grade that is lower than it has to be.

And third, once you've internalized the logic of the argumentative essay style, once you've understood the rationale for the conventions, then you can transfer that same logic to any situation that requires presenting an argument to an audience. Situations like, presenting a sales pitch to a client, or writing a memo to your boss requesting a raise, or delivering a closing argument in a court case.

So the point here is that *understanding the logic of the traditional essay format can help you to construct more persuasive arguments in any form, in any situation*. It'll be more obvious how this works once we've looked more closely at the logic of the essay format.

## **iii. Overview**

This is how we're going to proceed in this lecture series. First, we'll review the basic elements of the traditional argumentative essay style, and the focus here will be on understanding the *logic*, the *rationale*, for why the conventions are what they are. We'll answer questions like,

- why do introductions have the structure they do?

- why does the main body have to have this structure?
- why should conclusions be constructed like this?

and so on.

Along the way we'll look at some good and bad examples of these elements to illustrate the main ideas.

And finally, I'm going to present a **short example of a bad student essay**. Or maybe we should just call it an essay that needs some work. The topic is "Should Teachers Be Allowed to Ban Laptops in the Classroom?". *We'll analyze the logical structure of the essay, discuss recommendations for improving it, and then I'll present a revised and improved version of the essay based on those recommendations.*

After all this you should have a pretty good idea of what a good argumentative essay is, how they're organized, and how to go about writing one.

One final note: In this lecture series the focus is on the logic of the basic argumentative essay format. There's a lot that I won't be covering. I'm not going to be focusing on things like, for example, citation styles and footnotes and bibliographies, or how to use research tools, or avoid plagiarism, and so on. These are all important topics, but they aren't the focus of these lectures.

## Part 1: Guidelines for Structuring an Argumentative Essay

### 1. A Minimal Five-Part Structure

In this tutorial I'm going to review *the minimal five-part structure that an essay has to have to qualify as a good argumentative essay*, and talk a bit about strategies for organizing this structure on the page.

Now, by "minimal" I mean that any good argumentative essay is going to have *at least* these five elements or parts. They can have many more parts, but they can't have any fewer.

As we've seen, an essay will have at least these three parts, an *introduction*, a *main body*, and a *conclusion*. We'll talk more about what should go into the introduction and the conclusion later. Here I want to focus on the main body of the essay.

#### ***i. The Main Body***

The main body is obviously going to include the main argument of the essay. This is the argument that offers reasons in support of the main thesis of the essay.

Now, technically we could stop right here. We've got an essay and we've got an argument, so we've got an argumentative essay, right?

Well, we're not going to stop here. Why? Because our aim isn't just to write an argumentative essay. Our aim is to write a *good* argumentative essay, and *a good argumentative essay is always going to have more structure than this*.

**In fact, a good argumentative essay is going to contain at least three distinct arguments within the main body.**

For starters, a good argumentative essay is always going to consider an **OBJECTION** to the main argument that was just given, and *this objection is itself going to be an argument*. The conclusion of this argument, the objection, is that the main argument that was just given is in fact a BAD

argument, that the main argument fails in some way. It's going to argue that the main argument relies on a false or implausible premise, or that the logic is weak, or that it fails to satisfy some other necessary condition for an argument to be good.

## **ii. The Importance of Considering Objections**

Why do we need to consider objections? Remember, we're aiming for a good argument — we want our essay to give the most persuasive case possible for the intended audience of the argument. But it's important to remember that the intended audience of the argument isn't the people who are already inclined to agree with your thesis — that's what we'd call "preaching to the choir". If this was your audience then you wouldn't need to give an argument in the first place, since they're already convinced of the conclusion.

No, for an argumentative essay, we have to assume that our audience is the people who *aren't* convinced yet of the main thesis, who are inclined to be *skeptical* of the conclusion and will be looking for reasons to reject your argument.

So, if your essay is going to have any hope of persuading this audience, it's going to have to consider the skeptic's point of view. *That's why any good argumentative essay is always going to have a section that deals with objections to the main argument.*

Of course raising an objection isn't going to help your case unless you can come up with a convincing *reply* to it. If you can't meet the objection then it'll have the opposite effect, you'll be making the case *for* the opposition. So *a good argumentative essay is also going to have a section where you defend your argument by replying to the objections raised.*

It's important to remember that the objection is a distinct argument, and the reply is another distinct argument. The conclusion of the objection is that your main argument is a bad argument. The conclusion of your **REPLY** is that the objection just given is a bad objection.

So, the main body of your argumentative essay is actually going to contain at least three distinct arguments: a main argument, an objection and a reply.

**This is where we get the minimal 5-part structure. The introduction is the first part, then you've got at least the three arguments in the main body, giving us four parts, and the conclusion makes five.**

I call this a *minimal* five-part structure because it's the bare minimum that an essay has to have if it's going to qualify as a good argumentative essay. You can summarize it by saying that a good argumentative essay is going to have an introduction and a conclusion, and a main body where an argument is presented, objections are considered and replies are offered that defend the argument against the objections.

### ***iii. Consider the Strongest Objections***

Here's a very important point about objections. It may be tempting to pick a weak objection, one that's easy to refute, and reply to that. But doing this won't strengthen your argument, because it won't satisfy a thoughtful skeptic. What the skeptic wants to know is how you would respond to what they consider the strongest and best objections. *If you can successfully refute what your audience regards as the strongest objections to your position, then you've got the best chance of winning them over.*

So, a good argumentative essay is always going to look for the strongest possible objections to its main argument, present them accurately and fairly, and then attempt to systematically respond to those objections.

### ***iv. What If You Can't Think of a Good Response?***

Here's a question that my students sometimes ask me. Let's say you've developed what you think is a pretty good argument, and then you come across an objection to that argument that really stumps you — it really does seem to point out a weakness in your argument, and you honestly don't know how you should respond to it. Now what do you do? How do you proceed with the essay?

Well, if you were only concerned with the *appearance* of winning the argument then you might consider using a rhetorical device, like misrepresenting the objection in a way that makes it look weaker than it actually is, and then respond to that weaker version. But if you've been through the tutorial course on fallacies then you'll know that in doing this you'd be guilty of a fallacy, the *straw man fallacy*, and more importantly, a thoughtful critic will likely see it as a fallacious move too; it may actually weaken your case in the eyes of your intended audience, which is the opposite effect of what you intended.

I think that if you're really stumped by an objection, then you can do one of two things.

One, you can *change your mind* — you can accept that your argument fails, and either give up the thesis or look for a better argument for it.

But maybe you're not willing to give up your argument so soon. In the face of a tough objection, there's nothing wrong with saying "That's a good objection, I'll have to think about that.". Maybe with a little thought you can come up with a good response. But until then, in my view, rationality dictates that you should at least *suspend judgment about whether your argument is really as good as you thought it was*. Maybe it is and you can come up with a good defense, but maybe it's not. What you're admitting when you can't come up with a good reply is that you're not in a position to be confident about that.

### ***v. Organizing the Three Parts of the Main Body***

Okay, another question. We've got this three-part structure to the main body, with a main argument followed by an objection and then a reply. The question is, should this be the way you actually organize the essay on the page, with a section devoted to the main argument, *followed* by the objection, *followed* by the reply?

The answer is yes, you could, but no, you don't have to. The logical structure I've given here is what people will be focusing on when they try to extract the argumentative content from your essay, but just as you can



write the same argument in many different ways, you can organize an argumentative essay in many different ways that preserves the same logical structure.

How you choose to organize it will depend on a bunch of different things, like

- whether your audience is already familiar with the main argument
- whether an objection is going to focus on the truth of a specific premise
- whether it's going to challenge the logic of the main argument taken as a whole
- whether you're going to focus on lots of different objections rather than one big objection
- whether you're going to focus more on replies to common objections and so on.

And some of it will come down to stylistic choices, how you want to lead the reader through the argument. There's no one set way of doing this.

Just to illustrate, here's an example of an alternative organizational structure. You start off presenting your main argument. You lay out premise 1 and premise 2 of your main argument, but you anticipate that premise 2 is going to be contentious for some audiences, so instead of waiting to address the natural objection, you deal with it right here. You consider the objection to premise 2, and you respond to the objection right away. Then you move on and finish the argument.

