

## Notes to Guide Reading

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Week 1, Section 1: Features of the Academic Argument, and Introduction to Global Justice

### Reuters, “Truck of Corpses, New Shipwreck Intensify Europe's Migrant Crisis” (27 Aug 2015)

- This article, which provides a number of discouraging *descriptive* claims about the current refugee crisis in Europe, is intended to motivate the different types of academic arguments we commonly make—and which are relevant to writing in normative political theory.
  - This article is also a prelude to the first substantive issue-area we’ll be discussing this term: the rights and treatment of migrants.
  - In this vein, you can ignore the specifics of this article. What you need to understand, instead, is the difference between three categories of arguments: descriptive, empirical, and normative.
  - **Descriptive arguments** defend claims of fact—claims, in other words, that describe *how the world is*. For instance, if we were to argue that the refugee crisis in Syria is getting worse, we would be making a descriptive argument. And to defend this descriptive claim, we would appeal to evidence that confirms the truth of the worsening situation for Syrian civilians and refugees (e.g., actual figures of the number of refugees who have left Syria, the number of Syrians housed in refugee camps, the estimated number of Syrians who have died making the journey to the European continent, the number of civilians who have died in the Syrian conflict, etc.).
  - **Empirical arguments** defend claims of cause-and-effect—claims, in other words, that explain *why the world is the way it is*. For instance, if we were to argue that it is both Assad’s brutal regime and the violence perpetrated by ISIS that primarily explain the exodus of Syrian refugees to Europe, we would be making an empirical argument. And to defend this empirical claim, we would appeal to evidence that confirms that of all of the different possible causes that might explain why Syrian civilians are fleeing the country—which will require us to first know *how the world is* and will invariably involve appealing to relevant *descriptive* facts (e.g., the number of innocent civilians in who have died in the Syrian crisis).
  - **Normative arguments** defend value-judgments—claims, in other words, that explain *how the world should be*. For instance, if we were to argue that no one should have to endure violence by the state, or that the international community should intervene militarily against the Assad regime and ISIS, we would be making a normative argument. And to defend this normative claim, we would appeal both to normative principles (which is the focus of our class) and also to empirical and descriptive evidence. For arguing that some status quo is normatively problematic or needs to change involves both knowing *how the world is* (e.g., Syrians are fleeing in mass numbers to Europe) and also understanding *why the world is the way it is* (e.g., it was the Assad’s regime abusive response to peaceful protests that prompted the current civil war, and it was this civil war that motivated opportunistic extremists to violently create a new Islamic State).
  - **Major takeaways** here are two-fold. First, normative arguments are not arguments of opinion. The value judgments scholars of normative political theory defend are sophisticated arguments grounded in complex ethical and theories and principles of logic and epistemology. Second, normative arguments are not divorced from fact: as we will see throughout the semester, normative political theorists often incorporate descriptive and empirical facts into their writing to motivate the ethical problems they engage. What drives the normative argument, for example, that the international community should intervene militarily in Syria are the myriad descriptive and empirical facts that confirm and explain the widespread violence against innocent civilians.
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### Program for Writing and Rhetoric, *Knowing Words* excerpt (chapter 6)

- This reading should be a review for students from their introductory writing courses on the components of the rhetorical situation (purpose, audience, context) and rhetorical appeals writers make (ethos, pathos, and logos) to convince their audiences of their arguments.
- You should feel comfortable with the different components of the academic argument, since you will be emulating this in your own writing this term:
  - **Introduction:** grab your readers' attention and make them want to read on. With your writing in this class, you should strive to start your normative arguments with some real-world example (descriptive or empirical claim) that demonstrates why we should care about your thesis.
  - **Background:** clarify important and/or contested concepts, terms, ideas that give your reader the context necessary to understand the argument you make. This will require you to think through the rhetorical situation and determine who your target audience is and what assumptions and pre-existing knowledge they may have about your topic.
  - **Claim:** present a clear, specific, and interesting/contestable thesis. Your claim (thesis) should only consist in the conclusion you are arguing is true, and should be no longer than one sentence. It should avoid vague language, and it should be narrow in scope (e.g., arguing that legalizing abortion is wrong is much more narrow than arguing that everyone has a right to life). Moreover, if your thesis seems obviously true, where no reasonable person would contest its truth, it is probably not interesting or worth defending in a paper (e.g., we should protect the welfare of innocent children).
  - **Reasons and Evidence:** the truth of your claim depends on providing adequate and compelling reasons and evidence in support of its truth. In conducting research, it is common to find reasons and evidence that contradict our argument: you should know the different recommended approaches to responding to these contradictory reasons and evidence.
  - **Counterarguments:** the strength of your argument depends on responding to possible weaknesses in or objections to your argument—whether these counterarguments regard your assumptions, central claim, reasons and evidence, or warrant—that reasonable people may level against you. With all of your writing this semester, you will be required to defend your argument against possible objections, which will require you both to show why the objection is plausible and also why it is ultimately wrong.
- You should also familiarize yourself with the different logical fallacies I provide (from *Knowing Words*, chapter 4), so as to ensure that you avoid making these mistakes in your own writing.

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### Nagel, "The Problem of Global Justice" (2005)

- This is a long and dense article with *a lot* of moving pieces and assumed background knowledge, and I assigned it to emphasize (1) that it can be very difficult to identify the central argument an author makes, and (2) that the nature of political theory scholarship requires you to read our assigned course readings very carefully—briefly skimming these readings will not suffice.
- That said, be able to answer the following:
  - What is the difference Nagel draws between humanitarian duties and obligations of justice?
  - Why does the existence of sovereign states (nations) pose a problem for the cosmopolitan account of justice? This will require you to think through what cosmopolitanism in this context means.
  - Why does the "political conception" of justice, as Nagel terms it, deny the idea that justice extends beyond geopolitical borders?