

Sample Essay 1 for Philosophy & Political Thought 1

Professor Van Norden

NOTE: This is a paradigm of a good first essay for PPT 1. This is NOT your actual first essay prompt. Look on Canvas for your actual prompt. This is just to give you an example of what style to write in.

Length: 600-900 words

Learning Goal: Carefully explain to your reader what is said in the passage under discussion.

At this stage, your goal is interpretation and explanation, not evaluation or presenting an alternative conclusion. (That will come later in the course.) More specifically, make clear what conclusion(s) the author is arguing for and what premises he is appealing to. In explaining an argument, it should be clear how the premises are supposed to support the conclusion. Imagine as the ideal reader of your essay an educated person who has *not* taken a course like this one. (For example, you might write for a sibling, a parent, or a friend at another college or university.)

Topic:

- Explain the disagreement between Zai Wo and Kongzi over the three-year mourning period in *Analects* 17.21.¹

Formatting:

- double-space;
- use 12-point font, preferably Times New Roman;
- provide page numbers at the bottom of each page;
- include a title and your student number centered at the top of the first page;

¹ Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden, eds., *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2005), 50-51.

- use [*Chicago Manual of Style* “Notes and Bibliography Style”](#) for footnotes, except that you do *not* need to include a bibliography (notice that the footnotes in these directions illustrate the correct note format). If your work has been influenced by other sources in a general way but not so closely that a citation is in order, you should include acknowledgements.

Is the Confucian Mourning Ritual Justified?

Student Number: 12345678

Ancient Confucians claimed that one should mourn the death of a parent for three years. During the mourning period, one had to eat plain food, wear mourning clothes, and refrain from many activities.² Another Chinese philosophical school, the Mohists, criticized such prolonged mourning as wasteful.³ However, it was not just other schools that criticized the Confucians on this issue. From the *Analects*, the sayings of Kongzi (Confucius), we learn that one of Kongzi's own disciples questioned the wisdom of the three-year mourning period. In this essay, I shall explain the objection raised by Kongzi's disciple, Kongzi's immediate response, and the elaboration that Kongzi gives after the disciple leaves the room. Finally, I shall paraphrase Kongzi's complete argument.

In *Analects* 17.21, Kongzi's disciple Zai Wo argues that when mourning the death of a parent "one year is long enough,"⁴ because if "the gentleman" abstains from practicing rituals and participating in musical performances for three years, these activities will fall into disuse. Kongzi must concede that the neglect of ritual and music is bad, because in *Analects* 13.3, he himself states that "when ritual and music fail to flourish...the common people will be at a loss."⁵ In addition, Zai Wo argues that, after only a year, there will be a pressing practical need to harvest new grain and make new tinder. In short, Zai Wo's premises are that following the prohibitions dictated by mourning for three years leads to bad consequences. His conclusion is that mourning for one year is preferable, because it would not lead to these consequences.

² Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden, eds., *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2005), 50n152.

³ Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings*, 80-90.

⁴ Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings*, 50.

⁵ Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings*, 38.

In response, Kongzi does not deny Zai Wo's premises that the practice of three years of mourning leads to the neglect of the rites and music, and that it presents practical problems. Instead, Kongzi asks Zai Wo whether, after one year of mourning, he would "feel comfortable then eating [his] sweet rice and wearing [his] brocade gowns?"⁶ When Zai Wo replies that he would, Kongzi concludes, "...if you would feel comfortable doing [these things], then by all means you should."⁷ Kongzi explains that the gentleman avoids things like fine foods, music, and accommodations during the mourning period only because he "gets no pleasure...finds no joy...and feels no comfort" in these things.⁸ Kongzi's question implies that Zai Wo should obey the rules of mourning only if he has the appropriate feelings. This is consistent with the emphasis in other passages on the importance of having the right emotions. For example, in *Analects* 2.5, Kongzi states that being filial involves more than simply "being able to provide one's parents with nourishment." It requires that one be respectful.⁹

At this point in the dialogue, it appears that Kongzi and Zai Wo are in agreement that Zai Wo should cease mourning after only one year, even though they disagree about why this is justified. It is therefore surprising that, after Zai Wo leaves the room, Kongzi exclaims, "This show how lacking in Goodness this Zai Wo is!"¹⁰ Kongzi argues that the fact that "a child is completely dependent upon the care of his parents for the first three years of his life" explains why it is true that "the three year mourning period is the common practice throughout the world." Kongzi then concludes with a rhetorical question: "Did Zai Wo not receive three years of care from his parents?"¹¹ We can convert this rhetorical question into

⁶ Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings*, 50.

⁷ Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings*, 50.

⁸ Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings*, 50.

⁹ Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings*, 6.

¹⁰ Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings*, 51.

¹¹ Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings*, 51.

the following implied assertion: “Zai Wo did receive three years of care from his parents.” In other words, the justification for the practice of three years of mourning does apply to Zai Wo.