Now your main argument is presented, you've dealt with one objection, but maybe now you want to consider another objection, one that turns on the logic of the argument as a whole. So you raise that objection and follow up with a reply.

This is a perfectly good way of presenting the argument to the reader, even though some of the replies and objections are mixed into the presentation of the main argument. Structurally it looks like this:

- Premise 1
- Premise 2
  - Objection to Premise 2
- Reply to the objection
- Premise 3
- Conclusion of main argument
  - Objection to the logic of the main argument
- Reply to the objection

This is also a perfectly good way of organizing the essay into paragraphs. Not every element in the reasoning needs its own paragraph, it all depends on context and how much actually needs to be said to make a particular point. For example, sometimes you can state an objection in a single sentence. Let's say that the objection to premise 2 above can be phrased as a single sentence. Then it might be very natural to combine the reply and the objection into a single paragraph.

There are no set rules for how to do this, and you might find yourself adding and deleting and reorganizing paragraphs as you work through the essay, but however you organize it, the three-part structure of argument, objection and reply needs to be clear.

### ***vi. Summing Up***

Okay, we've covered a lot here, so let's sum up.

- An argumentative essay has a minimal five-part structure. It has an introduction, a conclusion, and a main body that itself contains at least three distinct arguments.
- The main argument of the essay is a distinct argument, but you also have to consider the strongest objections that you can think of, and

offer replies to those objections, and each of these are distinct arguments as well.

- The organization of the logical elements of the main body can vary. You can present a whole argument, then proceed to list objections, then consider replies, or you can consider objections and replies on the fly, as you work through the main argument. Regardless, your final paragraph structure should reflect the logical structure of these argumentative elements, however that logical structure is organized.

## 2. Writing the Introduction

Every essay, if it's following standard form, will have an introduction. In this lecture we'll look at what should and shouldn't go into the introductory section of an argumentative essay.

### ***i. The Functions of an Introduction***

To write a good introduction you need to know *what functions an introduction is supposed to serve*. An introduction has several distinct functions, but they all come down to making life easier for readers.

**First**, an introduction needs to tell the reader *what the general subject matter of the essay is*, what the *issue* is that you'll be discussing in the essay.

**Second**, unless the issue is well known to everyone in your audience, you might also need to provide additional *background information to help explain and set up the issue*. How much background will depend on the issue and what you can assume about your intended audience. The key is that when you do finally state your main thesis, the reader has a good idea of what you're saying and what the issue is about.

That gets us to the **third** function, to *state your main thesis*. By "main thesis", all we mean is the conclusion of the overall argument of the essay, what you're trying to argue for. One of the most common problems with student essays is a failure to be clear about what the main thesis of the essay is. This needs to be stated as clearly as possible in the introduction, before you get into the main body.

**Finally**, if your argument has any kind of complexity to it at all, then it can be very helpful to *let the reader know what to expect in the remainder of the essay*, how it's going to be structured and organized. You can think of it as providing a roadmap or plan or outline of how the argument is going to proceed. For smaller, simpler essays these roadmaps may not be vital, but they become more and more important for both the reader and the essay writer as an essay become longer and more complex.

Something to watch out for if you're going to give a roadmap of this kind is to make sure that you actually do in the essay what you said you'd

do in the introduction. The introduction sets up expectations for the reader, and you want to do your best to fulfill those expectations.

### ***ii. What Should Not Go In The Introduction***

That's what goes into the introductory section of an argumentative essay. It's also important to remember what *doesn't* go in.

A common mistake that students make with introductions is to begin describing arguments or providing other kinds of information that really belong in the main body of the essay. The introduction is for setting up the main argument, providing background and context so the reader is prepared to understand and follow the arguments in the main body, but that's it. Once you start giving premises and considering objections that pertain to the main thesis of your essay, you're not "introducing" your essay anymore.

### ***iii. An Introduction Can Have More than One Paragraph***

In essay writing guides people will often refer to the introductory *paragraph* of the essay. It's true that sometimes you can state what you need to state in one paragraph, especially if the essay is short and simple, but more often you'll need more than one paragraph to introduce the issue, state your thesis and sketch the outline for the essay.

So it's more accurate and more helpful to talk about the introductory *section* of an essay, where it's understood that this introductory section can include more than one paragraph.

### ***iv. An Example***

Let's look at an example. Here's the introductory paragraph of a student essay on the ethics of fighting in hockey:

We've all seen hockey players drop the gloves and start swinging. Fighting is part of the game of hockey that shouldn't go away because it helps to regulate aggressive players and is part of the entertainment value of the game that hockey fans enjoy. In this essay I will argue that fighting should be allowed in hockey. Some people object that fighting in

hockey sends the message to children that violence is acceptable, but I will argue that fighting actually prevents more injuries than it causes.

The first thing to say is, yes, there are some style and sentence structure issues that could be improved, but it's important to distinguish issues of *style* from issues of *function*, so for now let's ignore the style issues. In terms of function, what does this introduction do right?

(1) Does it clearly introduce the issue? (2) Is there a clear thesis statement? (3) Does it tell the reader what to expect in the remainder of the essay?

1. This introduction actually does a pretty good job on all three counts. It's clear that the issue is about the ethics of fighting in hockey.

Mind you, there's still some room for clarification. Someone might read this and wonder whether the issue is about whether fighting in hockey should be *banned*, or whether it's about fighting in hockey *as a general moral issue*. These two aren't necessarily the same thing. I might judge an action or a practice to be morally wrong but not necessarily agree that the practice should be banned. And it's also unclear whether this is about professional hockey or whether it's meant to include amateur hockey, and if so, what age-range of players is being considered. So there's room for improvement in clarifying precisely what the issue is, but it's still not too bad.

2. Does this introduction have a clear thesis statement? Yes it does!

The writer makes it clear in a couple of places what side he's going to come down on in this debate, but the clearest place is right in that middle sentence — "In this essay I will argue that fighting should be allowed in hockey". There are lingering questions about precisely what this means, but there's no ambiguity about what side of the issue the writer is on.

3. Does the writer give us an idea of what to expect in the rest of the essay? Yes, he does, especially in that last sentence:

Some people object that fighting in hockey sends the message to children that violence is acceptable, but I will argue that fighting actually prevents more injuries than it causes.

This tells us something about the argumentative structure of the essay. We know that the writer is going to consider an objection and present a reply to the objection, and we're told what issues the objection and the reply are going to address.

Does an introduction NEED this kind of outlining? For a shorter essay maybe not, this is partly a matter of preference, but you'll never go wrong by adding some discussion of how the argument is going to proceed, it's a good habit to pick up.

So this introduction gets a few important things right. Does it do anything wrong?

Well, if I were editing this I'd recommend that the writer re-think that second sentence:

Fighting is part of the game of hockey that shouldn't go away because it helps to regulate aggressive players and is part of the entertainment value of the game that hockey fans enjoy.

This sentence tells us a lot about how the argument of the essay is going to go. I think it tells us TOO MUCH — it's actually giving an argument for the main conclusion, and that's not what an introduction is for. This belongs in the MAIN BODY of the essay. In an introduction you can talk about the argumentative issues that your essay is going to address, but you want to reserve the presentation of these arguments for the main body.

The reason for this is simply to avoid confusing the reader. You don't want to start arguing for one side of an issue before you've finished explaining what the issue is.

So, if I were to summarize my editorial comments on this introduction, the key suggestions would be to move this argumentative bit to the main body, and to spend a little more time clarifying the issue — is the claim just that fighting in hockey shouldn't be banned, or that fighting is actually a good thing, a desirable feature of the game; is it about fighting only at the higher levels of amateur and professional hockey, or all levels? And so on.

I'm not going to bother rewriting this introduction here, the example is meant simply to illustrate the thought process that goes into writing introductions.

**The main idea is to think about the functions that an introduction is supposed to serve and to make sure that your introduction fulfills those functions.**



### 3. Writing the Conclusion

Every essay, if it's following standard form, will also have a conclusion. In this lecture we'll look at what should and shouldn't go into the concluding section of an argumentative essay.

