

What your essay should, and should not, achieve

Edward Morey, Rough draft – January 11, 2010

You will write two essays during the term. Each essay will go through at least three versions of refinements and improvements.

I, and you, will discuss your essays in class. You will discuss your essays and ideas with your classmates outside of class.

Choosing an appropriate topic:

You essay must cause you and others to learn about and think critically on a topic of interest to you. Others should find your essay a worthwhile read.

Your essay needs to question or inform on the philosophical or behavioral foundations of economics, or both. Think about the basic assumptions of economics. Learn about moral philosophy and behavior and relate them to economics.

Fulfilling the second objective, the objective of the course, will be difficult.

Your topic needs to have an economic perspective, but other perspectives as well.

To think critically means to question one's assumptions, to consider the implications of alternative assumptions. Not everyone thinks like an economist or makes economist-type assumptions. I want to find out, from you, how non-economists think.

Some essays will look at an issue from both an economic perspective and other ethical and philosophical perspectives.

Some papers will examine the philosophical and ethical foundations of economics.

Many papers will have an environmental aspect; an environmental aspect is not required, but I am a student of environmental economics, so know a bit about the topic.

I am willing to consider essays that do not have an ethical component; these essays will likely critique fundamental economic questions and assumptions like "do people have preferences in the economist's sense of the word" or "does more stuff bring more happiness?" Such essays will discuss the current literature and findings on the question.

Your objective is not to just lay out an economic argument for or against something, for example, the economic argument for free trade. If you were to write on free trade I would want to see, in addition to the economic arguments for and against free trade, alternative perspectives, the foundations of those other perspectives, and discussion of why reasonable people don't always conclude that free trade is great.

Keep in mind this is a critical thinking course and that you are writing an essay to be read by an economics major in a critical thinking course. You want the reader question their beliefs.

In particular, you need to make the reader question the standard economic paradigms. What is the moral basis of our normative economic beliefs? **The point of the essay is not to apply standard economic analysis to a topic**; it is to make the soon-to-graduate economics major think about the topic in different ways, “to take a critical look”.

Whatever your topic, you need to identify those, besides economists, who have interests and opinions about your topic. Then you need to find out what some of these other types think and why.

For example, if your topic has an environmental component you will need to investigate the field of environmental ethics, investigate the standard economic models on this aspect of the environment, investigate how different types of environmentalists (there are many types) think about the issue and why (the foundations of their views), and investigate how ecologists would approach the problem.

Be specific in your discussion of varying views. I will go crazy if you write stuff like “Philosophers think ...” or “Ecologists believe ...” Cite and discuss the views of specific individuals and schools of thought, not nebulous groups.

If your topic has to do with health, dying, or some such thing, you will need to learn a tad about the field of medical ethics, not just how an economist would approach a health issue.

If you are writing about trade or development, you will need to investigate why many non-economists question freer international trade.

What you personally believe is immaterial other than in your attempt to question your beliefs and the beliefs of others. Imagine you are writing about wolf preservation. Rather than writing about whether you are for or against it, relate the economic arguments for and against, and then, more importantly, discuss how others might decide this question on criteria completely different from those an economist would use. Then try and relate the differing perspectives.

The lectures and discussions in class are designed to make you think. I want to see that thinking reflected in your essays. **Your essay must absorb relevant materials from the readings and lectures, but should not stop there.**

I get excited when people write about opinions and beliefs they disagree with.

I will be looking for careful and reasoned thought on your topic. Depending on your topic, probably some combination of economic, ethical, philosophical, and psychological thought. Simply listing a bunch of facts is not enough. Simply stating something is right or wrong will not cut it.

Many of you will want to start with some topic in economics and then try to find its deeper meaning. This approach is usually a mistake.

You might consider instead one of the following approaches for finding a topic:

- Study some school of moral philosophy and then write an essay describing it and relating it to the standard economic perspective.
- Do the same with a specific philosopher, moral, or otherwise.
- Critique, from an economic perspective, a book on philosophy
- Choose some major ethical or moral issue: individual rights, abortion, terrorism, war, obligations to the poor, the future, animals, god, religion, etc. and consider what economics has to say on the topic, and how what economics has to say differs from the conclusions of other disciplines, and why.
- Learn something about how psychologists, or other social scientists, model human thought and behavior, and related it to how economics views and models behavior – your starting point could be individual or group behavior.
- Learn about behavioral economics, and related it to standard economic models.
- Consider some specific aspect of an environmental issue, for example, the weight given to future generations in determining the appropriate response to global warming. Then consider how the view on this specific varies across economists or between economists and others.
- Do you think like economists assume you think?
- There are many economists who consider why we have ethics and social norms. Find one, study their work, and tell us about it.
- Study some specific school of environmental thought, or the writing of some specific environmental thinker, and relate the perspective to the economic perspective on the environment.

I will bring in a number of books that consider issues that could generate a good essay.

If you are still looking for a topic:

One possibility is to find something in the course notes or readings and expand on it. For example, the notes briefly discuss the hypothesis that each individual has a fixed level of happiness from which it is very difficult to deviate for long. One could research this hypothesis in greater detail, writing an essay that could be make part of the class notes on happiness, including the evidence for and against the hypothesis, and its implications for consumer theory.

Someone could write for example on the moral philosophy of David Hume or John Stuart Mill, expanding on what I say about them in class.

I always appreciate great stuff that I can add to the course notes, pretending I wrote it.

Before you write an essay paper, you need to research the topic

This requires that you read the literature and understand the relevant economic, ethical, and philosophical concepts. This is problematic because I will not lecture on everything relevant to your topic before your essay is due – you will have to read ahead.

An essay is not something you just site down and write from you wealth of personal knowledge about the world.