We can now paraphrase Kongzi’s complete argument as follows. In order to appropriately perform any ritual, one must have the appropriate feelings, so there is no reason to mourn for three years unless one is so sad that one “gets no pleasure” from the things one forgoes. Since Zai Wo is not motivated to mourn for more than one year, he should not do so. However, humans are “completely dependent” upon their parents for the first three years of their lives. Consequently, it is the “universal practice” for humans to mourn the death of a parent for at least three years. Thus, any human who is not motivated to mourn for three years is inappropriately unfeeling and, hence, “lacking in Goodness.” Since Zai Wo is like any other human in that he too was completely dependent upon his parents for the first three years of his life, the fact that he is not motivated to mourn shows that he is not Good.

In this essay I have examined the argument between Kongzi and his disciple Zai Wo about whether the practice of three years of mourning is justified. Zai Wo criticizes the practice as impractical, anticipating an argument later developed in more detail by the Mohists. Kongzi concedes that there is no reason for performing the ritual unless it expresses one’s genuine sadness. However, Kongzi is disappointed in Zai Wo, because he believes that any normal human being would feel such sadness for three years after the loss of a parent.

Is the Confucian Mourning Ritual Justified?

Student Number: 12345678

Ancient Confucians claimed that one should mourn the death of a parent for three years. During the mourning period, one had to eat plain food, wear mourning clothes, and refrain from many activities.¹² Another Chinese philosophical school, the Mohists, criticized such prolonged mourning as wasteful.¹³ However, it was not just other schools that criticized the Confucians on this issue. From the *Analects*, the sayings of Kongzi (Confucius), we learn that one of Kongzi's own disciples questioned the wisdom of the three-year mourning period. In this essay, I shall explain the objection raised by Kongzi's disciple, Kongzi's immediate response, and the elaboration that Kongzi gives after the disciple leaves the room. Finally, I shall paraphrase Kongzi's complete argument.

In *Analects* 17.21, Kongzi's disciple Zai Wo argues that when mourning the death of a parent "one year is long enough,"¹⁴ because if "the gentleman" abstains from practicing rituals and participating in musical performances for three years, these activities will fall into disuse. Kongzi must concede that the neglect of ritual and music is bad, because in *Analects* 13.3, he himself states that "when ritual and music fail to flourish... the common people will be at a loss."¹⁵ In addition, Zai Wo argues that, after only a year, there will be a pressing practical need to harvest new grain and make new tinder. In short, Zai Wo's premises are that following the prohibitions dictated by mourning for three years leads to bad consequences. His conclusion is that mourning for one year is preferable, because it would not lead to these consequences.

Commented [BVN1]: Imagine as your reader an educated person who has not taken PPT. Most educated people will have at least heard of "Confucianism," so you do not need to explain that this is a Chinese philosophical movement.

Commented [BVN2]: Since the topic of this essay is the three-year mourning period, and since most readers will not know what this is, you should briefly explain it.

Commented [BVN3]: Few readers will have heard of Mohism, so if you choose to mention the Mohists you must briefly explain who they were.

Commented [BVN4]: Most readers will not know what the *Analects* is, and many will not know that "Kongzi" is the Chinese form of the person best-known in the West as Confucius.

Commented [BWWN5]: I give the reader a "roadmap" to the structure of the essay.

Commented [BWWN6]: Yes, it is fine to use the pronoun "I" in philosophical essays.

Commented [BWWN7]: You can write a shorter introductory paragraph than this, but you should not write one that is much longer, because this essay is so short (600-900 words).

Commented [BVN8]: This tells the reader who Zai Wo is, and ties this paragraph to the previous one by the common reference to a "disciple."

Commented [BVN9]: The use of the quoted phrase makes the sentence lively, but you do not need to quote the entire sentence from the original.

Commented [BVN10]: I explain why Kongzi might be persuaded by Zai Wo's argument.

Commented [BVN11]: I cite another passage in the *Analects* to justify my claim that ritual and music are important to Confucians.

Commented [BVN12]: In this sentence I identify Zai Wo's premises, and in the next sentence I identify his conclusion, and explain how it is logically connected to his premises.

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¹⁴ Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings*, 50.

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In response, Kongzi does not deny Zai Wo's premises that the practice of three years of mourning leads to the neglect of the rites and music, and that it presents practical problems. Instead, Kongzi asks Zai Wo whether, after one year of mourning, he would "feel comfortable then eating [his] sweet rice and wearing [his] brocade gowns?"¹⁶ When Zai Wo replies that he would, Kongzi concludes, "...if you would feel comfortable doing [these things], then by all means you should."¹⁷ Kongzi explains that the gentleman avoids things like fine foods, music, and accommodations during the mourning period only because he "gets no pleasure...finds no joy...and feels no comfort" in these things.¹⁸ Kongzi's question implies that Zai Wo should obey the rules of mourning only if he has the appropriate feelings. This is consistent with the emphasis in other passages on the importance of having the right emotions. For example, in *Analects* 2.5, Kongzi states that being filial involves more than simply "being able to provide one's parents with nourishment." It requires that one be respectful.¹⁹

