



The Ethical Reasoning Challenge (ERC)

Condensed Handbook and Sample Prompts

INTRODUCTION

The goal of this competition is to increase your understanding of ethical dilemmas by examining the reasons behind particular moral positions. ERC's structure guides you to study *why* someone holds a certain moral opinion and *how* such an opinion could be rationally defended. It asks students to grapple with the reasoning behind people's positions on controversial social, cultural and political issues.

The Ethical Reasoning Challenge is a debate-style competition developed and produced by ThinkerAnalytix. In the competition, teams examine arguments for and against positions on common ethical issues. Winners are decided not by which teams are most persuasive but on the depth of understanding and engagement with the arguments.

ThinkerAnalytix hosts an Ethical Reasoning Challenge annually in the spring campus at Harvard University. It draws students from various high schools in the Boston area.

Where argument mapping gives students the core skills they need to understand, evaluate, and engage arguments, the Ethical Reasoning Challenge gives students an opportunity to practice those skills in a format that more closely resembles real-life dialogue. If argument mapping is like basic drills, the Ethical Reasoning Challenge is like a scrimmage.

How to Win

Your goal in this competition is to answer “on behalf” of the prompt. Your score is based on how well you explain the prompt's reasoning, and help the prompt make the argument it is trying to make. You can best do this by making sure your response answers these 4 questions:

- 1) What is the prompt claiming?
- 2) How does the prompt support this claim?
- 3) What does the prompt *get right*?
- 4) What should the prompt change to better support its argument?

Your goal is NOT to “debate” the prompt, but to “support” it. You must critically analyze the claims being made in the prompt, consider the different arguments being made in support of the central claims of the prompt, and consider both how these arguments *in fact* end up supporting the prompt's central claims, as well as how these arguments

should support the central claims if we were trying to produce the best version of the prompt we could.

It might help if you think of your role in this competition as being like a defense attorney, with the prompt as your key witness. Your job is not to disagree with the prompt, or prove it wrong, or argue about any facts the prompt is presenting. Instead, you need to offer the best *interpretation* of the prompt you can, in order to show the plausibility of what the prompt is saying.

The difference between this competition and the above example, though, is that you are not the only “attorney” here. In addition to working with your teammates to produce the best response on behalf of the prompt that you can, you will also have to respond to the opposing team’s idea of what these prompts are claiming. How should you respond to them?

When you respond to another team, you are still responding *on behalf of the prompt*. You do not get ANY points for *merely* disagreeing with the other team’s reading of the prompt. Your job is still to offer the best interpretation of the prompt that you can, and you can continue to do this by addressing these four questions when you respond to an opposing team:

- 1) What is the other team trying to say about how we should interpret the prompt?
- 2) What did they get right about this?
- 3) What did the other team say (If anything) that DOESN’T help the prompt reach its conclusion?
- 4) What should the other team have said (if anything) to help the prompt reach its conclusion?

Good ERC Responses:

- Engage the text
 - The prompt explains *what* the speaker thinks about a certain issue and *why* they feel that way. Good responses draw connections between the differing supporting arguments in a prompt that the speaker may not be aware of, or is only implicitly stating.
- Explain the prompt’s *implicit* assumptions
 - Implicit assumptions are assumptions being made to support an argument that are not explicitly (or directly) stated. An implicit assumption isn’t necessarily a *wrong* assumption, just one that needs to be emphasized in evaluating an argument.
- Point out flaws in the Prompt’s Reasoning
 - The prompts often contain multiple arguments for the same point, and these arguments are not always compatible. Figuring out which arguments work, which contradict other arguments, and which are worth arguing for is a significant part of this competition.
- Ignore irrelevant information

