



ASSIGNMENT RATIONALE

sample · student · handout

This is a sample handout that Professor Steve Joordens provides to his students to introduce them to an assignment he uses in his Introductory Psychology class of 1500 students. The information provided is intended to help his students understand his rationale for the assignment and to help prepare them for the process they will experience.

Welcome to your peerScholar assignment!

You may have heard about peerScholar. We have had peerScholar assignments in past versions of this course but, because we are always trying to make things better, the details of these assignments change from year to year. This page is meant to give you the details of this year's assignment, along with the educational philosophy behind it all. I really hope you find the assignment engaging, and that you learn a lot from the experience.

Philosophy

In many of your classes, especially in your first and second year, you will be tested primarily via multiple-choice tests. Multiple-choice tests focus on your ability to learn the concepts of the course; relevant people, theories, terminology, etc. Clearly this is an important part of why you're here, and a well designed multiple-choice test can assess that well.

However, I often argue that the teaching of concepts is only one part of what a professor should be doing in a university setting. They should also be teaching students how to think well, and communicate their ideas clearly. How can we teach those sorts of cognitive skills? Well, cognitive skills are no different from any other skill. If a student wants to throw a football better, how do they learn to do that? Well, they try it, they watch others who are better than they are to see what they're not doing right, they might watch people worse than they are to feel good about their learning so far, but mostly they just practice. If you throw a football enough, especially if you take the time to learn from those around you, you eventually improve. The same is true for cognitive skills; you learn to think and communicate by trying it, learning from those around you (i.e., your peers), and you try it some more. Given all this, I feel that part of what university professors should be doing is giving students exactly this sort of practice. That is the goal of this assignment.

The Process

The exact process may be a little different from what is described below, and I will highlight those differences if there are any. But for now, here is a description of the general process.

The assignment occurs across 4 phases, each of which will give you a chance to think in various ways, and to communicate your thoughts. In this section I will outline the phases, and justify what I hope each will do with respect to helping you to think and communicate effectively (skills that will help you in every aspect of your future life).



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CENTRE FOR TEACHING SUPPORT & INNOVATION

I want this assignment to be interesting for you, and the best way I know to do that is to focus it on an issue that I think is provocative and relevant. Provocative issues can evoke emotions, and emotions are great as a source of cognitive motivation but the goal of the assignment will be to present reasoned arguments not emotional ones. The keyword to keep in mind is RESPECT. Humans have different perspectives on contentious issues, and to resolve those issues it is important we that we respect each other, and keep our discussions rational. I will be assuming that you will all respect one another, and me and our course, as you do the assignment.

OK, so with that provision in place, the context of this assignment this year will be Should We Conduct Research on Animals That We Would Not Conduct on Humans?

Phase 1: Reading, thinking, arriving at an argument, then presenting it clearly

As I described in the ethics section of Chapter 2, the current scientific practice is to have one ethical code applied to human research, and a much more permissive ethical code applied to animal research. Essentially, we can expose animals to research procedures that we would consider unethical if applied to humans.

However in Chapter 3 I outlined the principles of evolution, a theoretical framework that most scientists accept. One tenet of evolution theory is that there is no meaningful distinction between humans and other animals. Yes humans may show more complexity of behaviour than any other animal, but they are seen as another species that has the same basic properties and arose from the same basic process as did other species.

But wait, if scientists believe that humans are not meaningfully distinct from animals, then how do they justify performing procedures on animals that would be considered unethical if performed on humans? Doesn't their acceptance of dual ethical codes suggest that, at some level at least, they think there IS a meaningful difference?

As I told you, it was an Introductory Psychology student who first posed this challenge to me, and they did so in

such a persuasive way that I started reading, thinking and researching the issue, and all of this ultimately lead me to write a paper in which I argue that we SHOULD NOT conduct research on animals that we would not conduct on humans. I will make this paper available ... please give it a read.

Note that the argument I am making goes directly against the current practice. So clearly not everybody agrees with my perspective (that happens a lot with me by the way!). That means this is a good contentious subject, relevant to this course and to science in a general. A great context for an assignment meant to induce thought. So as you read through the paper, think about the points I make. Do you agree? Am I missing something? Do you think I'm being sneaky and not telling the whole truth? Ultimately my hope is that you come up with some idea, or counterargument, or even another argument in favour of my perspective but CRITICALLY something that represents YOUR reaction to this issue.

So your initial task is to write a short composition that highlights one - just one - idea, argument or counterargument, and expresses it convincingly. Think of it as an argument in which you are trying to persuade the reader about some other relevant point and how it relates to this general issue. I DO NOT want a summary of my argument. This assignment is about your perspective, your reaction, your thoughts, and your ability to back them up well.

The entire argument should be short, about 3 to 6 paragraphs of about 3 to 8 sentences each (I give those numbers just to be concrete ... they are not rules per se). The first paragraph should highlight the issue you will be focusing on, perhaps briefly presenting my position. The next should introduce your perspective on the issue and highlight how it is different. The next two to three paragraphs should provide the facts or logic or data you use to argue the perspective you have taken. If necessary, you may feel the need to have a final paragraph that brings it all together. Whether or not you need a final paragraph likely depends on how complex your argument is. Complex arguments often benefit from a summing up paragraph, simple ones sometimes don't need one.

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The brief composition will be due on the Phase 1 due date as specified by Professor Joordens. To submit it you log into peerScholar, paste your composition into the appropriate spot (or create it there), then submit it by the due date.

