



How to Plan an Ethics Bowl Presentation

An Ethics Bowl presentation should provide the scaffolding for an argument strong enough to withstand scrutiny. The goal is not simply to state a position and provide reasons for it. A good response to a case should make clear how the conclusion follows from a set of moral commitments, how those commitments apply to the facts of the case, and why the argument continues to hold once complications are introduced.

Begin with a clear answer to the question. Your position need not (and often should not) be absolute, but it does need to be identifiable. A presentation that spends several minutes describing the difficulty of the case without telling the audience what it concludes has yet to make an argument. State what you think ought to be done, permitted, prohibited, valued, or prioritized. From there, identify the principles or set of considerations that make your conclusion reasonable. This is the foundation of the response. If you believe one stakeholder's interests should take priority, explain why. If you appeal to autonomy, fairness, harm, responsibility, or another value, explain what that value is required in this case. A moral principle should do argumentative work rather than appear as a label attached to a conclusion.

The next step is application. Connect the principle to the specific facts of the case. This is where an argument becomes more than a general statement about right and wrong. Explain which facts matter, why they matter, and how they change what the principle requires. The audience should be able to see the movement from moral consideration, to relevant fact, to conclusion.

A strong response should then always place pressure on itself. Ethical reasoning depends on abstraction—or the ability to generalize. Without abstraction, one could never move from the particulars of a single case to a general claim about fairness, autonomy, responsibility, or harm. Abstraction will inevitably require throwing away particular bits of information of a particular case in order to arrive at a general ethical principle. The question is whether the details being omitted are morally relevant. Testing a potential argument means asking what happens when some of that particular information is restored. Do stakeholder interests change? Does the principle still make sense when circumstances change? Does a distinction that first looked incidental turn out to matter morally?

Nuance can be useful, but nuance must be precise. Saying that 'it depends,' that 'both sides raise important concerns,' or that 'the issue is complicated' is not substantive unless you can articulate how



the complication affects the reasoning. Useful nuance identifies which distinctions matter and explains why they matter. It tells us when two cases that appear similar should be treated differently, or when a difference between them can be ignored. Do not merely tell us that there is nuance, but show us the what, why, and how.

You should also anticipate the strongest objection to your position. Do not choose an objection because it is easy to answer. What would a reasonable person who understands your argument but disagrees say? Determine whether your argument can answer that objection without abandoning the principles on which it was built. If it cannot, revise the argument to account for the previous limitations. By the end of a response, the audience should be able to reconstruct your reasoning. They should know your conclusion, the principles supporting it, the facts that make those principles relevant, and the limits of your claim. A good Ethics Bowl response is therefore less like a speech and more like a structure. Every part should support the next, so that when a question introduces a new complication, the argument bends where it should without collapsing.