- The prompt often has metaphors or statements of personal feelings that are not directly related to the topic at hand. Good responses ignore these features and focus on the morally salient aspects of the prompts.
- Explain *why* you agree or disagree with an argument
 - It isn't enough to *just* say you agree or disagree with an argument. You need to *support* your claim that an argument does not work *with reasons*, and then explain how your evaluation of that argument affects the prompt's argument as a whole.
- Distinguish between something being *right* and something being *supported*
 - Sometimes the prompt will provide very good support for an argument that isn't itself especially convincing or persuasive. Other times, the prompt might offer a very good argument, but not offer much support in its favor. Your job is to offer support to the arguments made in the prompt that *deserve* support, and not just to note which arguments *are already* supported.
- "Signpost" the claims being made
 - In this competition, you often present an interpretation of someone else's interpretation of what some third person said earlier. Always try to clearly indicate *who* you are responding to with each of your arguments and *why* this argument is worth responding to
- Do not try to explain too many things at once
 - Despite appearances, these prompts engage in very complicated reasoning. Focus on giving a "deep" response to the arguments made in the prompt rather than focusing on as many different arguments as you can (depth over breadth).
- Do not "argue" with the prompt
 - Your goal in this competition is offer the best support you can for the claims made in the prompt. You should not try to "argue against" the prompt or show the prompt to be wrong unless you are doing so to emphasize other aspects of the prompt.

Bad ERC Responses:

- Mis-Read the Text
 - Most Bad responses are bad because they attack arguments the prompt or opposing team never made in the first place. Look over the prompt carefully before responding.
- Go Off-Topic
 - The prompts touch on many topics, and not all of these topics are morally relevant to the issue at hand. Ignore claims the prompts make that don't directly affect the issue in question.
- Argue Empirical Information
 - While the prompts might be *morally* wrong about an issue, the facts of the case are never in dispute in these prompts. Attempting to argue that the prompt got certain facts wrong is never a useful strategy.
- "Attack" the opposing team's response

- When you must respond to the opposing team, your ultimate goal is still to offer the best defense of the prompt's claims that you can. Emphasize what you both agree on and what the other team pointed out that you had not noticed. Only then should you explain what parts of their response you disagree with, and why.
- Reject Claims Without Good Reason (“That’s Just Your Opinion”)
 - If the opposing team says something you disagree with, you cannot claim that they are wrong because they are only “expressing an opinion.” ALL we are talking about in this competition are the different opinions one could have about a moral claim, so saying that someone else is “only offering an opinion” isn’t a criticism.
- Offer multiple bad arguments for one claim (“Counting Arguments”)
 - In this competition, your goal is to best support the claims made by the prompt. This is NOT the same as offering as many arguments as you can for a claim. Bad arguments are bad, even when you have a lot of them.
- Ignore other arguments in the prompt
 - Each of the prompts in this competition have multiple arguments, and you cannot respond to all of them. However, you also should not spend all your time on just one argument when it means there are significantly better arguments in the prompt that you are not addressing.

PRACTICE PROMPTS:

There are three sections of practice prompts here: 1) Rapid Fire Prompts, 2) Single Position Prompts and 3) Competition Prompts which present two different positions, on the same issue.

Rapid-Fire Prompts

- 1) The problem with lying to your friends is that friends are *more important* to you than strangers, and you can’t lie to strangers. Friends are people you have to do more for than you would for other people, and we know that lying is wrong most of the time. Therefore, lying to your friends is also wrong, and for the same reasons.
- 2) Sure, the Patriots may have been deflating their footballs, but it isn’t such a big deal. All the rules are arbitrary anyway, and I’m sure the Patriots winning the Super Bowl didn’t have anything to do with that, really. Besides, if the Patriots are so good at cheating, don’t they deserve some kind of reward for it?
- 3) I’m in favor of restricting gun rights, simply because there’s no reason not to restrict things we know we don’t need. We shouldn’t restrict water or air, because everyone needs those, and we never know how much is enough. But guns are the kinds of things where, even if you need *some*, you never need that many.

- 4) Certain actions have value *symbolically* – they matter to us because of what they represent, not because of what they in fact produce. Something like this seems to be true of things like attending funerals and going along with traditional holidays. If these things have value despite (or in spite of) their consequences, then perhaps the same could be said for the claim that voting has no value because one’s vote never “swings” an election.
- 5) If we take seriously the idea that people can *deserve* things from one another, the objections to the death penalty become easier to disarm. One can deserve a reward or punishment in virtue of their previous actions, and so it can be the case that one deserves to be put to death on the basis of some particularly heinous previous action. But this doesn’t show that we should in fact *have* the death penalty, it only shows major arguments against it do not work.
- 6) Many people think the problem with illegally downloading music is that the artists won’t get paid for their work, but that can’t be right. Artists sue their record companies for lack of payment all the time, and artists don’t *really* get paid when I listen to music on Youtube or Spotify, although that isn’t considered wrong. Maybe it’s true that we shouldn’t illegally download music, but it won’t be because this is what stops musicians from being able to make a living.