#### *i. The Functions of a Conclusion*

Just as with introductions, to write a good conclusion you need to know what functions a conclusion is supposed to serve. And just as with introductions, these functions are designed to make life easier for the reader.

The introduction and the conclusion are like bookends that help to frame the essay, impose some structure on it, and make it easy to get a grip on what the essay is about and how the conclusion is going to be defended. Many readers will skim the introduction or the conclusion of an essay to determine whether it's something they're interested in and worth reading through.

The **first** thing that a conclusion should do is *restate or summarize the main thesis or conclusion of the main argument of the essay*, what the essay argued for.

**Second**, the conclusion should briefly *summarize the key argumentative moves* that were made in the essay. So you're reminding the reader not just *what* you argued for, but *how* you argued for it.

And **third**, the concluding section of an essay is a place where the writer can give some additional *commentary* on the argument or the issue. This is optional, and there aren't any hard and fast rules about what sorts of comments are appropriate or inappropriate here. Some writers use the conclusion as an opportunity to comment on the significance of the issue, or point to questions that need further research.

What you should *avoid* doing, however, is add additional *argumentative* material in the conclusion. You shouldn't be introducing new material relevant to the main argument. If you find yourself wanting to add additional argumentative content in the conclusion, you should think

about how that material can be integrated into the main body, because that's where it belongs.

And finally, as we mentioned with introductions, in spite of the fact that many essay guides will talk about the "concluding paragraph", a conclusion can, and often will, require more than one paragraph to do the job properly. So it's better to think of it as the concluding *section* of the essay, rather than the concluding *paragraph*.

## **ii. An Example**

Here's an example. This is the conclusion of the essay on fighting in hockey, after it had been through a couple rounds of editing.

In professional and amateur hockey, fighting appears to be an accepted part of the culture of the sport. Some have argued that fighting in hockey should be banned, or at least penalized with the same severity as we see in other sports, like baseball or basketball. In this paper I've tried to defend the toleration of fighting in hockey. I argued that the tradition of using "enforcers" in hockey to pick fights with aggressive players on opposing teams helps to protect smaller and more vulnerable players from more serious injury, by functioning as a deterrent against the dirtiest and most dangerous behaviors. A natural objection is that a general ban on fighting would also curtail these more dangerous behaviors, but I offered reasons to believe that a general ban would not be as effective at preventing the intentional infliction of injury as some might hope. It may be counter-intuitive, but hockey with enforcers may actually be a safer sport than hockey without enforcers.

This paragraph performs all of the functions that we expect of a conclusion. It restates the main thesis, and it outlines the key argumentative moves that were made in the essay, including, in this case, an objection and a reply. Anyone reading this would have a clear idea of what the essay was about and what was argued for, and that's the key function of the concluding section of an essay.

## **Part 2: A Sample Essay with Some Problems (and Strategies for Fixing Them)**

### **1. The Essay: Should Teachers Be Allowed to Ban Laptops in Classrooms?**

In Part 2 of this tutorial on how to write a good argumentative essay, we're going to take a look at an example of a short essay that has some problems, and spend the rest of the tutorials diagnosing these problems and discussing solutions.

This example is a somewhat edited version of a real essay that was submitted as part of a classroom writing assignment. I've got permission from the author to use his essay here. In keeping with the main theme of these tutorials, I'm mostly going to ignore problems with style and focus more on problems with organizational structure and function.

#### **Should Teachers Be Allowed to Ban Laptops in Classrooms?**

I know some college teachers are starting to ban laptops from classrooms. I think that laptops should not be banned. Yes, some students surf the web or play games in class, but that doesn't mean the rest of us who use laptops responsibly should be punished for the actions of a few. In this essay I will argue that using laptops is a right that teachers should not infringe upon.

For starters, many of us who have grown up with computers have very poor handwriting and sometimes our fingers get sore if we have to use a pen to write a lot. That's why I like to take notes on my laptop, I can type much faster than I can write, and I can keep my notes organized in one place.

A second argument for laptops is that students should have a right to take notes as they choose. We pay good money for our courses and we all have different learning styles, so we should be free to choose the methods that work best for us.

Teachers complain that having a laptop is too much temptation for some students. They just can't keep themselves from browsing Facebook or playing solitaire in class, so they don't pay attention and miss out on important information or don't participate in class discussions. To this I say that college students are adults and need to be treated as adults, and that means they should take responsibility for their own education. If someone wants to chat on Facebook all day let him, it's his choice to fail, not the teacher's.

In conclusion, I feel strongly that laptops should not be banned from classrooms. Laptops may be a distraction for some students, but that's not a good enough reason to ban them.

## 2. Analysis: The Introduction

Let's take a look at the introduction:

I know some college teachers are starting to ban laptops from classrooms. I think that laptops should not be banned. Yes, some students surf the web or play games in class, but that doesn't mean the rest of us who use laptops responsibly should be punished for the actions of a few. In this essay I will argue that using laptops is a right that teachers should not infringe upon.

The introduction should tell me what the issue is, what the essay is about. I think this introduction does a pretty good job telling me what the issue is. It's clear that we're talking about the use of laptop computers in college classrooms, and specifically whether teachers should be able to ban the use of laptops. And because the issue is familiar enough to most people it doesn't need a lot of additional background information to clarify it.

By the way, it's helpful to remember the distinction between the *issue* being discussed in the essay and the *thesis* of the essay. The answer to the question "what is the issue being discussed?" can always be answered with a "whether" statement: "*whether* marijuana should be legalized", "*whether* Pete Rose should be allowed into the baseball hall of fame", "*whether* teachers should be allowed to ban laptops", and so on.

The *thesis*, on the other hand, is the writer's *answer* to this question. It's the conclusion of the main argument of the essay. You can always answer the thesis question with a "that" statement: my thesis is "*that* marijuana should not be legalized", "*that* Pete Rose should be allowed in the hall of fame", "*that* teachers should not be allowed to ban laptops".

And that leads naturally to our next question, whether the thesis of this essay is clearly stated in the introduction.

I think it's pretty clear what the thesis is here, though I'll point out a minor ambiguity. This author states the thesis in two places (see the bolded portions below):

I know some college teachers are starting to ban laptops from classrooms. **I think that laptops should not be banned.** Yes, some students surf the web or play games in class, but that doesn't mean the rest of us who use laptops responsibly should be punished for the actions of a few. In this essay I will argue that **using laptops is a right that teachers should not infringe upon.**

The first statement says that laptops shouldn't be banned, the second states that teachers shouldn't ban laptops *because students have a right to use them.*

That second statement is more specific and has more content than the first statement. It says not only that laptops shouldn't be banned, but also *why* they shouldn't be banned. I like this thesis statement better precisely because it's more informative about what the argumentative issue is that the essay is going to be addressing.

Now, it remains to be seen whether the rest of the essay actually makes good on this thesis statement.

Another thing we like to see in an introduction, especially if the essay is longer or the argumentation a bit more complex, is an outline or description of how the argument is going to proceed, what the rest of the essay is going to look like.

But this is a short essay and it doesn't really need an outline section to help the reader follow along. It wouldn't hurt to have one, especially if after rewrites you found the essay becoming longer or more complex than you originally thought, but at this stage I wouldn't penalize the essay for not having an outline. However, if you look at this introduction you do get a suggestion of how the argument is going to go.

I would recommend that the author be aware of the information they put in the introduction (and what they don't put in the introduction), because this information sets up expectations in the reader's mind about what they're going to see in the essay, and you don't want to say you'll do things that you end up not doing.

Anyway, to sum up, not knowing anything else about what's in the essay, this is a pretty good introduction. It may have to be re-written in light of what we actually find in the main body of the essay, but at the very least it presents the issue clearly and has a clear thesis statement.

### 3. Analysis: The Main Body: First Argument

Let's look at the first argument that we encounter in the main body of the essay:

For starters, many of us who have grown up with computers have very poor handwriting and sometimes our fingers get sore if we have to use a pen to write a lot. That's why I like to take notes on my laptop, I can type much faster than I can write, and I can keep my notes organized in one place.

