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## Chapter 8 : Academic writing

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## CHAPTER 8: ACADEMIC WRITING

### Paragraphs

#### Quotable quotes

“I try to think of a paragraph as the answer to a question or as support for a main point I am trying to make” (Joe Napier in McKernan, 1991, p. 94).

- **A brief introduction to paragraphs**

Paragraphs should contain fewer than 150 words and use sentences of varying lengths, to form a logical unit of the subject matter.

If you can write a paragraph well you are on the way to writing a good essay, for both are organised in similar ways. Each has a main idea or topic sentence towards which every other part contributes by providing evidence or illustration. What distinguishes a paragraph is that it should only contain material on one main subject; it should not stray from the point; unity is central to paragraph construction. Keep to the one topic, the one period of time, the same action and the same place or character. Paragraphs should help the reader keep on the track of the essay’s main points by dealing with them in an organised manner.

Good paragraphs have specific topic sentences to guide the reader, to control the content. Evidence and support develop the main idea which can be placed at the beginning or the end of the paragraph. Paragraphs require linking words to connect them with other ideas contained in other paragraphs. Examples of such transition words or signals are:

As an example  
Indeed  
To illustrate  
In conclusion  
Despite this,  
On the contrary  
To contrast  
Meanwhile

# Writing a paragraph

***In a word or two:***

**What is the topic?**

**Who is your audience?**

**What is the key idea?**

**What supporting detail or facts do you have?**

- 
- 
- 

**In a complete sentence or two:**

**What is the main idea? (Topic sentence)**

**Restrict or expand the main idea**

**Give another example or some detail to illustrate the main idea**

Convert what you have written to a paragraph with the topic sentence

- at the beginning,
- at the end, or
- at the beginning and the end

Rewrite your paragraph

- Varying sentence length
- Replacing vague words with specific, concrete words
- Using transition words to connect sentences

### Discussion exercise

In groups of three use the paragraph template on p. 69 to construct paragraphs on the following topics:

- The main problems in student writing ....
- Listening is a learned skill ....
- Audience analysis improves writing ....

Exchange your paragraphs with another group and develop a marking scheme to evaluate them.

### Team tasks

1. In pairs write a paragraph on "Sometimes you have to do housework" using a general to specific order –with the main idea placed at the beginning.
2. Rewrite your partner's paragraph using a specific to general order with the main idea placed at the end.
3. Read the two paragraphs together and decide which version you prefer.
4. Work on a task your group is currently involved in – like a group report – improving paragraphs by changing topic sentences and including transition words.

### Individual tasks

Take an essay you have written for this or another subject and edit it either on computer or by writing on your typed copy.

- (a) Change all sentences so that no sentence begins with "the"
- (b) Substitute specific language for general terms, eg., "dog" becomes "red setter"
- (c) Change passive to active voice, eg. "The report was compiled by four students", becomes "Four students compiled this report".

### Journal entry

"The difference between writing at university and any other writing I have done is ....".

### Speech opportunities

Deliver a 30 second to one minute speech with an introduction, a middle and a conclusion on:

"Paragraphs are the core of writing ...."

"Writing without a plan is ...."

"A paragraph without examples is ...."

"For want of a paragraph the essay ...."

### Sources of information

McKernan, J. (1991). *The writer's handbook* (2nd ed.). Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace.

## Essay Writing

### Quotable quotes

“Difficulties in adjusting to the oral and written components of university study were encountered by students who had performed well in University Entrance examinations, as well as those who performed poorly. These problems appeared to result from the very different essay writing and communication skills needed in secondary school, compared with skills required for tertiary study. Most students were able to plan essays and write descriptive prose, but were not accustomed to assembling material from a variety of sources, analysing it to find material relevant to a set topic, synthesising ideas, developing arguments and writing in a scholarly style.” (Bochner, S. (n.d.) *Evaluation of a CD-ROM tutorial on writing skills for First Year Students*. Unpublished Paper: Macquarie University School of Education).