Phase 2: Learning from your peers

In the second phase of the assignment you will learn more about effective argument and communication by analyzing the work of a subset of your peers. Specifically, when you log back into the system after the Phase 1 due date has passed, you will see six anonymously presented compositions. You will be asked to read each, and to ultimately provide a rating of quality and both a positive and a constructive comment. As you do this with the compositions assigned to you, six other students will also be rating and commenting on your composition. This process is called peer assessment.

This phase is likely different from anything you've been asked to do before. Usually you never see the work of your peers. Instead, some "expert" provides comments and evaluations. But that is a bit like learning to throw a football without ever seeing others at your level trying to throw a football. Seeing the work of your peers gives you a good sense of how well you are arguing relative to others at the same level. In addition, as you try to provide fair ratings and give useful comments, you will find yourself thinking about why some argument seems stronger than another. That is, you will be learning through discovery instead of just listening to someone like me try to tell you what the characteristics of good arguing are. This is called inductive thinking (or, a constructivist approach to learning) and it has been shown to be much more powerful than traditional forms of just "being taught".

Of course, you will only benefit from this assessment phase if you take it seriously and try to give your peers useful comments and reasonably accurate ratings. Although the ratings you give to your peers, and those they give to you, will not count toward your final grade on the assignment, the quality of the ratings and comments you provide will count. That is, we can assess how well your ratings differentiate between strong and weak compositions (as independently graded by TAs), and

each student will be asked to comment on the usefulness of the comments (see Phase 3 description below). When the TAs provide a final grade, they will take the comments into consideration as they do so. What this means is that we'd like you to play the teacher during this part of the assignment, and to try your best to do a really good job when you do. Doing so will maximize your learning, and will benefit your peers.

Another thing to notice about this phase is that you will now be exposed to six perspectives on this issue. Some of these arguments may be in line with yours, some may be different. Thought and argument are stronger when one sees things from multiple perspectives, and that's part of the idea here, too. Just remember, grade the effectiveness of the argument, not whether or not the author of the argument agrees with the argument you provided.

Your ratings and comments will be due on the Phase 2 due date as specified by Professor Joordens. You will do all your rating and commenting within the peerScholar platform as Professor Joordens will describe.

Phase 3: Revising in the context of peer feedback

Once the Phase 2 due-date has passed, you will log back into the system and will then see your composition along with the 6 sets of ratings and comments provided by your peers. Your ultimate task is to revise your argument in a way that makes it stronger, and to do so by "wisely" taking into account the comments of your peers. However, you will also be asked to perform a few other steps along the way.

Part of the idea here is to get you performing what is called "self-reflective" thought. As you read each of the comments, I want you to think about them and to assess how valid you think they are. As you go through life, others will constantly give you their feedback on how you are doing; how you dress, the music you like, how good of a job you're doing at work, whether you are fun to live with, etc. Sometimes their opinions are correct, sometimes they are not. A valuable skill is listening to the opinions of others, considering them in light of what you know about yourself, and deciding whether the opinion is or is not valid. Then you modify

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your behaviour in light of the valid feedback, and you ignore the invalid feedback. To formalize this process, we're going to ask you to rate how useful you found each of the comments, and to also rate how accurate you feel the rating of your work was. Again, all of this is intended to promote self-reflective thought.

After going through the comments and deciding which are useful, you are then to revise your original composition in a way that you think makes the argument stronger. Note, if your first argument was very strong, then perhaps the right thing to do is to not change it. But if the comments, or your self-reflections, convince you that you can improve your work, this is your chance to improve it.

Your ratings of the ratings and comments, and your revised composition, will be due on the Phase 3 due date as specified by Professor Joordens. Your ratings are done within peerScholar, your revised composition can either be pasted into the appropriate submission box, created within peerScholar, or uploaded.

Phase 4: Seeing your final mark and the TA comments

You do not have to do any work in Phase 4. Rather, Phase 4 is about you seeing your final mark on the assignment along with TA comments.

Specifically, once Phase 3 is complete a small army of TAs will give you a mark on your work, and will provide comments that justify the mark they give. Your final mark will be out of 9, and will be broken down as follows:

- **3 points...** to reflect the quality of your final composition. The TA will assess your composition primarily in terms of how effectively you argued the perspective you chose. This will include how well you justified your position with facts, logic or data, how well you communicated your position, and will also consider basic writing aspects (grammar, spelling, etc.)
- **3 points ...** to reflect the quality of the feedback you provided to your peers. This will include an assessment of the quality of your ratings, and will also include the TAs opinion on how accurate and well communicated your comments were.
- **3 points...** to reflect how accurately and well you revised your work in light of the comments you received in Phase 3. Did you ignore useful comments, or revise your composition based on poor feedback?
- = **For a total out of 9 points**

You will see your mark broken down in this manner along with a TA comment related to each breakdown.

I realize this is complex assignment, and that it requires you to keep lots of dates in mind, and to do the right things at the right times. Hey, those are valuable life skills as well. I do hope that you see the rationale behind all this, and that you understand that I assign this work because I think it can be very beneficial to you in the future. Databases have information, Scholars have information and know how to use it to effectively to bring about change ... to their lives, and maybe to the world. As a professor, I hope to help produce Scholars, and this assignment is a small part of that larger goal. Please see it that way, and put some serious thought into it! Thanks.

