

Writing a Moral Problems Paper

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I remember what it was like when I first began reading philosophy. All too often, the language seemed stilted, the examples contrived and improbable, and the reasoning tortuous. I fought my way through difficult texts, and in the process learned how to read such texts more efficiently—that is, I learned how to get more out of them, and to do so faster. But I picked it up on my own; no one taught me. Certainly no one ever offered me a set of tips or guidelines on how to do it.

I hope the following remarks help you acquire some of these skills more quickly and easily. Very little of what follows is absolute, for reading and writing well are much more of an art than a science. I hope the following suggestions help you in acquiring that art.

Philosophy as Conversation

Philosophy is often a dialogue. Plato used the dialogue format explicitly, but it is implicit in much of contemporary philosophical writing, especially in articles. Essentially, articles are snippets out of a conversation. One philosopher (it's rare for philosophical articles to be co-authored) is explicating, commenting on, criticizing, or fine-tuning the work of other philosophers. We often see the thread of a conversation running through a group of articles, each of which comments on and attempts to improve upon its predecessors, thereby giving rise to yet further contributions to the conversation. Part of the greatness of key philosophical works—such as Plato's dialogues, Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Augustine's *Confessions*, Aquinas's *Summa*, Descartes' *Meditations*, Hume's *Treatise*, Kant's three *Critiques*, Hegel's *Phenomenology* or Heidegger's *Being and Time*—lies precisely in their ability to initiate a wealth of such conversations, sometimes continuing for centuries.

The conversational character of philosophical discourse has some important implications for how you can best read philosophical texts. Keep the following points in mind:

If philosophy is a conversation, then you are walking into the middle of a conversation when you pick up a journal article. A lot has been said before you arrived, and one of the challenges to you as a reader will be to figure out what you missed.

Some authors help you to understand the conversation by telling you what one (or more) of the previous participants said about the issue at hand. As a result, philosophical works may contain a summary of previous positions, and often these are positions that are not the author's own. Be careful not to attribute to authors positions that they are only recounting in order to subsequently refute them.

This type of writing is often quite different from textbook writing. Once you are aware of the difference, it may be easier to follow.

Just as the philosophy you are reading is part of a conversation, so too your reading may become conversational. Ideally, reading is not a passive process of mere assimilation, but an active—indeed, interactive—process quite similar to a conversation between you and the author. The text talks to you, you listen and respond with questions, and often the text yields up further answers to your questions. It is precisely this back-and-forth movement that is at the heart of philosophical understanding.

Active Reading

Reading in the way just indicated is one way of reading *actively*. In *Reading Critically, Writing Well*, Rose B. Axelrod and Charles R. Cooper outline six strategies for critical reading. Five of these are particularly helpful for us in this context.

Previewing

Before you begin to read the body of an article or book, try to figure out what to expect. If the author (or someone else) has provided an abstract, read that carefully. Pay attention to the title. Read the introduction and conclusion. All of this help you to begin your reading with a cognitive map of what to expect, and this makes it much easier to process the information. You may have to revise details of that map, but it is a lot easier to navigate with it than with none at all.

Annotating

Read with a pencil or pen in your hand, and don't hesitate—unless it's a library book—to mark up the book. Put question marks by things that are unclear—and if later they become clear, erase the question mark. Put numbers in the margin whenever points are enumerated. If you find a phrase like “My second argument is...”, make sure you know what the *first* one was. Circle key terms. Put a star by references in the footnotes that you want to look up.

Many of us use highlighters for underlining a text. These are visually helpful, but much less sophisticated than a pencil. If you find that you're highlighting everything, something's wrong—the whole idea of highlighting is to make the main points stand out more clearly.

Outlining

When you annotate, you are already beginning to outline. See if the article is divided into sections. Use any title the author gives for sections or subsections. If only numbers are given, supply your own titles. Look for the overall structure of the piece. Many philosophical pieces will be divided into arguments, objections, and replies.