Single Position Prompts

PROMPT 1.

Separation of Church and State

Alcoholics Anonymous is a fundamentally religious program meant to help addicts end their destructive behaviors. I don’t have a problem with the program *existing*, but I’m not sure how I feel about judges being able to *require* convicted addicts attend AA as part of their sentence. Isn’t it wrong to make a religious program be legally required for non-religious people? I know AA *claims* it isn’t a religious program, but their meetings are often in churches and their program was originally meant as a cure for atheism as well as a cure for alcoholism.

Typically, people respond to this dilemma by pointing out that AA *works*, and people who complete the program are happy to have done so. If no one affected complains about it, how could it be wrong? But I don’t like this way of thinking about things. If we could successfully rehabilitate criminals by *forcing* them to have parts of their brain removed, this wouldn’t be morally right even if it worked and no one who had their brain modified complained about it. AA works, but it works by giving people a fundamentally religious worldview. There’s nothing wrong with such a view, but there *is* something wrong with the government *forcing* people to adopt that view as part of a legal sentencing. This violates the establishment clause of the first amendment, and is morally impermissible.

PROMPT 2.

Gun Control

Here's an obviously true moral principle: It's unfair to punish me for what other people do. Unless I made them do it, or there's some sense in which what they did is *my* fault, then you can't punish *me* for it since I had nothing to do with it. And if the only way you can punish *them* is to also punish me, you either punish them later or find some other way of doing it. You can't trample on my rights just because you're upset about something.

If that's true, then I can't understand why anyone is in favor of gun control. What it comes down to is this: I like my guns, and I enjoy buying them and shooting them at the range. There's nothing wrong with this, because I'm adult who's allowed to make my own choices with my own money. But now I'm supposed to *stop* doing these things and fundamentally change the orientation of my life pursuits and hobbies because *other people are irresponsible* with their weapons, and not because *I* did anything wrong. Isn't this obviously unfair?!

You might want to say that it's worth it to be unfair in order to save lives, but the thing is, I'm not the one killing anyone! Taking my guns away from me doesn't help anyone live! If a child accidentally shoots himself with his father's gun, you punish the father. You'd only ever think you should punish me too if you already thought I was no better than he was just for *owning* a gun in the first place.

PROMPT 3.

Teacher Salaries

You know, everyone *says* teachers don't get paid enough, but I don't buy it. Sure, teaching is very important and very difficult, but we already have too many teachers! There are always more teachers than there are teaching jobs available, even though 60% of teachers quit within the first five years of teaching. While there's a high demand for teachers, there's an even higher supply of them, so why pay more if what we pay them already is clearly enough for people to want to be teachers? I mean, it would *be nice* if teachers were paid more, sure. But they don't *have to be* paid more and *there's nothing wrong* with not paying them more. My point is we can always put the money somewhere better, so why should we ever put it towards paying more for the same teachers we already have?

Sometimes people talk about a "brain drain:" the problem that since teaching pays so little, people who *would* be great teachers choose to go into something else instead of teaching because they want to make more money. Well, I say good for them! If we already have too many teachers, having incentives for people to *not* go into teaching is exactly what we need! And clearly the teachers we already have are at least *good enough*. Just because we *can* have better teachers by paying more doesn't mean we should.

PROMPT 4.

Freedom of the Press

When people complain about the *Rolling Stone* cover featuring Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, they presumably mean to say that *Rolling Stone* did something *wrong* in featuring Tsarnaev on their cover. But I'm not so sure about that. Their main story for that issue was on Tsarnaev and his actions, so what else were they supposed to put on the cover?

