



How to Write an Ethics Bowl Case

Writing an Ethics Bowl case begins with looking at the world closely enough to notice the ethical tensions that we have learned to ignore through our social habits and assumptions. Most good cases do not involve a dramatic moral catastrophe. Instead, they examine practices in our society that seem mundane, familiar, or socially accepted.

First, identify a contradiction. Reflect on the things we do every day and identify actions that feel uncomfortable, unfair, or difficult to justify. Intuition is helpful here. A potential starting point is thinking about the subtle hypocrisies or inconsistencies that all of us fall prey to—when we say we support a general principle but engage in practices that seem to conflict with it. We may say we value autonomy while supporting technological innovation that allows for mass surveillance. We may value equality while tolerating a system of unpaid internships that disadvantages poorer students. We may value consent while engaging in a culture of mindlessly clicking “I agree” for internet service agreements.

Then, examine yourself. A case writer should identify assumptions they themselves rarely question because those assumptions are built into the world they inhabit. What practices feel obvious only because they are familiar? What compromises have become invisible through repetition? Which harms are treated as “unavoidable” collateral damage when they may instead be the product of active choices? Are traditional grading systems really the only way to evaluate students effectively, or do we only think so because of tradition? Should response time in text messaging be a measure of closeness in relationships? Is our pre-professional “networking” culture just and equal?

Once you identify the ethical tension, think of a specific scenario in real life that forces someone to confront it. Ethics Bowl cases work through situations of life, not through abstract ideas. “Privacy” is not yet a case, neither is “inequality,” “surveillance,” or “free speech.” A case emerges when it is clear that we, as a community, must make a decision and can no longer avoid the contradiction built into the situation. The case should therefore place the reader at a point of pressure. Something has happened, a decision has to be made, and the usual assumptions no longer provide an easy answer. The case text should make competing values visible without resolving them for the reader. From there, provide enough context to make the problem intelligible. Identify the stakeholders, the relevant history, the interests at stake, and the consequences of the available choices. Facts should not be included because



they are interesting. Each fact should help explain why the problem exists or why resolving it is difficult.

A strong case also resists telling the reader what to think. It should not be a disguised argument. If one side appears foolish, malicious, or morally empty, the case needs more work. The ideal case constructs a situation in which reasonable people could disagree.

The final question to consider is whether the case reveals something larger than the immediate decision. A strong Ethics Bowl case takes a particular moment and exposes the structure or system beneath it. The reader should finish the case recognizing that what first appeared ordinary contained a moral problem that had been there all along.