



How to Read an Ethics Bowl Case

Ethics is concerned with solving problems about how one ought to act, what one ought to value, and what obligations people have to one another. Your first consideration when reading an Ethics Bowl case, then, is to identify what exactly the central problem is. Before deciding your position, you should be able to explain what is at stake, why the situation creates a genuine ethical difficulty, and what competing considerations make the problem hard to resolve.

Start by identifying the stakeholders. Who is making the relevant decision? Who is affected by it? Who has interests, rights, responsibilities, or vulnerabilities that matter to the case? Stakeholders should not be treated as a list of people who happen to appear in the text. The point is to understand how each party stands in relation to the problem and what claims they might reasonably make. From there, identify the values or moral considerations that structure the disagreement. A case might involve fairness, autonomy, harm, responsibility, loyalty, equality, dignity, consent, freedom, or some other concern. These values begin to form the ethical framework through which the case can be understood. You do not need to begin with a formal philosophical theory. What matters first is recognizing what your understanding of right and wrong requires you to pay attention to.

The next step is to distinguish the facts of the case from the ethical judgments being made about them. Facts tell you what happened, what choices are available, and what consequences may follow. Ethical claims tell you why those facts matter. Do not assume that a fact carries its moral significance on its face. Ask what principle makes that fact relevant and whether the same principle would apply consistently elsewhere. Once the central problem, stakeholders, and values are clear, begin identifying the tensions between them. Most Ethics Bowl cases are difficult because there might be multiple reasonable moral considerations that can point in different directions and result in different conclusions. Protecting one value may come at the cost of another. Respecting one stakeholder's claim may impose a burden on someone else. The central task is therefore not to discover a value that everyone accepts, but to determine how competing values should be weighed and whether some considerations should take priority. As you read, test the limits of each possible position. Ask what assumptions an argument depends on, what facts would strengthen or weaken it, and what consequences would follow if its principle were applied consistently. You should also try to reconstruct the strongest version of positions you initially reject. Ethics Bowl rewards the ability to understand disagreement before attempting to resolve it.



By the end of your reading, you should be able to state the ethical problem clearly, identify the relevant stakeholders, explain the values in conflict, and describe what any proposed resolution would have to account for. Only then are you ready to argue for a position. The goal of reading an Ethics Bowl case is not to arrive at an answer as fast as possible. It is to understand the problem well enough that your answer responds to it.