Now, the first thing I would say to this author is that if there's an argument here at all, it needs to be clarified, because as it stands it sounds like what you're giving me in this paragraph is an explanation for why you happen to *prefer* using a laptop to type your notes. But that by itself isn't an argument for why teachers shouldn't be allowed to ban their use.

So, my first question to the author would be, how are these facts supposed to bear on the issue? How do we get from this to the conclusion that teachers shouldn't be allowed to ban laptops?

We need to try to understand what the author was really trying to get at here.

What's actually going on here, it seems, is that the author is *responding to a possible objection that questions the necessity of using laptops*.

The teacher says "Why can't you just take notes with pen and paper? You don't really NEED to use a laptop to take notes."

This is relevant, right? Because if using a laptop to take notes really is nothing more than a matter of personal preference, then it's hard to see how that could supersede a teacher's right to conduct their class as they see fit.

But this paragraph looks like it's a response to this objection: It's saying "No, I DO need to use a laptop. The quality of my note-taking will suffer if I don't use a laptop. It's not just a matter of preference."

Okay, let's assume that this was the author's intent. You still need to connect this to the main conclusion in some way.



I want to point out that the conclusion we're going for is a *moral* conclusion, it says that teachers *shouldn't be allowed* to ban the use of laptops in classrooms. So at some point the author has to think about how these facts about sore fingers and slow note-taking are relevant to this moral claim.

Now, **it's a generally accepted principle of moral reasoning that you can't derive a moral conclusion from purely descriptive premises.** To believe otherwise — that you can infer a moral conclusion from purely descriptive premises — is to commit what philosophers call the “naturalistic fallacy”. The standard way to fix this problem is to add premises to the argument that articulate the general moral principles or moral values that would ground the moral conclusion.

So my question to the author is, what sort of moral argument are you going for? You need to make this explicit so that readers can see how the claims you make in this paragraph are relevant to the conclusion.

I think a natural way to develop this argument (maybe not the only way) is to cast it as a *fairness* issue. Banning the use of laptops would be UNFAIR to the students who rely on laptops for their note-taking, it would UNFAIRLY DISADVANTAGE them (relative to the other students in the class who don't rely on them), to take their laptops away.

So if we go with this strategy, then the argument might look like this:

- 1. Banning the use of laptops will disadvantage certain students in the classroom (those that really benefit from the use of laptops...).**
  - 2. Teachers should not adopt classroom policies that disadvantage certain students but not others.**
- Therefore, teachers should not ban the use of laptops in classrooms.**

In the first premise, we're saying that those students who, like the author, have poor handwriting, write slow, get sore fingers, are more disorganized with paper notes, etc. are going to be disadvantaged by banning laptops.

The second premise asserts the fairness claim. All other things being equal, a policy that disadvantages one group of students but not others, is *unfair, it's unjust discrimination*.

Now, what we've done here is the sort of thing I'd try to work through with a student if they were looking for feedback on a draft. *We're trying to clarify and make explicit the reasoning that's really animating this paragraph.*

From here I might have some suggestions for rewriting the paragraph to make this logic clear, but I'd usually let the student take a crack at it first.

In this lesson all we're doing is argument analysis, so I'll stop here. Later on we'll look at a rewritten version of the essay that incorporates some of this analysis.

#### **4. Analysis: The Main Body: Second Argument**

Now let's look at the second argument we encounter in the main body:

A second argument for laptops is that students should have a right to take notes as they choose. We pay good money for our courses and we all have different learning styles, so we should be free to choose the methods that work best for us.

Unfortunately, this is a confusing pair of sentences. It sounds like there are some different competing considerations going on at once. That first sentence just begs the question, if taken as an argument. If not taken as an argument, then it just restates the conclusion.

All the action seems to be in the second sentence. If we try to reconstruct this as an argument, the reasoning seems to rely on two premises:

**1. Students pay good money for their classes.**

**2. Students have different learning styles.**

**Therefore, teachers should not ban the use of laptops in classrooms.**

The premises are both true, but it's not at all clear how our intended conclusion is supposed to follow from this. As it stands it's clearly a weak argument.

Nor is it obvious how we might charitably repair this argument in a way that reflects the author's intentions, because the intentions aren't clear. How is the point about paying good money relevant to the conclusion? Are the two premises intended to work together or are they really intended to be separate points? If you have to be a mind-reader to properly reconstruct an argument, that's a bad sign, and this is a case where you have to be mind-reader.

So, given this, I would advise the author to rethink what they're trying to say here, and especially if they really think that the money issue is relevant. My advice would be to either rethink this paragraph or get rid of it entirely.

## 5. Analysis: The Main Body: Third Argument

Now let's look at the third argument that we encounter in the main body of the essay:

Teachers complain that having a laptop is too much temptation for some students. They just can't keep themselves from browsing Facebook or playing solitaire in class, so they don't pay attention and miss out on important information or don't participate in class discussions. To this I say that college students are adults and need to be treated as adults, and that means they should take responsibility for their own education. If someone wants to chat on Facebook all day let him, it's his choice to fail, not the teacher's.

This is nice. The author is considering an objection to the main argument and offering a reply. Remember that an objection is itself an argument, so we should be able to state the objection as an argument, distinct from the reply, and for our purposes it'll be helpful to do so. So let's restate this objection in a way that fills in the reasoning.

### ***i. Reconstructing The Objection***

What we're trying to do is make explicit the reasoning in the first half of the paragraph. Remember, this is going to be an argument for giving teachers the right to ban laptops from the classroom.

Here's a premise that summarizes the point being made here:

Some students are unable to resist the temptation to use laptops in ways that interfere with their ability to learn and participate in class.

Next premise:

Banning laptops would remove this obstacle to learning for certain students.

Third premise — this is the relevant moral premise:

Teachers have a right to set classroom policies that remove obstacles to learning and fulfill the educational goals of the class.

Remember, what we're doing here is trying to reconstruct the argument underlying the objection. *This third premise isn't stated explicitly in the essay, but what we're doing is reconstructing an argument that we think best fits the*

*author's intentions*. It's a moral conclusion, so we need to refer at some point to a moral premise, and one like this would do the job.

Now we can infer the moral conclusion:

Therefore, teachers have a right to ban laptops from the classroom.

Here's the full reconstructed argument written in standard form:

- 1. Some students are unable to resist the temptation to use laptops in ways that interfere with their ability to learn and participate in class.**
- 2. Banning laptops would remove this obstacle to learning for certain students.**
- 3. Teachers have a right to set classroom policies that remove obstacles to learning and fulfill the educational goals of the class.**

**Therefore, teachers have a right to ban laptops from the classroom.**

In the second half of this paragraph, the author gives a reply to this objection. Remember that a reply is also an argument. And it's an argument for a specific conclusion — namely, that the objection just given is a bad objection. If we grant that in this objection the conclusion follows from the premises, then the reply is going to have to target the truth of one of the premises.

## ***ii. Reconstructing the Reply***

Let's take a look at the author's reply:

To this I say that college students are adults and need to be treated as adults, and that means they should take responsibility for their own education. If someone wants to chat on Facebook all day let him, it's his choice to fail, not the teacher's.

The key idea here is expressed in these lines, "college students are adults and need to be treated like adults", "they should take responsibility for their own education".

So, how do these points challenge any of the premises in the objection?

This response seems to be directed at the “paternalism” underlying the objection, the notion that teachers are like parents, or father figures (the root word of “paternal” is *pater*, which is Latin for “father” ) and teachers know what's best for students and have a right to force them to do what they judge to be in the students' best interest.

The author's response is to say "no", you don't have that right, or at least not an unconditional right. Part of being an adult is being free to make bad choices and taking responsibility for those choices.

In terms of the argument on the right, this reply is really a challenge to premise 3, the premise that says that teachers have a right to set classroom policies that remove obstacles to learning and fulfill the educational goals of the class. Teachers *don't* have an unconditional right to set classroom policies as they see fit. In some cases the rights of the students *outweigh* the rights of the teacher, and the implication is that this is one of those cases.

So, as we've reconstructed it here, this comes down to a “conflict of rights” issue — the rights of teachers versus the rights of students.

And that's how I would recommend the author of this essay frame the objection and the reply, as a conflict of rights issue. It already does this to a certain extent, but I would push the author to make the reasoning more explicit.

