

Defending a Position

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To begin with, some general remarks: A philosophical essay in which you are asked to defend a position or thesis will break down into four major sections...

- I. definition: *define* and *clarify* your thesis
- II. motivation: explain why your thesis is *plausible*
- III. objections: explain why and how someone might *criticize* your thesis
- IV. upshot: *respond* to the objections – can they be countered, or should the original thesis be modified (or even dismissed)?

Note that a good essay need not end up defending the thesis it starts with; it is perfectly acceptable to begin with a plausible thesis and then ultimately show it to be untenable. What we are looking for is for you to clearly identify a thesis, explain why it is attractive, identify its (apparent or actual) shortcomings, and then explain their implications. This is what it means to *analyze* a position.

Your next essay assignment asks you to defend an answer to the question: What, if anything, distinguishes art from everything else? This question is of the general form: What, if anything, distinguishes *X* from *Y*? As it turns out, the way in which you answer a question of this form is more or less the same whatever the particular question may be. That is, although *what* you argue in your essay will be specific to aesthetics, *how* you argue will not be specifically aesthetic. *Whenever* you are defending a thesis about what distinguishes one thing from something else, you will bring in the same sort of motivations, raise the same sort of objections, and draw out the same sort of implications.

To get a sense of which are the relevant sorts of motivations, objections, and implications, construct an essay outline based on one of the following theses. Ask yourself: What considerations would you bring in to motivate the given thesis? What specific objections might one raise against this thesis? What does each objection tell us about the original thesis? Can the original thesis be modified in any way to accommodate the objections?

Q: What, if anything, distinguishes lovers from best friends?

A: Lovers have sex (with one another)

Q: What, if anything, distinguishes murder from killing?

A: Killing is compelled or forced; murder is not

Q: What, if anything, distinguishes Canadians from everyone else?

A: Canadians love hockey

Q: What, if anything, distinguishes science fiction from other genres?

A: Science fiction is anything with aliens that isn't funny