**The positive approach**

*You don’t have to write things out in your actual paper in this order, but these are the steps that are used in making the “straightforward” argument.*

1. What are all the considerations that *could* be relevant to your thesis? That is, what are all the different sorts of things one might think provide reasons for and against [your topic]?
   1. Don’t bend over backwards here: think about the stuff your audience is going to think about (fairness, equality, harm, etc).
2. What are alternative plausible views (these are alternatives to your thesis)?
3. Which considerations favor your thesis, and which do not? Why?
   1. Be careful: a consideration might favor your thesis, but favor some different thesis more. You want to identify the considerations that favor your view over other plausible views, and the ones that do not.
4. For the considerations that do not favor your thesis:
   1. Argue that either they are not morally relevant (they don’t really generate reasons).
   2. Or argue that they are less important than the considerations that favor your thesis.

**The negative approach**

1. What are all the alternative plausible views (these are alternatives to your view)?
2. For each, argue that it is false.
   1. You might show that its claims about what matters, or how much these things matter, are false.
   2. Or it might have really implausible implications.
3. If all that remains is your view, you are done.
   1. For this to work, you have to really have engaged with *all* the alternative views.

**How to show something is not morally relevant**

*You don’t have to do all of this, but doing all of it gives you a strong argument.*

1. Find a specific example in which [that something] is present and *uncontroversially* provides no reason to act.
   1. Generally, you want to find an example about a different context than the one you are arguing about. You know your audience disagrees with you about that context, so probably aren’t going to agree with you about examples from that context.
   2. It’s easy to find cases where [that] doesn’t generate an *obligation*, but this might be because the obligation is overridden, or would be too demanding, or is impossible to fulfill. Those don’t support your claim.
   3. Ideally, what you are looking for is a case where, if [something] did generate an obligation, it would be easy to fulfill and there would be no downside to fulfilling it, and there is still no obligation. This suggests that [something] does not even give us reasons to act.
2. Give a more general, theoretical argument as to why [something] is not morally important at all.
   1. Look at Delmas’ discussion of fairness, Hampton’s discussion of equality, or my discussion of respect for examples.
3. If [something] sometimes *seems* important, discuss what would make us think that even it is not true.
   1. E.g. we might be mistaking [something else] for [something]. Think about our discussion of fairness in class: I claimed that the cases where fairness seems important tend to be cases where the unfair action also causes some harm, or where it also involves complicity, and *those* are what really matter.

**How to show one type of reason/duty is more important than another**

*You don’t have to do all of this, but if you can, that’s great.*

1. Find a specific example in which the two reasons/duties conflict
   1. As above, you generally you want to find an example about a different context than the one you are arguing about.
   2. If you are making a very general claim, you may need multiple examples (to properly generalize).
2. Show that, in this example, it is *uncontroversially* permissible to act as the first reason requires, and wrong to act as the second one requires
   1. What you say about this example has to be plausible to people who disagree with your thesis.
3. Show that that context is relevantly similar to the context you ultimately want to talk about
   1. Otherwise you can’t draw conclusions about your thesis from this example.
4. Give a more general, theoretical argument as to why the one is more important than the other.

**Giving Counterexamples**

*Some rules of thumb*

1. Focus on the claim that is most committal (the claim with the most entailments).
   1. The more entailments, the more ways to show that the claim is false.
   2. It can be helpful to look at the claim that applies in the broadest range of situations.
2. Look for cases right on the borderline:
   1. If the claim is “If x is true, then y is true,” look for cases where x is just barely true.
   2. If the claim “If either x or y is true, then z is true,” look for cases where x is just barely true, and y is not.
3. Don’t be afraid to add a lot of details to make the counterexample more plausible, even if this make the situation unlikely to occur. You often only need to show that there is a *single* counterexample, even if it is a very rare type of case.

**Responding to counterexamples**

A counterexample to your thesis is an example that a) your thesis says something about, and b) what your thesis says diverges from what is (obviously?) true.

To respond to a counterexample, you might claim that, in fact, your thesis doesn’t say anything about this case.

To respond to a counterexample, you might provide additional arguments that what your thesis says about this case is true.

To respond to a counterexample, you might claim that there is some feature of the example that confuses our judgments, producing misleading evidence.