## **6. Analysis: The Main Body: Evaluation and Recommendations**

In this lecture I'll summarize the overall logic of the argument presented in the essay, and compare it with the organizational structure recommended in Part 1 of this lecture series. Then I'll offer some suggestions on how to strengthen the argument of the essay.

### ***i. Summary of the Overall Logic***

The original essay has five paragraphs, three of which constitute the main body of the essay. The author intended for these three paragraphs to be read as giving three separate arguments for the conclusion, but our analysis showed that this wasn't really the case.

The first paragraph does give an argument, what we might call the "hardship" argument. This is the one that says that removing laptops would impose an unfair hardship on students who really benefit from the advantages of taking notes on a laptop. If you take away their laptops then those students are at an unfair disadvantage in the classroom.

The second paragraph, however, doesn't really have any argumentative content. All it does is repeat the conclusion, that teachers don't have a right to take away students' laptops. Then there's the point about students "paying good money for their education", as though that fact alone is supposed to entitle them to use their laptops, but this point isn't developed, and it's not clear how the author thought it should be relevant to the moral issue, so it was hard to know how to reconstruct an argument.

The third paragraph is interesting in that it doesn't really present a third argument as such. Rather, it presents an objection to the main conclusion and offers a reply to the objection.

Once we did some argument reconstruction, we saw that the objection was that some students who use laptops in class are going to be distracted and won't learn as well, and teachers have *right* — maybe a *duty* — to set policies that remove obstacles to learning, and therefore they have a right

to ban laptops from the classroom, for the sake of those students who just can't help but be distracted by the presence of their laptops.

The reply focused on the assumption that teachers have a right to set whatever classroom policies they want if they think the policies are in the best interests of the students. The author challenges this paternalistic assumption, arguing that it treats college students like children who can't take responsibility for their own educational choices. But college students aren't children, they're adults, and teachers should treat them like adults, and if that means a student fails because they can't stay away from Facebook during class, then so be it.

## ***ii. Recommendations***

My first recommendation is to **get rid of paragraph 2**, since it's not really doing any work for us.

Now we can work on developing the arguments in the first and third paragraphs.

The first thing I want to point out is that the objection considered in paragraph three isn't really an objection to the "hardship" argument given in paragraph 1.

Remember the hardship argument is based on the claim that some students would be disadvantaged by the loss of their laptops, and the claim that teachers shouldn't adopt policies that unfairly discriminate against certain students. The objection considered in paragraph 3 doesn't address either of these claims. The objection does challenge the main conclusion, the main thesis of the essay, but it's really a separate argument against the conclusion, it's not targeting the premises or the logic of the argument given in the first paragraph.

**So, my next recommendation is that the author consider an objection and a reply to this argument, the hardship argument.**



### i. Formulating the Objection to the Hardship Argument

The principle I'm appealing to here is that *a good argumentative essay should consider objections to every distinct argument for the main thesis that is presented in the main body*. Objections to one argument don't automatically count as objections to other arguments.

So, let's go back and take a look at this argument and ask ourselves what a natural objection to it might be.

**1. Banning the use of laptops will disadvantage certain students in the classroom (those that really benefit from the use of laptops...).**

**2. Teachers should not adopt classroom policies that disadvantage certain students but not others.**

**Therefore, teachers should not ban the use of laptops in classrooms.**

As presented here, the logic works fine, if there's a problem it's with the plausibility of the premises.

Now, I'm inclined to accept premise 2, that teachers shouldn't adopt policies that disadvantage some students but not others. But only if the disadvantage is significant — if the disadvantage is minor, a mere inconvenience, then premise 2 isn't so compelling. So the question is whether the disadvantage to students caused by removing laptops is a *significant* disadvantage.

*So, a weakness of this argument is that premise 2 is only plausible if the hardships imposed on students by banning laptops are significant.*

Consequently, *the natural objection is this*: the disadvantages, the hardships, imposed on students by banning laptops are, in general, *not significant*. If you've got a student with a disability that's one thing, but if the complaint is that your fingers *get tired fast*, or your handwriting *isn't all that clear*, or you're *forced to use a paper filing system* rather than an electronic filing system, that sounds more like an *inconvenience* than a genuine hardship.

## ii. Formulating a Reply to the Objection

Now, if this is the objection, then you can only reply in one of two ways. You could argue that even if the disadvantages are minor inconveniences, teachers should still be able to adopt policies that remove those disadvantages. I'm not sure off the top how to defend that, but that's one way to go.

The other way to reply is just to argue the empirical issue: "No, the disadvantages imposed ARE significant, for some students."

You could make this reply stronger by presenting, say, the results of studies that show what fraction of students use typing as their primary mode of written communication, or studies on learning styles and the value of supporting a diversity of learning styles in the classroom. And so on, you get the idea.

## iii. Strengthening the Reply to the Paternalism Argument

Now, let's go back and take a look at the objection-reply pair in paragraph 3:

Teachers complain that having a laptop is too much temptation for some students. They just can't keep themselves from browsing Facebook or playing solitaire in class, so they don't pay attention and miss out on important information or don't participate in class discussions. To this I say that college students are adults and need to be treated as adults, and that means they should take responsibility for their own education. If someone wants to chat on Facebook all day let him, it's his choice to fail, not the teacher's.

A question that might naturally arise here is whether the author should make an effort to first present an argument that can serve as the target of the objection, so that we have a nice 3-argument set, with argument, followed by objection, followed by reply.

My answer is sure, you could do that, but you don't have to, there are lots of ways of organizing the argumentative points here that could be equally effective.

Sometimes an argumentative essay is structured around responses to possible objections to the main thesis, so the format is closer to “Here’s my claim. Tell me why I should reject it”, and the burden of proof is passed on to the opposition to provide compelling arguments against the claim, and the essay focuses on systematically replying to possible objections. That’s a perfectly good format, and you can use some of that format here, in this part of the essay.

A more important issue is whether the reply is as strong as it could be. Here’s the original objection:

To this I say that college students are adults and need to be treated as adults, and that means they should take responsibility for their own education. If someone wants to chat on Facebook all day let him, it's his choice to fail, not the teacher's.

You can see the focus is on treating students as adults, and we interpreted this as a challenge to the unconditional truth of premise 3 above. Yes, teachers have a right to set classroom policies that remove obstacles to learning, but this right isn’t absolute. In this case it conflicts with the right of students to choose their own learning styles, and it’s unjustifiably paternalistic, it treats students like children rather than like adults.

That’s the reply. My concern about this reply — and this is what I would tell the author of this essay — is that it pits one rights claim against another, the teachers’ versus the students’, but **it’s not clear in the reply why the students’ interests in having the freedom to fail should outweigh the teacher’s interests in optimizing the learning experience for students.**

This is an important concept in moral reasoning. When you pit rights claims against one another, or moral considerations of any kind against one another, you’ve got a situation like this, where the moral issue turns on which claim is stronger — are they equally strong, or does one outweigh the other? If they’re equally strong then you’re at a stalemate, it’s unclear what the policy should be.

However, if the student's rights clearly outweigh the teacher's rights in this case, then we judge the policy to be wrong and the students win.

But it goes both ways, if the teacher's rights clearly outweigh the student's rights, then the policy is justified and the teachers win.

**The problem, from an argumentative standpoint, is that different people may have different intuitions about which rights claim is stronger.** *Relying on people's intuitions about the case is risky*, because you might have people who grant the setup but think that the teacher's rights in this case outweigh the students' rights.

#### iv. Why Should the Student's Rights Outweigh the Teacher's Rights?

In a case like this, what you might want to do is *offer some additional reasons why one set of rights claims should outweigh the other set*. The author of this essay needs to say why the students rights claims should outweigh the teacher's rights claims. As it stands the essay doesn't give us any additional reasons.

So how do you do this? There are different ways you could do it.

Here's one way: You could *reason by analogy*. Let's consider some other policies that would have the effect of removing obstacles to learning.

**Claim:** Coming to school tired and hungry impedes student learning.

Clearly a true claim. So, if teachers have a right to impose policies that remove obstacles to student learning, then why not impose this policy?