Summarizing

It is often helpful to try to put someone else's argument into your own words. Summaries don't seem creative, but doing a summary can often teach us a lot. We have to understand what the author is saying in order to reformulate it in our own words. Moreover, the process of summarizing something forces us to focus on what is important in the piece, and that focus is very valuable. Finally, you will often find that you discover a lot about the holes in an author's arguments by summarizing an article or book. By summarizing in your own words, you have to ask yourself continually exactly what did the author mean by a particular claim. This process often reveals hidden ambiguities and shortcomings in an argument.

Analyzing

The process of summarizing is usually a first step toward analysis. When we analyze a piece, we are usually asking two questions. First, does the author provide adequate support for the claims that are advanced? Here we use the standards of logic to evaluate how well the author has succeeded in justifying his or her conclusions.

Second, do you agree or disagree with the points an author is making? It is important to try to figure out where you stand on these issues. Sometimes this is a slow and difficult process. Sometimes we come to understand our own position initially only in bits and pieces.

Writing a Moral Problems Paper

Imagine that you want—or, perhaps, must—to write a term paper in a moral problems course. Let's look at the steps you will go through, taking as our example a paper on euthanasia.

Choosing a Topic

Look for a topic that interests you, first and foremost. It will be easier to do and more worthwhile for you. Narrow it down to the point that you can cover the topic in the time and space you have available for it.

Let's assume that you know you want to write a paper on the morality of euthanasia. Initially, your topic simply reads:

the morality of euthanasia.

That's a vast topic, and the first thing you need to do is to **narrow it down**. Are you interested in discussing euthanasia in regard to newborns with severe birth defects? adults in the final stages of a terminal disease? those with extremely painful disorders who are not necessarily on the brink of death? It makes a difference which group you discuss, since somewhat different moral issues arise in each case. In the case of newborns, there is no possibility of obtaining consent from them, since they are incapable of consent by virtue of their age. With adults in the final stages of a terminal disease, it is possible to ask them what their preferences are, and they may already have indicated those preferences in a living will. In any case, their death is immanent; one is hastening a process which is already near its end. In the case of those with chronic, painful, but non-fatal disorders, the situation is different. One is not hastening the inevitable, or at least not the immanently inevitable. Let's say that you decide to do a paper on the third group. Your topic is now:

the morality of euthanasia for people with chronic, painful disorders.

As you work on your paper, you may find that you are **refining you topic further** and further. You realize that "painful" is a little vague, and that you really want to consider the extreme cases of great pain. Thus you make the topic a little more precise:

the morality of euthanasia for people with chronic, extreme pain.

You realize that you will need to have one section of your paper that details exactly what you mean by "chronic, extreme pain."

Presumably you are concerned with those cases in which people make a choice to die, not those cases in which others simply kill them. Thus your topic is a bit more precise:

the morality of voluntary euthanasia for people with chronic, extreme pain.

However, you make a note to yourself that "voluntary" is a tricky concept here, because sometimes people can want one thing while they are in pain, and later be glad they are alive.

Confining yourself to euthanasia for people with chronic, painful disorders, you have to consider whether you want to look at (a) passive euthanasia, which is just withholding life-saving treatment, or (b) active euthanasia, which involves taking some active measures to terminate the person's life. After thinking a moment, you realize that passive euthanasia doesn't help many of the people with chronic pain, since they will continue to live (but in great pain) even if treatment is withheld. So you decide to consider active euthanasia, and you realize that somewhere in your paper you will have to explain why this distinction is important for the group of people you want to consider. Your topic is now:

the morality of voluntary active euthanasia for people with chronic, extreme pain.

But even this may not be specific enough, because you realize that one of the central issues is whether doctors should perform euthanasia or not. Now your topic is:

the morality of voluntary physician-assisted active euthanasia for people with chronic, extreme pain.

This raises a number of issues specifically about physicians' responsibilities, and you realize that one section of your paper will be devoted to this. Perhaps the most difficult thing is that physicians are committed to preserving life, and doing something that actively brings about its termination would seem to violate their professional code. You make a mental note to yourself to consult those professional codes of ethics to see what they have to say about this issue.

In all likelihood, these refinements won't all happen at once. The refinements will occur over a process of time as you work on the paper. That's fine.