At this point in the dialogue, it appears that Kongzi and Zai Wo are in agreement that Zai Wo should cease mourning after only one year, even though they disagree about why this is justified. It is therefore surprising that, after Zai Wo leaves the room, Kongzi exclaims, "This show how lacking in Goodness this Zai Wo is!"²⁰ Kongzi argues that the fact that "a child is completely dependent upon the care of his parents for the first three years of his life" explains why it is true that "the three year mourning period is the common practice throughout the world." Kongzi then concludes with a rhetorical question: "Did Zai Wo not receive three years of care from his parents?"²¹ We can convert this rhetorical question into

Commented [BVN13]: "In response" gives the reader a signpost to how this paragraph is related to the preceding one.

Commented [BVN14]: I explain how Kongzi's argument is related to Zai Wo's argument. What is Kongzi disagreeing with and (equally important) what is he agreeing with?

Commented [BWWN15]: I replaced "your" with "his" to flow with the rest of the essay. I use brackets to warn the reader that I have done this.

Commented [BVN16]: I substituted "these things," for "them," which does not change the sense of the original sentence, but makes it flow better in the context of my essay. I use brackets to warn the reader that I have done this.

Commented [BVN17]: I use two ellipses (singular is "ellipsis") to mark text left out of the original.

Commented [BVN18]: I make explicit an implication of what Kongzi has said, but mark it as an "implication," rather than as something that is said explicitly.

Commented [BVN19]: I cite another passage as evidence for my claim that Kongzi thinks appropriate emotions are required in order for action to be genuinely ethical.

Commented [BVN20]: Because Kongzi's argument is in two parts and is complex, I briefly summarize for the reader what has been said so far.

Commented [BVN21]: I anticipate the reader's surprise at the turn the passage takes, and use it to mark a transition to the next section.

Commented [BVN22]: I make explicit how these two claims are logically related. (I originally wrote a lot more about this, but when I edited the rough draft I cut some sentences out here to be more concise. Was this the right choice?)

¹⁶ Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings*, 50.

¹⁷ Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings*, 50.

¹⁸ Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings*, 50.

¹⁹ Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings*, 6.

²⁰ Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings*, 51.

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the following implied assertion: “Zai Wo did receive three years of care from his parents.”

In other words, the justification for the practice of three years of mourning does apply to Zai Wo.

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In this essay I have examined the argument between Kongzi and his disciple Zai Wo about whether the practice of three years of mourning is justified. Zai Wo criticizes the practice as impractical, anticipating an argument later developed in more detail by the Mohists. Kongzi concedes that there is no reason for performing the ritual unless it expresses one’s genuine sadness. However, Kongzi is disappointed in Zai Wo, because he believes that any normal human being would feel such sadness for three years after the loss of a parent.

* * *

Things to notice about the preceding essay:

1. *This first assignment is about carefully reading and explaining a passage, not evaluating it. You will get a chance to evaluate arguments and develop your own position in later essays.*

Commented [BVN23]: I identify the fact that, although what Kongzi said is in the form of a question, it is intended as an implied assertion, and I identify what that assertion is.

Commented [BVN24]: Putting an argument into your own words is as important as making good use of quotations.

Commented [BVN25]: In this paragraph, I quote several phrases that we have already discussed from *Analecets* 17.22. I use quotation marks to show that I am citing the original text, but I do not necessarily have to provide a footnote, since the reader can easily find the original quotations earlier in this brief essay. (Some instructors will feel that a footnote is required here. What is essential is that I have used quotation marks around anything that is not my own words, and the reader has no doubt in this context what text I am citing.)

Commented [BVN26]: It is completely fine to use the word “I” in philosophical writing.

Commented [BVN27]: The references to the Mohists in this essay are not essential. They are just a way of making the essay more interesting by contextualizing it.

Commented [BVN28]: In my conclusion I simply summarize the main points of the essay, as briefly and clearly as possible.

2. *The essay helps us to understand better the arguments of Zai Wo and Kongzi. To do this, it makes explicit what the premises and conclusions of each argument are, and how they are related to one another.*
3. *Quotations are identified with quotation marks and the original source is provided.*
4. *Each paragraph has a coherent but distinct topic that contributes to the overall topic of the essay. No paragraph seems like an irrelevant digression.*
5. *Each sentence contributes to the topic of its paragraph. No sentence seems irrelevant to its paragraph.*
6. *There are signposts and transition words to let the reader know where we are going in the essay (“in addition,” “in response,” “instead,” “in other words,” etc.).*
7. *The introduction and conclusion avoid broad, unsubstantiated claims; they are brief and help the reader to understand the essay as a whole.*
8. *The writing style is simple and clear, rather than verbose and pretentious.*