**Policy:** All students are required to sign a contract promising that they'll eat three well-balanced meals a day and get at least 8 hours of sleep at night.

Heck, why not require that they all wear monitors that keep track of their food intake and sleep periods, so we don't have to rely on the honor system. That would be even more effective.

Or how about this?

**Claim:** Students who work more than 20 hours a week at part-time jobs do worse in school, on average, than students who work fewer hours.

Let's say this figure is true, that students who work more than 20 hours a week are likely to do worse in school than those who work fewer hours.

Why, then, shouldn't teachers be allowed to put limits on student work hours?

**Policy:** Students are not allowed to work more than 20 hours a week at part-time jobs.

You see where this is going. Most of us will think "no, these policies are not defensible". Even if these policies would improve student learning, our intuition is that teachers don't have a right to micro-manage the lives of students, it's a violation of a student's rights to non-interference, and it fails to respect the autonomy of students, their right to make and take responsibility for their own choices.

So the question is, why isn't a ban on laptops similar?

This is an example of *reasoning by analogy*, or reasoning by "similar cases". You present a series of cases where the intuitions are clearer, and then claim that the case under consideration is similar in all relevant respects to the cases you just presented; therefore, rationality dictates that the intuitions in those cases should carry over.

Anyway, this is meant only to give some idea of how one might beef up this part of the essay.

I'm not saying this line of reasoning is ultimately persuasive. Arguments from analogy are notoriously vulnerable to certain kinds of objection (like, whether the cases really are similar in all the relevant respects) but on the whole, offering some considerations like this might be helpful in strengthening the reasoning in this section.

### ***iii. Summing Up***

Okay, that was long, but we're done with my recommendations for strengthening the logic of the essay.

As a point of summary, let me just note the two principles that informed my evaluation and recommendations in this section.

The first is that **a good argumentative essay should consider objections to every distinct argument presented in the main body.** We saw that in the essay we've been looking at, the author didn't consider possible objections to the first argument given, so we had to give that some thought.

The second principle is that **when a moral issue is framed as a conflict of rights or conflict of values issue, and it's not obvious to your audience which rights or values should outweigh the other, you need to provide additional argumentation in favor of one side.** This was the guiding principle in my recommendations for strengthening the objection-reply pair in paragraph 3.

## **7. Analysis: The Conclusion**

After that lengthy discussion of the main body it may seem a bit anti-climactic to look at the conclusion, since it's only two lines long, and when we rewrite this essay in light of this discussion, the conclusion will likely be rewritten as well. But for the sake of completeness let's do it anyway. I'll use this discussion to highlight two important points about conclusions.

### ***i. What's Good About the Conclusion***

Here's the conclusion of the essay:

In conclusion, I feel strongly that laptops should not be banned from classrooms. Laptops may be a distraction for some students, but that's not a good enough reason to ban them.

Is this a good conclusion? Well, it could be better, but it could also be worse.

What's good about it is that, one, *it restates the main thesis of the essay* — laptops should be not be banned from classrooms.

And two, in that second sentence *it gives some indication of how the conclusion was argued for*.

These are things we like to see in a conclusion.

### ***ii. What's Not So Good***

On the other hand, this conclusion also has a couple features that I think students should avoid when they can. So let's talk about those here.

#### **i. First Comment**

Let's consider this expression:

*I feel strongly that* laptops should not be banned.

I see these sorts of expressions a lot in student essays: "*I feel that*", "*I believe that*", "*in my opinion*", and so on. And students seem to think that by being more emphatic about it — by saying, "*I feel STRONGLY that* ",

or “I FIRMLY believe that” — they’re somehow making the conclusion more persuasive, or the argument stronger.

But the fact is that *this kind of language actually tends to weaken an essay rather than strengthen it.*

Now, why is this? Well, compare

I feel strongly that laptops should not be banned.

with

Laptops should not be banned.

These two sentences assert very different things. For one thing, the subject and predicate of each sentence are completely different.

The subject of the first sentence is ME, or rather you YOU, the author of the essay.

And the predicate is what? The predicate is “feel strongly that laptops should not be banned.” So the sentence is about YOU, the author, and it asserts something about how you feel, namely that, that you feel strongly that laptops should not be banned.

When I see a sentence like this, I have to admit that in my mind, I find myself saying, “I thought this essay was about the pros and cons of laptop use in the classroom, *not about your feelings about laptop use.*” I’ll return to this point later.

Now compare this to “Laptops should be banned.” What’s the subject?

The subject is “laptops”. And what’s the predicate? The predicate is “that they should be banned”.

So, this sentence isn’t about the feelings or beliefs of you, the author, it’s about laptops and their use in the classroom.

Remember, this is what the author is supposed to be arguing for in this essay, this is the conclusion.

And here’s the point. *The essay isn’t about you or how strongly you feel about the conclusion.* The fact that you may feel strongly about it is



irrelevant to the conclusion, it carries no argumentative weight whatsoever.

I remember once when I was an undergrad student in a philosophy class, and we had to submit weekly writing assignments on the assigned readings for the class. And when my professor returned the first couple of assignments to me I saw all this red ink in my concluding section, and it said something to effect of “Ack, this was going so well until the end! You have such a strong voice right up until the end, and then you start qualifying your argument with “I feel that ...” and “I think that ...” and “I believe that ...”

And then he wrote this, which has stuck in my head ever since:

**“No one cares what you believe. They only care about why you believe it.”**

Now, let me be clear about the point that my professor was trying to make here, and the point I want to make to the author of this essay. I, as a person, may very well care about and be interested in what you, as a person, feel and believe about a particular issue. But from the standpoint of an argumentative essay, where the goal is to provide good reasons for your audience to accept a claim, *the fact that you may feel strongly about the claim is not, by itself, a reason for anyone else to accept that claim.* That’s the sense in which your feelings about the issue are irrelevant.

And that’s why expressions like “I feel strongly that ...” tend to weaken rather than strengthen the argumentative force of your essay.

If the arguments that you’ve given in your essay are good then that should be enough to persuade the reader, and that should be the focus of your concluding statement, not your personal convictions about the conclusion.

Switching into this mode can also be distracting because the subject of the conclusion suddenly becomes you and your beliefs and feelings, and this can come across as amateurish. If you do this a lot in an essay then the essay will read more like a diary entry or an essay about you and your

personal feelings, rather than an argumentative essay about the issue in question.

So, that's a long way of saying that you should avoid phrasing like this, and stick with phrasing like this:

"In this essay, I have argued that ..."

"I have shown that ..."

"It was demonstrated that ..."

"Reasons were given to believe that ..."

where the emphasis isn't on the author's feelings about the conclusion, but on the reasons that were presented in the main body of the essay.

## ii. Second Comment

Okay, that was the first comment I wanted to make about this conclusion. Here's the second.

I said earlier that one thing this conclusion does well is that it gives some indication of how the conclusion was argued for. I was referring to this second sentence,

Laptops may be a distraction for some students, but that's not a good enough reason to ban them.

It points to the conflict of rights issue that we talked about in the third section of the main body.

However, saying it does a good job at indicating how the conclusion was argued for is really overstating it. It doesn't do a very good job. It has two problems:

**First**, it's too vague. Or I should say, if it's to function as a summary statement of how the conclusion was argued for, it's too vague. If it's just functioning as additional commentary, then I guess it's not too vague, but that's not what this looks like.

**Second**, it gives an incomplete picture of the logic of the argument. More specifically, it only refers (obliquely) to the argument developed in

paragraph three, the paternalism argument. It doesn't say anything about the hardship argument developed in the first paragraph.

The principle here, is that *if you're going to bother reviewing the argumentative moves that you made in the essay, don't tell only half the story, tell the whole story*. Otherwise you risk misleading the reader who jumps to the conclusion looking for a summary review of the essay.

### ***iii. Summary***

So, in summary, here are my recommendations for this conclusion:

One, get rid of the "I feel strongly" language. You want to talk about what you argued for, what you demonstrated, not what you happen to feel or think about the conclusion.

And two, give a more complete summary of the argumentative moves in the essay.