Journalists for the NYT do the research before they write the article.

The place to start your research is the articles on the web page for this course, and my lecture notes. Many of you will also find useful readings on the web page for my environmental economics course (4545). My feeling will be hurt if you do not consider these sources.

An essay requires a bibliography and references to factoids etc. People who write essays are basically collecting, condensing and synthesizing the work of others. You are not the first to write on your topic, and your reader needs to know this.

My problem with some of the “detailed proposals” will be that there will be no indication that you have researched/learned about your topic. Your research on your topic should be under way. Your first essay assignment should reflect the fact that your research is under way.

In your topic proposal, I will be frustrated by a lack of economic or philosophical arguments that I can critique – a proposal that only says, “I will analyze x”, puts me in a place where there is nothing I can do to help you. All I can do is frustratingly say, “So, analyze it.”

An essay on which you receive no objective feedback will likely be deficient on one or more dimensions, and will receive a poor grade. This is a primary reason I will discourage changing topics midstream. A secondary reason is that all of the thought I put into your original topic is wasted.

A good essay requires good writing

I write a lot, but the product is rarely well-written.

When I use the word “essay”, I don’t mean term paper; rather something more in the five to ten-page range. Produce an essay that will become a reading for the course.

Think of yourself as a reporter for the New York Times (or some other big newspaper or magazine) who is writing an article that will be published on the newspaper’s web page.

Study some of the articles from the NYT on the course web page wrt to how they are written and organized. Try to emulate them. Note that they often start with something very specific.

Also study how I write up class notes and essays for the course – you might conclude there is much room for improvement.

I want something from you that is like a NYT article that I can publish on the course web page.

Include links in your essay that provide more detail and related material (make sure you are not linking to pages that have since disappeared)

Given the amount of effort I will devote to your essay, I do not want to read something that is poorly written: organization, exposition, grammar and punctuation are all important. Every step of your essay needs to be well written. You, hopefully, know what you mean when you write or say something; that does not mean other people will know what you mean. Have others read your essay and comment on it: make sure what they understand is what you wanted to say.

For some of you, exposition and grammar will be an issue. Get someone to help you with this. Have your friends read your essay and have them explain to you what they think it says, without continuous feedback from you on what you were trying to say. This is typically an enlightening process.

Carefully check every sentence for consistency with all of the others – sometimes you contradict yourself, even though that was not your intent.

Writing is a difficult thing, especially if you don’t do it all of the time. Assume what you initially write is a start but needs improvement.

The university has resources to help you improve your essay, but you need to make appointments well in advance.

It is always nice to start your essay with an abstract of 100 words or less, telling the reader what your essay is about. That way, they can quickly see if the topic is something they are interested in.

Stuff to be wary of

I would discourage essays whose intent is to show some action or policy is good or bad. E.g. a paper that says we must save the wolves or feed all the starving children.

Be wary of writing an “editorial” rather than article.

If you do want to argue that we should save the wolves, you can’t just say “the benefits of doing so are greater than the costs. You better provide some evidence, references to back up your assertions, etc. Otherwise, the reader has no reason to believe you.

That said, I doubt whether you will be able to estimate all of the benefits and costs before your essay is due, so I would not take on a mission that requires this estimation for success.

For example, one can’t simply assert that “the benefits of reducing solid-waste pollution in the U.S. are less than the costs.”

That, said a paper simply estimating the economic benefits and costs of saving wolves, or reducing solid-waste pollution, would not be appropriate for this course.

Search your essay for statements about actions or policies that suggest the action is “correct”, “right”, “wrong”, “efficient”, or “inefficient” etc. In most cases you will not have the evidence to reach such a conclusion. One is better served with statement like, “it would be xxx if one assumes” or bla thinkers would find this “wrong”

I will jump on statements like we must do xxx, unless you make a very persuasive argument that we should.

Convincing me that something is bad does not convince me (and it should not convince you) that the bad needs to be eliminated. The question is always whether eliminating the bad is worth it in terms of costs. My backyard currently looks terrible, but the cost of doing something about it this week (or maybe ever) is too high.

You are presenting arguments and points of view. For the most part you are not reaching conclusions about what should or should not be done, or whether something is right or wrong. Your job here is not to reach normative conclusions but rather to make your reader think critically about your topic, to think about it in new ways.

Remember that any statements of fact or estimates of things need to be referenced when they asserted.

You can write an essay that assumes we should pursue some goal and then discuss how best to achieve that goal. This is different than writing about whether we should pursue the goal. For example, consider two different topics: “Should there be universal health care in the U.S.” vs. “What is the best way to provide universal health care”. If your topic is the later, you should not be discussing whether we do or don’t want universal health care. If you wrote about the latter you would simple say I am assuming the goal is universal health care, or I assume the goal is saving the wolves.

Or, the difference between arguing that we should improve the lot of the poor, vs. increasing the minimum wages a good way to improve the lot of the poor.

When you turn in a draft of your essay, treat it as the essay on which your final grade will be based.

If the terms **externality** or **mark failure** appear in your essay, you better read my 4545 notes on market failures and externalities.

You can’t say, “What we are doing is not **sustainable**” unless you cite extensive literature to that effect, or make very clear that this is simply your unsubstantiated opinion. Citing papers that say “what we are doing is not sustainable” does not substantiate the point unless one is citing the research and conclusions of experts - journalists and popular writers are not experts. Of course, you can make clear that the people you are quoting are not experts, but that calls into question why you are quoting them in the first place.

Think about admissible evidence in court. For example, the difference between the coroner, who is a medical doctor, testifying that Bill died of a heart attack and the reporter for the local newspaper testifying that Bill died of a heart attack.