### Key stages in constructing an essay

1. **Define the Audience:** Who are you writing for? What do they expect?
2. **Select your Topic:** What is your topic? What do you know about it? What do you need to know?
3. **Find Information:** Where can you get information? Books, Journals, CD-ROMS, Internet, librarians.
4. **Sort:** articles or photocopies, highlighting and writing ideas in margins. Arrive at key ideas, find supporting evidence, avoid copying other writers.
5. **Plan:** where to put what, getting key ideas up front and then supporting them.
6. **Write:** the first draft.
7. **Read:** the draft critically. Is it logical? Is it convincing? Do you signal changes of idea with transitions?
8. Have you done what many good teachers do?
  - Tell them what you are going to tell them.**  
Thesis statement or key idea.
  - Tell them.**  
Give details and supporting evidence for your key idea in as many paragraphs as it takes.
  - Tell them what you have told them.**  
Clearly sum up your argument.
9. **Edit.** Spell check. Vary sentence lengths. Put key ideas first and evidence after. Replace vague words with specific concrete words. Use transition words to connect sentences. What can you cut out? What must you add? Have you clearly identified sources and given p. numbers for any quotes over three words?
10. Read it out to yourself. Ask a friend to act like a critic and tell you where your essay is good and where it is vague or unclear or has errors of reasoning.
11. Rewrite.

### Sources of information:

Germov, J. (1996). *Get great marks for your essays*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin. Recently written by an Australian academic in an informal style, this paperbook will help anyone who wonders why other people write better than they do in essays, reports and exams.

McKernan, J. (1991). *The writer's handbook* (2nd ed.). Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace.

**A DIAGRAM OF AN ESSAY**

Scratch out a five line plan in note form as a guide as you write

Capture attention and lead into thesis statement (your argument in one pithy sentence) which clearly addresses all key elements in the question. Provide some background and point to the essays purpose and audience, avoid generalisation.



Transitions McKernan P.142

Transition Words

In Paragraph I elaborate on one of the main ideas in the thesis statement. Give evidence and examples.  
Make a link to the next to the next idea in the following paragraph.

- Again
- In addition
- Accordingly
- Consequently
- Therefore
- Since
- Before
- In the same way
- Similarly
- Although
- And yet
- For instance
- In comparison



Connection between ideas

As for Paragraph II Check spelling, punctuation.



Connection between ideas

As for Paragraph II & Paragraph III with different aspect of your case.



Connection between ideas

- Conversely
- Even though
- However
- In spite of
- Nevertheless
- As has been noted
- In particular
- Therefore
- To emphasize
- As an example
- To illustrate

Examine the opposing case.  
Meet objections to your case that the reader may have.  
Show your case is stronger, more reasonable



- For this purpose
- Although
- Nonetheless
- As stated earlier
- As the next section will show
- Finally

May have more paragraphs if your information and argument warrants.



CONCLUSION

Ask yourself "Would an intelligent person agree or disagree with this paper?"

**Definitions adapted from Bate, D. & Sharpe, P. (1990)  
*Student writer's handbook* : How to write better essays.  
Sydney: Harcourt , Brace, Jovanovich, p. 5.**

**Analyse:** Separate or break the subject matter into its parts to discover their nature, proportion, function and relationships.

**Argue:** Systematically support or reject a position by presenting reasons and evidence for acceptance or rejection, while indicating your awareness of opposing points of view.

**Compare:** Find similarities and differences between two or more ideas, events, interpretations etc. Ensure you understand exactly what you are being asked to compare. For example, if asked to compare adversarial and problem solving approaches to negotiation on which aspects should you focus?

**Contrast:** Similar to compare. Usually the difference is that you should concentrate on dissimilarities.

**Describe:** Recall facts, processes or events. Try to provide a thorough description, emphasizing the most important points.

**Discuss:** Present a point of view, that of others and /or your own. This is likely to entail both description and interpretation. Your opinion should be supported by arguments and evidence.

**Evaluate:** You are being asked to appraise in order to make a judgement which means considering both strengths and weaknesses.

**Explain:** This will require you to analyse in order to assign or interpret meanings clearly. You should avoid merely describing or summarising for your focus is on the 'why' or 'how' of a particular issue, with the aim of clarifying reasons, causes, effects.

**Outline:** Give an organized description or an ordering of information in which you state the main points. Present the information in a systematic arrangement or classification.

