

Philosophy, Ethics and Writing: Argument, Voice and the Page

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Layout demonstration — sample record, not a published paper.

Abstract

How do argument and voice divide the work inside one sentence? This chapter treats form, voice and the page as three things to be checked separately, and says why the real failure mode in ethical writing is vagueness rather than ornament.

Keywords: argument; ethics; voice; writing

1 Introduction

Writing about ethics is writing about choices someone will act on. That makes clarity a requirement rather than a style, and it makes the page a place where a claim can be tested before it is used.

This chapter separates three things that are usually discussed together: the form of an argument, the voice that carries it, and the layout that lets a reader check it. Each is examined on its own and then in combination.

The text is a specimen. No position is defended; what is offered is the arrangement a defended position would need.

2 Argument as a form

An argument is a form before it is a position. Naming the form first — claim, reason, objection, reply — makes it possible for a reader who disagrees with the conclusion to follow the path that produced it.

- State the claim in one sentence that could be false.
- Give the reason that carries the most weight, not the most reasons.
- State the strongest objection in the words of someone who holds it.

The third instruction is the one that changes the writing most. An objection written in a caricature protects the argument; an objection written fairly tests it.

3 Voice without decoration

Voice in ethical writing is not ornament. It is the trace of a decision about what to say plainly and what to leave to the reader, and it shows up most clearly in the sentences that could have been hedged but were not.

A hedge is honest when the evidence is uncertain and evasive when the writer is. The same word can be either, which is why the distinction has to be made case by case.

The practical test is whether removing the qualifier changes what the sentence claims. If it does not, the qualifier was decoration.

4 The page as a test

Layout is where an argument meets a reader who is tired. Paragraphs that each carry one step, headings that say what the step is, and a first sentence that can be read alone are not typographic taste; they are the difference between an argument that can be checked and one that can only be admired.

A finished chapter would add the cases that make the argument concrete and the counterexamples that keep it honest. The specimen keeps the structure and leaves the cases to their sources.

References

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