Constructing an Outline of Issues

Some people write from outlines, some don't. Most of us, however, at least make a list of the things we want to discuss in a paper, even if it isn't a full outline. From the process of refining your topic, you already have several issues for your outline:

describing the condition of those with "chronic, extreme pain."

detailing what counts as "voluntary" for people in such conditions

discussing why passive euthanasia is not enough for people in this situation

the responsibilities of physicians in regard to euthanasia requests.

Now you have the start of a structure for your paper. You will revise this structure continually as you work on your paper. Again, that's fine.

Also, don't hesitate to make notes to yourself along the way. For example, next to "the responsibilities of physicians...", you might make a note, "Check AMA guidelines." Don't forget to go back later and check over these notes and reminders.

Developing Your Thesis

It's one thing to choose a topic, but quite another to develop a thesis about that topic. Your *topic* indicates the area you want to work on; the *thesis statement* indicates what you want to prove

about that area. The crucial first step here is to begin to think through exactly what you believe. You may be uncertain, and that's all right. Then at least try to jot down the things you think are wrong. Gradually you will be developing your central thesis, the main claim that you want to defend in your paper.

In our euthanasia paper example, your initial thesis statement might be:

doctors should not perform euthanasia.

As we saw before with your topic, you will probably refine your thesis statement as you work on your paper. For example, the word "should" is ambiguous here. Does it mean that physician-assisted euthanasia should be *illegal*, or does it mean that it is *morally wrong*, or does it mean *both*? Let's imagine that you mean that it is morally wrong. Then your revised thesis statement is:

it is immoral for physicians to assist in euthanasia.

Notice that we've already begun to incorporate some of the revisions from our statement of topic. Let's incorporate the rest of them now:

it is immoral for physicians to assist in voluntary euthanasia for people with chronic, extreme pain.

Notice that there is now a very specific focus for your topic: it is on the morality of the *physician's* actions.

Once again, it is important to realize that developing your thesis may take time. This is part of the normal give-and-take of writing a paper.

Getting Sources

Now that you have a sense of your topic, it's time to get some sources to use in developing your paper. This is rarely a one step process. Expect to make several trips to the library, for each batch of reading—in footnotes, bibliographies, etc.—will suggest additional sources that you may want to consult.

Card Catalogues. The first thing to consult at your library is the card catalogue. These are now often computerized, and this may allow you to search by subject and also to look for any key words in the title. Pay particular attention to anthologies and books with extensive bibliographies. If you see anthologies with something like "the basic issues" in the title or subtitle, make sure you look at it—it will probably be a valuable asset in getting an overview of the issues involved.

Databases. Computerized databases make it incredibly easy to search for books and articles on a specific topic. (In fact, the problem is usually getting too much information, rather than too little.) Some databases, like *InfoTrack*, survey popular sources as well as some scholarly ones. In philosophy, the most valuable resource is *The Philosopher's Index*, which is available in many libraries on CD-ROM. (Otherwise, it is probably available in hard cover.)

Here are a few hints about searching databases. First, you may have to search under several different words to cover your topic. A search on "euthanasia" may have to be supplemented with one on "mercy killing." Some databases contain a thesaurus with lists of alternative words to consult, etc.

Second, many of these programs support sophisticated search logic, and this can help you eliminate unwanted references as well as uncover all the relevant ones. Since your interest is in physician-assisted euthanasia, you may well want to do a search on physicians and either euthanasia or mercy killing. If you are only interested in things done in the last five years, you may add a further restriction to eliminate anything before 1990. Consult the guide for the particular program you are using to determine how it handles search logic.

Third, databases often contain abstracts of articles and books. These can be invaluable. Once you know what a particular article discusses and tries to prove, you can more easily decide whether you want to track it down and read the whole thing or not. Make sure you selection the proper option on your search to insure that you get the abstracts if they are available.

Fourth, you can often download your search results onto a floppy disk and then transfer this to your own computer, if you have one. This makes it much easier to organize and work with your bibliography.

Anthologies, Bibliographies, Encyclopedia and Review Articles, etc. It's difficult and time-consuming to survey a new area without help. Review articles, encyclopedia articles, and annotated bibliographies can save you a tremendous amount of work in this area. Look for these in your bibliographical searches.