## Academic Essay Requirements Feedback Sheet - Attach to front of essay

**Tutor:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Student's Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Assignment Grade:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Submitted on Time:**  Yes  No

**Itemised Rating Scale**  
(ticked when applicable)

**STRUCTURE**

- The first paragraph contains a clear statement of the thesis and indicates background, focus and direction
- Hierarchical relationships made clear before details
- Paragraphs organised around a topic sentence
- Clear sequence of ideas
- Ideas related and integrated by transitions
- Quotes smoothly integrated or introduced
- Conclusions drawn from preceding argument and unambiguously stated


- Rambly, incoherent beginning
- Unconnected details
- No coherence in paragraph
- Ideas not organized
- No connection between one idea and the next
- Quotes stand alone
- Conclusion absent or not related to previous argument

**APPROACH AND ARGUMENT**

- Logically developed argument
- Adequate analysis of subject
- Critical evaluation of subject
- Accurate presentation of evidence
- Based on reliable evidence or authority


- Essay rambles & lacks continuity
- Superficial account of subject
- Uncritical account of subject
- Much evidence inaccurate or questionable
- Excessive reliance on opinion or generalization

**SOURCES AND THEIR USE**

- Adequate acknowledgement of sources
- Effective use of sources
- Appropriate evidence chosen
- Correct citation of references


- Inadequate acknowledgement of sources
- Insufficient use of sources
- Inadequate choice of evidence
- Incorrect referencing

**STYLE AND PRESENTATION**

- Academic, formal language & tone
- Appropriate fluent piece of writing
- Rich & varied vocabulary
- Succinct writing
- Legible and well set out work
- Grammatical sentences
- Correct spelling throughout
- Fluent expression
- Correct use of indefinite & definite articles


- Colloquial English
- Clumsy expression
- Cliché ridden expression
- Unnecessarily repetitive
- Untidy and difficult to read
- Ungrammatical sentences
- Much incorrect spelling
- Un-English word order
- Does not use 'a' or 'the' where appropriate

- Sections left blank are not relevant to this assignment.
- Some aspects are more important than others, so there is no formula connecting the number of ticks in boxes with the grade given.



**Writing tasks:**

Using the outline on p. 72 write an essay on one of the following topics:

1. Professor Goodwin of the University of Southern Queensland and convenor of the Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee (AVCC) academic standards panel on English had this to say about Australian University students:

“Academics who complain of the “illiteracy” of students often take a very limited view of what “literacy” is. It may turn out to depend on a student’s knowing the intricacies of the past-tense forms of “lie” and “lay”. On such tests, many current students—perhaps most—fail. But they have abilities that the golden age of students—invariably our own generation—lacked. They are not afraid to express their ideas, not fearful of making grammatical errors that will lose them marks. They concentrate on ideas and arguments and they have an ability to organise them into a case without days of agonised procrastination. The transition from school experience to university experience is less violent than it once was. At school, students learn what word-processing can do to help them write (and spell); are required to assemble information and ideas and present longish essays; and they have a more relaxed association with teachers and libraries than used to be so. In other words, they are in many ways better prepared for university than previous generations” (Goodwin, K. (1992, Nov 5–11) Mickey Mouse and the study of English. *Australian Campus Review Weekly*. p. 14).

Write an essay arguing for or against the case that present Australian university students are better prepared for university than previous generations.

2. In his book *Sharing the Country* Frank Brennan says:

“As we work towards the first centenary of federation, we should be able to define ourselves as a nation owning its past and embracing its future, including that of Aborigines. For they are entitled not only to welfare assistance to deliver them from their poverty but also to special recognition as the inheritors and custodians of the only culture and heritage that are unique to this land. This will require an avoidance of inflated rhetoric and a clear statement of the parameters for negotiation and discussion. The process will go nowhere unless it involves State governments as well as the Federal government. It will also require the involvement of Australians who are not Aboriginal. For their part, Aboriginal communities and their leaders on the national stage will have to accept principles that are non-negotiable including the sovereignty of Parliament, equality of treatment and opportunity for all Australians” (Brennan, F. (1991) *Sharing the country: The case for an agreement between black and white Australians*. Ringwood, VIC: Penguin).

Write an essay arguing for or against Brennan’s view that Aborigines are entitled not only to welfare assistance to deliver them from their poverty but also to special recognition as the inheritors and custodians of the only culture and heritage that are unique to Australia.