Of course, no one objects to the *mere* presence of Tsarnaev. Rather, they object to what can be seen as a *glamorized* portrait of Tsarnaev on the cover of a popular magazine. Tsarnaev is not a celebrity, and portraying him like one can imply that what he did was acceptable or worthwhile when it clearly wasn't. After all, we don't *want* to encourage terrorists, opponents of the cover might say. I don't think this is very credible, however. The fact is, we *are* conflicted by Tsarnaev, who seems to be as horrendous as he is enigmatic. The cover captures our conflicted feelings about Tsarnaev, and is also an interesting conversation piece. Even tasteless art is still art, and even disgusting art is not morally wrong.

One could claim that there's something wrong with *making money* off a tragedy, but hasn't every news agency done this so far? Or maybe you'd think there's something wrong with *any* positive portrayal of someone who has done wrong, but that seems clearly extreme. In the end, we need to remember that it's just a magazine cover we'll all forget about in a month anyway. You don't have to *like* the cover, but that doesn't mean there's something *wrong* with it, either.

PROMPT 5.

Drug Legalization

I'm completely against drug legalization. The argument for the legalization of drug use seems to be that drugs don't really hurt anyone, and that most of the people getting hurt by drugs are the ones that are being arrested for using them. But this is obviously false. Drugs might be pleasant, but you can get addicted to them, and drug addicts often and easily ruin their own lives and the lives of others around them. That second half is the real problem; drug users might have rights to do whatever they want with their bodies, but they don't have the right to do what they want to other people, and one follows the other.

Sometimes people say that this is a slippery slope, that if we thought this way we would have to make alcohol and coffee illegal too. Obviously, coffee doesn't harm anyone, but alcohol does. And if being consistent means banning alcohol too, then so be it. Drugs (including alcohol) ruin lives, and our government should be involved in preventing people from ruining their lives and the lives of other people. If making *more* drugs illegal is part of this, so be it.

Finally, what about the people that are jailed as a result of unfair drug legislation? Most people say that minorities are disproportionately convicted of drug crimes compared to other groups, and that this is a reason to end "the war on drugs." But we shouldn't end wars just because some generals are corrupt. A change in how we prosecute and convict drug users doesn't require making *any* drugs illegal; it just requires diversity training and a more informed court system.

PROMPT 6.

Cheating on Standardized Tests

I don't feel any remorse about cheating on tests like the SAT, and I don't see why anyone can think it *morally* wrong. Obviously, people administering tests don't want you to cheat on them, and this makes sense. They want to measure your abilities compared to everyone else's, and one way to do this is to make sure everyone takes the same test. But

the problem is that this test doesn't just determine a grade I get, it determines *the rest of my life*. Isn't it wrong to let my math abilities as a high schooler determine my future income?

When I cheat on a test, I'm showing that I am able to succeed against unfair and arbitrary obstacles to my life goals by knowing what the rules are and how to get around them. This is *exactly* the kind of initiative and drive future employers should be interested in. Whatever else I do in my life, I will be hired for some future job on my basis to understand the goals my employer wants and how to reach them. I just want to focus on developing that skill instead of memorizing the definitions of words I will never use again.

What about people who work hard at studying, you might ask? The students who study harder than me, don't they deserve the future success that I'm fundamentally *stealing* from them? No, I'm not. They have just as much ability to cheat as I do, and if they choose the hard way to achieve success, that's their choice. Besides, what about the people that can't afford expensive SAT tutoring? Should they just be condemned to a life of poverty because their parents were poor too?

Competition Prompts

Round 1: Should Charter Schools Use Lottery-Style Admissions Processes?

(Prompt #1)

I go to a charter school, and I care about the quality of my classmates. If I didn't, I would be at a regular public school they would let anyone into. Since we've already decided to be in favor of schools specifically more elite students, I don't see why anyone would want to undercut this dedication to excellency by making it easier for less intelligent or less qualified people to get in. Allowing charter schools to make admissions decisions by lottery is akin to converting them into regular public schools, and a bad idea.