## 8. The Essay: Improved Version

In this lecture I'm going to present a rewritten and hopefully improved version of the essay, "Should Teachers Be Allowed to Ban Laptops in Classrooms". This version might strike you as a completely different essay, it's so heavily rewritten, but as I'll try to show in the commentary on the next lecture, the major changes in the introduction, the conclusion, and the logical structure of the main body were all motivated by the analysis and recommendations we just discussed. There are stylistic changes too, the writing style is a bit more mature, but what I want to focus on is the logical and organizational structure of this rewritten version, and the continuities between this version and the original version.

### Should Teachers Be Allowed to Ban Laptops in Classrooms?

#### Introduction

It is increasingly common to see students using laptops in college classrooms. Many students use laptops for taking notes, and others use the internet to help research points of interest that are relevant to class lectures. However, it is also common for students to spend time in class casually browsing the net, instant-messaging and reading Facebook pages, or playing games. Some college teachers have found laptops so distracting to students in their classes that they have banned their use. This policy invites the question, should college teachers be allowed to ban laptops from the classroom?

In this essay I will argue that teachers should not be allowed to ban the use of laptops in classrooms. The essay will attempt to defend two claims: first, that a ban on laptop use unfairly discriminates against students who will be disadvantaged by not using a laptop for note-taking in the classroom; and second, that a ban on laptop use is an unjustifiable infringement on the rights of students to make and take responsibility for their own educational choices.

#### A Ban on Laptop Use is Discriminatory

I use a laptop for taking notes. I and many other students have grown up using computers and keyboards as our preferred mode of written communication. We rarely hand-write anything, our handwriting is hard

to read, and our fingers get tired and sore if forced to write for extended periods of time. Some of my college classes are seventy-five minutes long, some as long as three hours. For myself and many other students, it is a considerable hardship to be forced to take handwritten notes in these classes. In addition, I organize my notes electronically, using a system that is convenient and that suits my learning style.

I grant that many students are comfortable taking handwritten notes and would not be impacted by a ban on laptops. The hardships I am describing would be felt by only a minority of students. But the point is that a ban on laptops would unfairly disadvantage this minority who rely on electronic note-taking in the classroom. I can type much faster than I can write, and consequently I can pay better attention in class if I'm typing than if I'm handwriting (and if my fingers aren't sore). Students like me would be put at an unfair disadvantage if laptops were banned. Teachers should not be allowed to adopt policies that put a certain group of students at an unfair disadvantage.

It might be objected that I'm exaggerating the hardships imposed by being forced to hand-write notes, or that only a very small minority of students will be subject to them. I can attest that I am not exaggerating the hardship in my own case, and my informal survey of laptop users in my classes showed that about a quarter would feel seriously disadvantaged by being forced to hand write notes. This is a minority, but it's not a "very small minority". Ultimately this is an empirical question, and proper scientific studies must be conducted to determine just how many students would be seriously disadvantaged by the removal of laptops.

However, it is reasonable to believe that the problem will only increase with time. A number of studies have shown that increasing percentages of elementary school children have difficulty mastering and experience frustration with handwriting. The introduction of computer labs in elementary schools, and the increased number of computers in homes, has lead to more students bypassing handwriting and moving straight to word processors to complete most of their written school work. One study of middle-school students revealed that in some school districts, 15% of students could not even read cursive handwriting because they had little or no exposure to it in their elementary schooling. Given these trends, college teachers should expect that more and more students will be entering their classes with poorer and poorer handwriting skills, and

that the hardships imposed by banning laptop use in the classroom will become increasingly common and obvious over time.

To sum up, I affirm that the banning of laptops in the classroom imposes a significant hardship on an increasing number of students, that this would be unjustly discriminatory, and hence that teachers should not be allowed to ban their use.

### **A Ban on Laptop Use is Paternalistic**

A common argument for banning laptops is that some students are simply unable to resist the urge to use their laptops in ways that distract their attention from classroom lectures and discussion, leading to poorer academic performance overall. Consequently, removing laptops from the classroom is likely to lead to improved academic performance for these students. Teachers, it is argued, have a right to set classroom policies that remove obstacles to learning for their students. Hence, teachers have the right to ban laptops from the classroom, if they believe that doing so will improve the academic performance and learning experience of these students.

I'm willing to grant the factual premises here. Yes, some students find it difficult to resist the urge to browse the web and be distracted in class, and some would benefit from a ban on laptops. Where I disagree is with the implied assumption that teachers have an unconditional right to set academic policies that restrict the freedoms of students whenever they believe that doing so is in the students' best interest. I would argue that teachers only have a right to restrict student behavior when that behavior would be harmful to the teacher or the other students. For example, we can agree that students shouldn't be allowed to be disruptive in class, but this is because doing so interferes with the ability of the teacher to teach the class and with the learning experience of the other students. Teachers shouldn't have a right to restrict a student's behavior when that behavior is only harmful to the student.

Let me give an example to illustrate the principle. It's well established that students who come to school tired and hungry perform less well than students who are not tired and hungry. But if teachers have a right to set classroom policies that promote student learning, why not set the following policy?: All students must sign a contract promising to come to class well fed and rested. Heck, why not require that they wear medical

monitors that track their food intake and sleep cycles, so we don't have to rely on the honor system?

Of course no one believes that teachers have a right to impose this kind of policy, even though it would likely improve the learning experience of many students. Why not? Because it's overly paternalistic. It assumes that students can't or shouldn't be allowed to take responsibility for their own academic choices, that they should be treated like children. If I choose to come to school hungry and tired, that's my choice, and I bear the responsibility for the consequences, not my teacher.

My claim is that the argument for banning laptops based on the harm caused by their use to the laptop user (and not to the other students in the class, or to the teacher) is open to the same objection, that it's overly paternalistic. If I choose to come to class and surf the web or update my Facebook page, that's my choice, I should be allowed to bear the responsibility for those choices. To say otherwise is to deny me the freedom and respect I deserve as an adult.

### **Conclusion**

In this essay I argued that teachers should not be allowed to ban the use of laptops in classrooms. My argument was based on two separate lines of reasoning: one, that a ban on laptop use unfairly discriminates against students who will be disadvantaged by not using a laptop for note-taking in the classroom; and two, that a ban on laptop use is an unjustifiable infringement on the rights of students to make and take responsibility for their own educational choices.

## 9. The Essay: Improved Version with Commentary

Let's walk through our new and improved essay.

By the way, the student who wrote the original essay also did a rewrite. His rewritten essay has some elements in common with this one, especially in terms of the overall argumentative structure, but I've had a larger hand in editing the language for this version.

I've broken the essay into four sections and added some commentary after each section.

### ***i. Headings***

Notice that we've added headings to help flag the introduction, the conclusion, and the two arguments presented in the main body. Headings aren't necessary, but they do help the reader to follow the organization of the essay, and in academic essay writing they're the norm rather than the exception. It is a style thing, though, and whether you use it depends on the venue and the genre in which you're writing. For example, you usually won't find headings in newspaper opinion columns, even though opinion columns really are a form of argumentative essay writing. On the other hand, bloggers tend to use headings a lot, so it really does depend on the venue.

### ***ii. Section 1: The Introduction***

#### **Introduction**

It is increasingly common to see students using laptops in college classrooms. Many students use laptops for taking notes, and others use the internet to help research points of interest that are relevant to class lectures. However, it is also common for students to spend time in class casually browsing the net, instant-messaging and reading Facebook pages, or playing games. Some college teachers have found laptops so distracting to students in their classes that they have banned their use. This policy invites the question, should college teachers be allowed to ban laptops from the classroom?

In this essay I will argue that teachers should not be allowed to ban the use of laptops in classrooms. The essay will attempt to defend two



claims: first, that a ban on laptop use unfairly discriminates against students who will be disadvantaged by not using a laptop for note-taking in the classroom; and second, that a ban on laptop use is an unjustifiable infringement on the rights of students to make and take responsibility for their own educational choices.

Notice that we've broken the introduction into two paragraphs, one paragraph for presenting background information and setting up the issue, and another paragraph for stating the thesis and giving a summary outline of how the main argument will proceed.