3. In the late 1980s and early 1990s several prominent business people who are now called “Corporate Cowboys” or “failed entrepreneurs” lost a great deal of other people’s money. Many people feel that governments should seek to prosecute these former business people to the full extent of the law and ensure that they take responsibility for the business failures over which they presided and the loss of shareholders’ funds which resulted from these failures. Others feel that nothing is to be gained from investigations and court cases over corporate affairs.

Write an essay arguing for or against the case for holding business people responsible for the failures of companies in which the public have invested funds.

4. On the one hand we rely on the news media to inform us about the world and on the other we value our privacy.

Write an essay arguing for or against the view that in the interests of an informed public there should be no restrictions upon the freedom of the press.

5. Our greatest resource is our children and yet in their early years most children are cared for by people who have no formal training in being parents or in developing relationships with others.

Write an essay developing the argument for or against the proposition that all people over the age of 18 should have undertaken classes in parenting and relationship building.

6. The time has come to legislate that all positions in business, government and the professions not only be open to both men and women but that there should be equal numbers of men and women at all levels of all organisations in the interests of—
  - i. making the best of human talent
  - ii. in the interests of equity and “a fair go”

Write an essay arguing for or against the case above.

“Hollywood no longer reflects—or even respects—the values of most families. On many of the important issues of contemporary life, popular entertainment seems to go out of its way to challenge conventional notions of decency” (Michael Medved in “Hollywood Versus America” quoted in *Hollywood Guilt* (1993, April 10–11) *The Weekend Australian*, p. 1).

Write an essay arguing for or against the case that Hollywood movies no longer reflect or respect the values of most families and that on many of the important issues of contemporary life popular entertainment seems to go out of its way to challenge conventional notions of decency.

8. “Currently 35 per cent of all marriages end in divorce, but up to 37 per cent of the divorced people regretted their divorce five years later”. Heather Carmody quoted in Fisher, S. (1993, March 25). “Divorce regrets prompt help program”, *The Australian*, p. 2.

Write an essay arguing for or against the suggestion that all couples entering into marriage or wanting to register a de facto relationship for legal purposes be rewarded with a \$500 grant if they undertake a course in marriage guidance and relationship counselling. Your essay should outline the benefits of such a course for couples and for society.

9. “Emphasising academic achievement only is causing the Australian education system to neglect aspects of education which are vital to the development of a well rounded individual”, Mr. Webb, Principal of Scotch College in Adelaide quoted in Lideman, D. (1993, March 22). “Private school head hits obsession with results”. *The Australian*, p. 4.

Write an essay arguing for or against the proposition that secondary schools are obsessed with results to the detriment of the education of students.

10. “The extraordinary opportunity that exists for us is that, as we undertake the biggest economic changes in our history and learn to cope with the social problems they create, as we reorientate ourselves in Asia–Pacific and the world, we still have the option to redefine ourselves. We still have the option of a new Australia. We still have this pragmatic, republican option”. Don Watson, from a speech given to the Australian Republican Movement. Watson, D. (1993, August 20). “How to become a young country at last”, p. 14, *Times Literary Supplement*, pp.13–14.

“Far from being multicultural, an Australian Republic could turn out to be more monocultural than at any time in the country’s history, demanding total loyalty not merely to the flag and the constitution, but to Australian–ness in an all–embracing, perhaps even claustrophobic sense” (Mount, F., 1993, August 20). “Is the Monarchy a link or a shackle?” *Times Literary Supplement*, p. 14.

Write an essay supporting the view of an Australian Republic you consider to be most likely to be accurate.

11. The 1993 murder of the child James Bulger by two older boys in England brought calls for the destruction of violent videos on the grounds that they influence those who commit violent crimes.

Assemble the evidence for and against the negative influence of violent video material, decide what you think the government’s policy ought to be and argue the case for your view.

12. In your first job after graduation you are invited to your boss's house for dinner. At the table a woman called Chriselda dominates the conversation. Chriselda says "Will someone tell me why all these unemployed people don't have to do some work for their unemployment benefits? Why are they allowed to sit at home watching TV or going surfing? Why can't they be required to do some useful work like minding the latch-key kids whose parents work, building walking tracks in the local parks, delivering meals on wheels or any number of things that aren't being done because society can't afford the wages? They need only do it for four hours a day and could use the rest of the day to look for work. It would give them confidence to contribute to society".