I'm not saying that people not in charter schools are lesser people, or that people in charter schools are somehow better. I'm just saying that, generally speaking, everyone should be able to receive the kind of education they are best fitted to have. "Quicker" students shouldn't be slowed down by "slower" students, and "slower" students shouldn't have to worry about the classroom being too stimulating or hard to follow. It is just better for everyone if we have *some* kind of tracking in place, and you essentially lose that if you make admissions to charter schools dependent on random chance. You'd be mixing together people that shouldn't be mixed, and removing the prestige that makes better educators want to teach there in the better place. Things are already hard enough for teachers, should we really make them harder?

Sometimes people claim charter school admissions tests are racist, and this is why we should switch to a lottery system. If that's really true, let's just switch to a better test! Otherwise we'd be letting all the murderers out of death row just because a couple of them were innocent. Just as guilty criminals deserve punishment, genuinely intelligent students deserve better schools; that we don't always sort these correctly is never a reason to stop sorting, just to do a better job of it. Charter schools are the last refuge of those who deserve better than the public school system can provide. It would be wrong to take that away from them.

(Prompt #2)

Charter schools were originally allowed to exist because we believed our children deserve better schooling than they had access to in their public schools. However, it turns out that the current way charter schools handle admissions effectively ensures that only the very people that are not in need of help are the ones receiving it. We can't keep stealing from the poor to give to the rich, and we can't keep charter school admissions policies the way they currently are. Short of getting rid of charter schools altogether, instituting a blind or lottery-style admissions process is the only hope of solving this inequality.

The thing about charter schools is that while almost *everyone* deserves a better education than they are able to get, some people deserve this more than others. If I stole ten dollars from everyone, everyone deserves ten dollars from me. But if I already spent most of it, then the money I have left shouldn't be split equally among my victims. It should go to those who have the least amount of money, because although everyone lost the same amount, they lost much more than those with more money. Our current admissions policy does the opposite of this, and this means we should change it.

Anyone who tries to disagree with me by saying that charter schools should admit on the basis of merit has failed to notice that too many people already sufficiently merit access to charter schools, and trying to pick which of those students merit it the most is a political nightmare. Better to just set a baseline requirement and then enter all those who exceed it in a lottery. This way, no irrelevant factors can get in the way of choosing the most worthy students. If the worry is supposed to be that this admissions style produces a random class of people who might not be the best class, then so be it! I'll take morality over efficiency any day, and so would anyone who really cared about our youth, and not just themselves.

Round 2: Should we allow the death penalty for especially heinous criminal offenses?

(Prompt #1)

Many people believe we should be against the death penalty because it is somehow contradictory to murder for the sake of preventing future murders. I don't think that's a good argument, but it suggests a much better one. We might think no one should ever be murdered, and so the same thing that makes the actions of murderers wrong also suggests why we should not consider capital punishments for any crime in particular: no one deserves to have their life prematurely ended, and since this is true of all people, it is also true of people who have ended the lives of others prematurely.

The worry here is that there's nothing capital punishment *does* to either the criminal or the victim's representatives that makes it worth doing. Killing someone who has committed murder doesn't prevent him from murdering again any more than life imprisonment would, and the victim's families cannot regain the love and support the criminal took away from them by allowing the state to execute him. Given that we should generally allow people to live unless we have good reason to have it be otherwise, what reason could we provide here? Capital punishment is as harsh as it is unmotivated.

Some people do think capital punishment has benefits, either because it prevents others from also murdering or because it provides some kind of closure for the families affected by the crime. But both of these are false. Capital punishment has not been shown to reduce the number of murders committed compared to places where we only have life imprisonment, and there are all kinds of ways for families to achieve closure that do not involve the killing of the criminal. Capital punishment makes sense as an intuitive response to wrongdoing, but not as a thought-out legal policy. If we remember that criminals really are people instead of monsters, then we should make sure we continue to treat them as people, even if they couldn't do the same for others.

(Prompt #2)

I believe in the appropriateness of capital punishment in extreme cases, and I'm sure most people who disagree with me just aren't worried about the extreme cases. Maybe someone who murders one person doesn't deserve the death penalty, but what about someone who murders many people without remorse for no particular reason? If there really are people who do irredeemably bad actions without good reason, why shouldn't the state have the right to forcibly remove their life from them? It isn't that implausible that at least some people really do forfeit their right to life when they show they don't care at all about anyone else's rights. We arrest people who violate other peoples' liberty, so why not murder those who murder others?