Notice also that we got rid of that second paragraph of the original essay, the one that we decided wasn't doing any work for us. So the main body of the essay focuses on the two lines of argumentation developed in the first and third paragraphs of the original essay, what we called the "hardship argument" and the "paternalism argument". Let's look at the hardship argument.

### ***iii. Section 2: The Hardship Argument***

#### **A Ban on Laptop Use is Discriminatory**

I use a laptop for taking notes. I and many other students have grown up using computers and keyboards as our preferred mode of written communication. We rarely hand-write anything, our handwriting is hard to read, and our fingers get tired and sore if forced to write for extended periods of time. Some of my college classes are seventy-five minutes long, some as long as three hours. For myself and many other students, it is a considerable hardship to be forced to take handwritten notes in these classes. In addition, I organize my notes electronically, using a system that is convenient and that suits my learning style.

I grant that many students are comfortable taking handwritten notes and would not be impacted by a ban on laptops. The hardships I am describing would be felt by only a minority of students. But the point is that a ban on laptops would unfairly disadvantage this minority who rely on electronic note-taking in the classroom. I can type much faster than I can write, and consequently I can pay better attention in class if I'm typing than if I'm handwriting (and if my fingers aren't sore). Students like me would be put at an unfair disadvantage if laptops were banned.

Teachers should not be allowed to adopt policies that put a certain group of students at an unfair disadvantage.

It might be objected that I'm exaggerating the hardships imposed by being forced to hand-write notes, or that only a very small minority of students will be subject to them. I can attest that I am not exaggerating the hardship in my own case, and my informal survey of laptop users in my classes showed that about a quarter would feel seriously disadvantaged by being forced to hand write notes. This is a minority, but it's not a "very small minority". Ultimately this is an empirical question, and proper scientific studies must be conducted to determine just how many students would be seriously disadvantaged by the removal of laptops.

However, it is reasonable to believe that the problem will only increase with time. A number of studies have shown that increasing percentages of elementary school children have difficulty mastering and experience frustration with handwriting. The introduction of computer labs in elementary schools, and the increased number of computers in homes, has lead to more students bypassing handwriting and moving straight to word processors to complete most of their written school work. One study of middle-school students revealed that in some school districts, 15% of students could not even read cursive handwriting because they had little or no exposure to it in their elementary schooling. Given these trends, college teachers should expect that more and more students will be entering their classes with poorer and poorer handwriting skills, and that the hardships imposed by banning laptop use in the classroom will become increasingly common and obvious over time.

To sum up, I affirm that the banning of laptops in the classroom imposes a significant hardship on an increasing number of students, that this would be unjustly discriminatory, and hence that teachers should not be allowed to ban their use.

This section starts off much like the original essay, describing the hardships that some students would suffer if laptops were banned.

The second paragraph completes the main argument. Notice those last two lines in that paragraph:

Students like me would be put at an unfair advantage if laptops were banned. Teachers should not be allowed to adopt policies that put a certain group of students at an unfair advantage.

It's important that you be as explicit as possible about what your conclusion is and how it's supposed to follow from what you've said before.

In our earlier evaluation of this line of reasoning I pointed out that the original author never considered any obvious objections to this argument.

Well, that's what we do in the next paragraph, in the first line:

It might be objected that I'm exaggerating the hardships imposed by being forced to handwrite notes, or that only a very small minority of students will be subject to them.

The rest of this section is an attempt to answer this objection. This isn't an easy thing to do. You're trying to argue that a certain proportion of the student population either is suffering or is going to suffer a significant hardship by not being allowed to take notes on their laptops. This makes it an empirical issue that would be best answered by citing research studies on the question. But what if there are no studies, or no studies that you've been able to discover? Then how do you make the case?

Well, my thought was that you could at least try to make the claim plausible, give some reasons why at the very least it shouldn't be dismissed.

And so we have a reference to an *informal survey of the author's peers*, not conclusive by any means, but it's something. The author admits that this is an empirical question, though, and that studies would need to be done to properly estimate just how many students would be seriously disadvantaged by the removal of laptops.

Now, the next paragraph is meant to support this line of reasoning by arguing that, even if the numbers are small now, it's reasonable to think that the problem will only increase over time, as more and more students arrive in college with less and less experience with hand writing.

Notice the conclusion:

Given these trends, college teachers SHOULD EXPECT that more and more students will be entering their classes with poorer and poorer handwriting skills ...

This conclusion is actually much easier to argue for, since the increasing difficulties that children are having with hand writing is easier to document, and the conclusion is simply that it's reasonable to expect that this problem will grow over time. It's rhetorically effective in the context of this argument because even if someone wasn't convinced that this is a serious problem for college students right now, they may still be convinced that it's likely to *become* a problem, and that might be just enough to persuade a skeptic to accept the empirical premises of the main argument.

Notice that there's a summary concluding paragraph in this section. This is often a good idea. If you've just finished presenting an important argument and you're about to switch gears and talk about something else, then it's helpful to flag this transition with a summary conclusion like this, to remind the reader of what you've established and to clearly demarcate one section of the essay from another.

#### ***iv. Section 3: The Paternalism Argument***

The next section takes up the "paternalism argument". Or rather, we introduce the objection to which the paternalism argument is a reply.

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doing so will improve the academic performance and learning experience of these students.

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This section starts off much as it did in the original essay, but here I tried to flesh out the reasoning and fill in the premises that lead to the conclusion that teachers SHOULD have a right to ban laptops. The reply starts when we identify the key premise that we want to challenge:

Where I disagree is with the implied assumption that teachers have an unconditional right to set academic policies that restrict the freedoms of students whenever they believe that doing is in the students' best interest.

I would argue that teachers only have a right to restrict student behavior when that behavior would be harmful to the teacher or the other students.

This the key to the reply. We're basically invoking a classical notion of liberal freedom, freedom as freedom to act and do as you wish as long as you're not hurting anybody else. We're trying to cast a ban on laptops, when it's done ostensibly for the sake of the student using the laptop, as an unjustifiable infringement on a student's right to non-interference. That's the argumentative strategy, anyway.

Do you remember the image of the teeter-totter in our discussion of this argument, and about the need to give some reasons why the student's rights in this case should outweigh the teacher's rights? Remember we discussed one way of doing this, by drawing analogies between a ban on laptop use and more obviously unjustifiable policies, like forcing all students to come to class rested and well fed?

Well that's what we're doing in the rest of this reply. Here's the analogy:

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## **v. Section 4: The Conclusion**

### **Conclusion**

In this essay I argued that teachers should not be allowed to ban the use of laptops in classrooms. My argument was based on two separate lines of reasoning: one, that a ban on laptop use unfairly discriminates against students who will be disadvantaged by not using a laptop for note-taking in the classroom; and two, that a ban on laptop use is an unjustifiable infringement on the rights of students to make and take responsibility for their own educational choices.

Rounding off the essay is the conclusion. I didn't put a lot of effort into this, it basically parallels the structure of the outline presented in the introduction, but that's not an uncommon stylistic device in argumentative essays. You sort of want the introduction and the conclusion to be like bookends, propping up and framing the arguments in the main body. If there's a certain symmetry between the introduction and the conclusion, that's not a bad thing.

Still, you could write this conclusion differently, maybe add some additional commentary on how you argued for it, but the important thing is that it do its job as a conclusion, which is to restate the main thesis and give a brief summary of how the thesis was argued for.

One final note before we end this. I just want to reiterate that the purpose of this sample essay, and the analysis we did on it, and this revision, was to illustrate some of the general principles of argumentative essay writing. The specific issue we're discussing here is irrelevant. Whether laptops should or shouldn't be banned from the classroom is irrelevant, that wasn't the point of this exercise. So if you find yourself disagreeing with the conclusion of this essay, or wanting to criticize the argumentative moves that were made in it, that's fine, that's great. I can think of three or four weaknesses in this argument that a skeptic could exploit in developing a rebuttal to this essay, so feel free to take it apart.

What I do think is clear, however, is that **this revised version of the essay is a better argumentative essay than the original version.** The point of the exercise is to get *a better understanding of the general principles of argumentative essay writing that explain why this is so*, so that you can bring these principles to bear on your own writing, and help you to improve your essay writing skills.