If you were looking for sources on euthanasia, look at the many anthologies—such as this one—available on contemporary moral problems. They have often done much of your work for you, and if you find certain articles being mentioned or reprinted in several of them, that's a good indication that it is an important piece to read. Also, there are specialized anthologies—some in philosophy, some more general—that may contain a wide range of articles. Prometheus Books has a series called “Contemporary Issues,” which are very well done; there is one of euthanasia entitled *Euthanasia: The Moral Issues*, edited by Robert M. Baird and Stuart E. Rosenbaum. The Dushkin Publishing Group publishes a long series of anthologies in its series “Taking Sides.” Greenhaven Press has a very nice “Opposing Viewpoint” series, including one on *Euthanasia: Opposing Viewpoints*. Both the Dushkin and Greenhaven series contain both selections from the popular press and more specialized sources and both contain bibliographical guides.

In some areas, you will find entire books that are devoted just to a bibliographical guide in a particular area. Although they may appear overwhelming, these are almost always divided into sub-topics, etc. If you use them cautiously and selectively, they can be valuable without being overwhelming.

Encyclopedias often publish helpful articles, and it is worth consulting them. There are both general encyclopedias—like the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which still has the highest standards of scholarship—and special-interest encyclopedias. In philosophy in general, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1967), edited by Paul Edwards is now fairly dated, but it still has some excellent pieces. In ethics, the two-volume *Encyclopedia of Ethics* (New York: Garland, 1992), edited by Lawrence and Charlotte Becker, is a superb collection of articles on a wide range of issues in ethics; *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), edited by Peter Singer, contains fewer articles, but they tend to be longer than those in *The Encyclopedia of Ethics*. Both also contain excellent bibliographical suggestions, and both are quite recent. Also, journals occasionally publish review articles that survey the literature on a given problem. *American Philosophical Quarterly* often has such articles (e.g., “Recent Work on Punishment”), and they provide an excellent way of understanding what the recent issues are in a given area.

Journals. There are a number of philosophy journals that specialize in ethics. These include *Ethics*, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, *Social Philosophy & Policy*, *The Journal of Social Philosophy* and *The Journal of Applied Philosophy*. These are often worth just browsing through, even when you do not have a specific reference, for they contain a wealth of articles and book reviews that may have some bearing on your topic.

There are numerous other, more specialized journals that you should also be aware of. For example, the *Hastings Center Report* contains excellent articles and reviews in biomedical ethics and related fields. Some of the more specialized journals are listed in the bibliographical guides to each chapter in this book.

Books. Single-author books in ethics often offer a sustained and detailed articulation of a single point of view on a particular moral question. They are invaluable, for it is only in this context that authors are able to develop their position both broadly and in depth. For readers, they also require a significant investment of time compared with articles. Try to discover the author's thesis early in your reading of the book and learn to read them efficiently.

Reading Your Sources

One of the best pieces of advice I ever got in high school was to always read with a pencil in my hand. Read actively, outlining and making marginal notes (unless it's a library book, then put your notes on a separate piece of paper). When you're reading in preparation for writing a paper, you should continually be asking yourself two questions. First, what is the author's position and what support is offered for it? The focus here is on understanding the article or book on its own terms. Second, how does the author's position relate to my own? Here the focus is on developing your own position. As you read, note particular arguments that may provide support for your own position as well as possible objections to your position. These will be invaluable when you turn to writing your paper.

The First Draft

A Sense of the Problem. Why should I care about what you are going to say in your paper? It's often helpful at the beginning of your paper to give the readers a sense of (a) why your topic is an important one and (b) why your thesis is significant. In your euthanasia paper, you could show that the *topic* is important by pointing to ballot initiatives to legalize it in parts of the United States, by legalization efforts in other countries, etc. To show that your thesis is significant, you can point to a number of physicians publicly involved in euthanasia. (Articles from two of them are included in this anthology.)

A Preview of Where You're Going. Once you've generated a sense of why readers should care about what you're going to say, then you should give them some indication of where you're going in the paper. Usually, you would begin by developing your position first and then turning to the arguments on the other side. In this case, however, since physician-assisted euthanasia is currently illegal, you will probably want to consider first the arguments in favor of physician-assisted euthanasia. This heightens the readers' sense that there is a real issue here, a genuine moral questions to be answered, and that there is real controversy over the correct answer.