The idea is just that some things really are so bad that there's no reason to think they don't warrant the worst possible punishment for the person doing them. When we think of people who help commit genocide, or are personally responsible for the killings of hundreds of innocents, on what basis could we claim that we "aren't allowed" to do more to them than merely imprison them for life? In that case, why wouldn't murder, or torture, or whatever would be worse, be what their action merits. If you literally do the worst thing someone can do, and we generally think punishments should fit their crimes, is it so implausible that we should do the worst thing we can do back to you?

A big reason I think I'm right is that most people who dislike the death penalty dislike it for reasons that don't affect what I'm saying. So suppose it is true that the death penalty disproportionately affect minority and lower-income offenders. That would just mean we need to have a better sentencing system, not that certain kinds of sentences are not allowed. And suppose it is true that capital punishment costs more than life imprisonment. That would just mean we need to really justify giving someone the death sentence. That some people don't deserve the death sentence doesn't mean nobody does, and it is when you get to the more extreme cases that you see how important it is to make sure justice is served in both directions.

Round 3: Should we protect our environment from further harm by businesses and governments?

(Prompt #1)

I think it's obvious that we should work to protect the environment as much as we can once you're clear on what the environment really is. It isn't just some pool of mutual resources we all have claims on; it's something like the conditions of the possibility of any action whatsoever. And if you know what that means, you know that we have no

choice but to protect the environment insofar as we want to do anything at all – every action takes place in *some* place, and we can't have a future without having a place to have it in. Protecting the environment is just a way of protecting ourselves.

I don't mean that the environment matters because we should care about other species, or because nature is somehow inherently worth protecting. These things might be true, but I don't know whether they are, and I think we should protect the environment even if they weren't. Even if all you care about is making sure you are as happy as you can be, you won't be happy if you do things that destroy the environment because you have no choice but to continue living in the area you have now destroyed. People thinking they can benefit from harming the environment are like movie supervillains who believe they should destroy the world for personal gain: you can't benefit by destroying the thing that grants you benefits in the first place.

You might worry that I'm being too optimistic about how much environmental factors really affect us, because you can always ruin the environment in one country and keep living in another country. This seems to be what we do now, after all. The problem with this is that countries aren't actually different places – we all live on earth, and ruining the environment in one country will ruin *the earth*, even if it doesn't happen as quickly as we might expect. Just because the negative effects of harming environments happens too slowly to affect business decisions doesn't mean they don't happen, and when we do notice them, we'll wish we'd realized what we were really doing much earlier.

(Prompt #2)

By and large, I think working to protect the environment right now is a waste of time. It isn't that there isn't reason to think we can harm the planet (I'm sure we can) or that I believe the planet can easily and speedily recover (I'm sure it won't); I simply think that in order for the environment to be worth saving, we'd have to show that it's better for us to work on maintaining our current environment than it is to reap the advantages of our current structure and let future generations figure it out for themselves. I don't think you can ever show that, because it isn't true.

The problem is that, as time passes, we get better and better at creating technology to serve our ends. So right now, we are not very good at creating technologies to save the environment, but we are good at creating technologies that harm the environment and give us other benefits. Given how quickly we have technologically progressed in the past fifty years, why think we won't come up with better ways to save the environment within the next several years – ways that won't be feasible except for advances in technology we haven't actually made yet? The alternative is sacrificing our current productivity in the hopes that we'll figure a way out of the hole we dug ourselves into before we knew what we were doing. I'd rather keep digging and hope to find another shovel down there.

Sometimes people think we should save the environment because it isn't "ours" to waste; we inherited it and must also pass it on to our children, and it would be bad to use it all up for ourselves when it belongs to all of us. But I think we should care about what will make us *and* our children happier in the end, rather than what we have to do to be fair to dead relatives that don't even exist anymore. If I can take my child's college fund and invest it so my child will have *more* money than she would otherwise, that's worth

doing even if my child couldn't agree to it. If we really care about making the environment as well as we can, working on it right now is just not the right way to go about doing it.