Everyone at the party had something to say. You remember people saying these things—

"Imagine trying to supervise people who don't want to work. It would be impossible—worse than being a warder in a gaol".

"Chriselda, don't you know any history? What you are proposing is worse than the workhouses in England where they gave people busy work like picking oakum just to keep them from relaxing".

"Don't be so ignorant, Chriselda. People need to be paid a just wage for what they do—not be exploited for mere benefits".

"Don't worry, it's all a capitalist plot. Unemployment is necessary to create a pool of labour ready to take up the jobs of the people who complain about poor wages and conditions".

"Chriselda, if you feel like that you could give up half your wages and employ someone yourself. It's up to individuals, not the government".

"Look, these people can't help it. Most of them lack the skills to get jobs in a technological world. As the jobs get more complicated fewer people can do them".

"I think it's computers. They have taken away jobs".

"Chriselda why don't you give up your job and look after your kids yourself? Then someone else would have a job".

"Have you any idea how demoralising it is not to have a job? Why should the unemployed suffer any more indignities? Do you think it's fun not to be able to afford even a bus fare after you've paid the rent and the electricity and the no-frills food?"

You think about unemployment and decide to research the topic and write a persuasive argument answering the question "What should we do about unemployment?" so that the next time you are in such opinionated company you will have some idea of what you think on the topic.

13. "The use of marijuana ought to be decriminalised." Argue for or against this statement. Explore the literature thoroughly so that you can produce a clear argument of your own on this topic. Read the following articles and other references you can discover: Wilson, P. (1993). *Beyond the Witchhunt: Decriminalising illegal drugs*. 7th Lionel Murphy Memorial lecture. Sydney: The Lionel Murphy Foundation.

What is marijuana? *Drug Forum Summer, 1991/92*, pp. 31–32.

14. Jocelyn Scutt (1991) argued:

"Even if it were true that men are naturally more aggressive than women, and women biologically programmed to be caring and nurturing, whilst men are not, all the more reason to alter our patterns of socialisation and education; all the more reason to train men to be less aggressive and to be nurturing, instead of embracing patterns of socialisation and education which deliberately set out to make boys MEN and girls WOMEN, exaggerating the qualities the biological reductionists, the 'traditionalists' and sociologists didactically inform us are 'naturally' 'male' and 'female'. p. 171. Scutt, J.A. (1991). The domestic paradigm: Violence, nurturance and stereotyping of the sexes. *Women's Studies International Forum*. 14, pp. 163–172.

Write a persuasive essay supporting and developing this argument and explaining how men might be trained to be less aggressive and to be nurturing.

15. Australia's multiculturalism is an advantage. Outline the cultural, economical and social advantages of a multicultural Australia to an audience you know is extremely hostile to the idea.
16. Nationalism is a curse and Australians should be wary of being infected by such a disease. Argue this case.
17. Welfare groups are arguing that if the Queensland Government spent on welfare what it spent on the Indy Car Race, the money would be better spent. Argue for or against this case.
18. Cats are to Australia's finely ecologically balanced fauna population what rabbits were to its flora.

Write an essay arguing for and against that laws should be passed to control the increase in the cat population because .....

19. In a recent perusal of an e-mail bulletin board discussion series on racism I came across the following comment:

"A *New Yorker* (July 25, 1994) article reported on a preparation of racial categories for Census 2000. In it arguments were presented that "race" is in fact nonexistent. Most of us "choose our race". For example, a child of a Taiwanese father and a Swiss mother can choose a race arbitrarily, in fact belonging to no racial type. I myself have Italian, English, Irish, Cherokee roots (and more). To what race do I belong? Japanese, a group that claims racial homogeneity rather stubbornly, is at this point in history a broad mixture of Chinese, Korean, Ainu, Portuguese (and other no doubt) bloodlines. Native Alaskan peoples have been variously stereotyped as "Pacific Islanders", "Asians" and "Native Americans". The notion of race itself is a stereotype, and not a helpful one (Guy Modica Sept 14, 1994. gmodica@jpnucba.bitnet).