An Outline of the Paper. Develop an outline of the paper that allows the development to flow well. The simplest outline for the euthanasia paper might be something like this:

- I. Introduction
- II. Arguments in Favor of Legalizing Physician-Assisted Euthanasia
- III. Arguments against Legalizing Physician-Assisted Euthanasia
- IV. Replies to Arguments against Legalizing Physician-Assisted Euthanasia
- V. Conclusion

This is a simple, almost simplistic, structure, but it gets the job done. Each of the three major parts will then have a number of subdivisions dealing with specific issues such as the Hippocratic oath, the danger of a slippery slope, the rights of physicians to refuse, the pressure from insurance companies, etc.

An alternative outline might well take each of the individual topics separately, considering the pro's and con's of each topic. Then the initial outline might look more like this:

- I. Introduction
- II. The Physician's Duty to Do No Harm: The Hippocratic Oath
- III. The Physician's Right to Refuse Euthanasia Requests
- IV. The Role of Insurance Companies in Decisions about Euthanasia
- V. The Dangers of Abuse: The Slippery Slope
- VI. Conclusion

The arguments for and against your position in regard to each of these issues would then be contained in a single section. This provides more continuity than the previous outline on specific issues, while the previous outline gives a clear picture of the coherence of the overall position.

Constructing Arguments

Once you have a rough outline, begin to sketch out the arguments. Consult your reading notes, for these should contain virtually everything that you want to discuss in your paper. Jot down the various arguments you want to consider under each issue.

Example: The Slippery Slope Argument. Consider the issue of the possible abuses that could occur if physician-assisted euthanasia were legalized. These are often called "slippery slope" arguments because as a group they usually claim that, if we take the first step down this slope (legalizing euthanasia), then we will slide the rest of the way down. You might have one argument about how the eugenics program in Nazi Germany included euthanasia, and the way in which that led to hundreds of thousands of deaths. The initial general structure of an argument like this is:

Premise 1: Legalizing euthanasia in Nazi Germany led to massive abuses of the system;

Conclusion: Legalizing euthanasia in the United States will lead to massive abuses.

Of course, as soon as we see the argument stated in this way, we realize that we need an additional premise to establish the relevant similarities between the United States and Nazi Germany. Clearly we can't say "Whatever happened in Nazi Germany will happen in the United States." Instead, we might try something like this:

Premise 2: The situation in the United States is like the situation in Nazi Germany.

But now that we have spelled out this premise, we realize that it is far from strong. Presumably there are lots of ways in which Nazi Germany was different from the United States, including its myth of Aryan racial superiority.

Any there any other cases in which euthanasia has been tried in circumstances more similar to those in the United States? The example of Holland comes immediately to mind, for they have legalized (at least to some extent) physician-assisted euthanasia and they are a society that is at least more similar to ours than Nazi Germany.

Premise 1: Legalizing euthanasia in Holland has led to abuses of the system;

Premise 2: The situation in the United States is like the situation in Holland;

Conclusion: Legalizing euthanasia in the United States will lead to massive abuses.

The second premise here seems much less controversial than in the preceding example. Now, however, the difficulty is with Premise 1. Whatever abuses may occur in Holland, they are nowhere near those of Nazi Germany. The way to strengthen this argument is to provide additional support for Premise 1.

Even if we can support the conclusion of this argument, we need to go further. We need to provide additional support in order to conclude that we should not legalize euthanasia. The argument might begin with the conclusion of the preceding argument.

Premise 1: Legalizing euthanasia in the United States will lead to massive abuses.

Premise 2: We should avoid doing anything that will lead to massive abuses.

Conclusion: We should avoid legalizing euthanasia.

Once again, we have to provide support for our premises, and here the troublesome one will be the second premise.

Counter-examples. How might we attack the second premise? Well, we could point to thing that lead to massive abuses but which we nonetheless have legalized. Drinking alcohol comes immediately to mind. It leads to massive abuses and extremely high personal as well as social costs. When we begin to argue in this fashion, we are examining a counter-example. Philosophers often use counterexamples to criticize the positions of their opponents, and they are a powerful argumentative technique.