After doing some research on the topic, argue the case for and against that:

The notion of race is a stereotype and not a helpful one and we should not request that people identify themselves by race on government or business forms.

20. Australian historian Geoffrey Bolton said in 1994:

"As Australians attempt to redefine their sense of nationalism there is more than a risk that a European past, especially the British part of it, will be repudiated. It is not certain that it will be replaced by a wider and more tolerant internationalism." Bolton, G. (1994, September 28). Revitalised history can still make its presence felt. *The Australian*, pp. 32-33.

- a) Argue for or against the case that a more tolerant internationalism in trade and in social relations is based on an understanding of history.
  - b) Argue for or against the case that national identity is unnecessary in an age of speedy communication.
  - c) Argue for or against the case that Australians need to develop a national identity that sets them apart from any of the nations that contributed to Australia's population.
21. What can be done with young people who break the law? Consider the long term effects of your solution in the lives of juvenile offenders and in its effects on the community.

**Reference:** Gale, F., Naffine, N., and Wandersilz, J. (1993). *Juvenile justice: Debating the issues*. St. Leonards NSW: Allen & Unwin.

22. What causes school violence? What are its effects and how can it be eradicated?

**Reference:** *Sticks and Stones: Report on Violence in Australian schools.* (1994). House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

23. What should be Australia's stance on China's human rights policies?

"China's human rights situation will probably be very strained for a long time to come. It is not a matter of holding China to impossibly high "Western" standards; reasonable conformity with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights will suffice. The problem lies, of course, with the Chinese government's policies and priorities, which allow precious little room for individual freedoms, public expression of dissent and due process of law. More frequent and public conflicts between arbitrary authority and private persons and groups seem inevitable. And as China becomes more enmeshed in the world, the world will become more enmeshed in the comings and goings of Chinese citizens. (p. 117). Gurtov, M. (1994). *The future of China's rise.* Asian Perspective. 18 (1). pp.109–128.

24. In an editorial about Bangladesh writer Tasleema Nasreen who faced death threats from Muslim extremists, Asiaweek suggested that:

"Dhaka could learn a lesson from Southeast Asian nations with Muslim majorities. At the first signs of extremism, Malaysia and Indonesia act quickly to remove rabble-rousers. What may be lost by squelching a radical's freedom of expression is usually gained in terms of the promotion of law, order and, most importantly—tolerance".  
*Tasleema in Extremis*, Asiaweek (August 24, 1994 p. 20).

What is being advocated in this article? Give your reasons for or against agreeing with this view. Decide how you would deal with Tasleema Nasreen and persuade your readers or audience to share your views.

25. The right of an individual to bear arms has no validity in modern urbanised societies.

Argue for or against this case.

26. American culture dominates the world through its media products.

Argue for or against this proposition.

27. "What are the causes of strikes?" Examine the different relations between employers and trade unions in various countries and suggest reasons why some countries have high levels and others low levels of strikes.

28. "What should Australia's policy on immigration be in the next century?"

29. "What constitutes sexual harassment?" Give reasons for its occurrence and suggest ways that it might be reduced.

30. "How violent is Australian society?" Explain how the level of violence could be reduced in our society.

31. "Our society does not accommodate the needs of adolescents".

32. Suggestions for reducing traffic accidents involving young drivers"

33. Recent brutal senseless murders of young people have resulted in calls for the death penalty to be reintroduced. Write an essay which puts the case for or against the reintroduction of capital punishment.

34. Recently the issue of Taiwanese independence has been in the news.

- Argue for or against Taiwanese independence from Mainland China.
35. Argue for or against the proposition that Australia should lower the voting age to 16.
  36. Argue for or against the suggestion that Tertiary education should be free and all students should receive a living allowance.
  37. Argue for or against the suggestion that Workers are powerless without collective action.
  38. A multicultural society could be “strong in diversity”. Persuade your readers what must be done by Australia to avoid the disharmony and division experienced in other multicultural societies.
  39. Write an essay arguing the case that jingoistic chauvinism is an anachronism.
  40. Argue for or against arranged marriages.
  41. Argue for or against the proposition that Asian cultures undervalue women.
  42. “Human beings care about one another.”  
Argue for or against this case.