Of course, someone might try to object that euthanasia is a matter of life and death and thus that it is dissimilar to drinking. This type of reply attempts to show a dissimilarity between the original case and the counter-example in order to weaken the relevance of the counter-example. However, the defender of the argument could reply that drinking often leads to death either from alcohol-related illnesses or from accidents caused by intoxication. Such a reply strengthens the counter-example by reinforcing the similarities between it and the original case.

Types of Premises. The premises of an argument may be of several different types. Some premises are **conceptual**, dealing primarily with the meaning of our words. Others are **normative**, making claims about what we ought to do. Finally, some are **empirical**, giving us relevant facts about the world. Consider the following argument.

Empirical Premise: Dr. Kavorkian is practicing euthanasia.

Conceptual Premise: Euthanasia involves the intentional taking of another person's

life.

Normative Premise: It is always morally wrong to intentionally take another person's life.

Conclusion: What Dr. Kavorkian is doing is morally wrong.

It is important to distinguish among these three types of premises, since each is evaluated and supported in different ways. *Empirical premises* are in principle the easiest to test out, since they usually make claims about empirically-verifiable matters of fact. In this case, we might substitute the name of a different doctor—Dr. Koop, for example, the former Surgeon General of the United States—and we would find that it was clearly false. *Conceptual premises* are largely a matter of definition. Sometimes there is no absolute right or wrong in these matters, but it is always important to be certain that everyone is using key terms in the same way. In this case, the conceptual premise could be refined considerably. For example, there is no mention of the distinction between voluntary and involuntary euthanasia, nor is there any reference to the distinction between active and passive euthanasia. *Normative premises* are sometimes the most difficult to prove, and they often demand great refinement. The normative premise given in this argument—“It is always morally wrong to intentionally take another person's life”—is one that only absolute pacifists would accept. Most people think it is morally permissible to intentionally kill another human being in self-defense and in warfare.

The Second Draft

Many of us find that we have to go through several drafts before a paper is satisfactory. After you finish your first draft, here are some things you may consider to develop the paper further.

Outlining. Near the end of the process, try doing an outline of what you've written, even if you didn't have a detailed one at the beginning. Outline what's there, and then you can do two things. First, you can check to see if you've stayed on track in your paper. You can compare what you've written in a given paragraph with your outline in order to make sure that everything in that paragraph actually contributes to your topic. If it doesn't, you may want either to delete it or to move it to another paragraph or section. If you work on a word processor, it is particularly easy to move paragraph around, and sometimes we accidentally have some of our ideas out of place.

Second, look over your outline and make sure that you haven't left anything out. Sometimes we miss the forest for the trees, and sometimes in our own arguments we miss glaring holes because we are concerned with tiny details. Outlining helps us to see the general structure and the large gaps.

Third, if there are important topics which you have not considered, make sure that you indicate (probably in your Introduction) that you are aware of them and have consciously chosen to set them aside. In a euthanasia paper, for example, you may realize that there are important difficulties about the meaning of “voluntary.” Does it refer to a choice made in great pain, only to one made in a pain-free reflective state, only to a choice reaffirmed over a long period of time? If you are not going to consider certain issues such as this in your paper, tell the reader.

Avoid Common Mistakes. Read over your draft, and check for various kinds of common mistakes. Try to eliminate rhetorical questions by changing them into straightforward assertions. Get rid of gender-specific language wherever possible. (I prefer to use plural constructions to do this.) Don't use words whose meaning isn't completely clear to you. Proofread carefully, even if

you use a computerized spell-check program. A spell check will not indicate anything is wrong with a sentence like, “I red the book.” It takes a human being to realize that it should say, “I read the book.”

Quotations. Generally, make sure that you have kept direct quotations to a minimum. Unless there is a special reason to do so, summarize the ideas in your own words. It will preserve the flow of the paper and show the reader that you have mastered these ideas. Give a direct quote, however, if the author’s specific wording is important.

Academic Integrity

It goes without saying that you shouldn’t cheat on a term paper—and cheating on an ethics paper seems particularly outrageous! However, even when people don’t intend to cheat, they sometimes do so through a combination of carelessness and ignorance.

Plagiarism is the unacknowledged use of another person’s words or ideas as your own. If you are using someone else’s exact words, they must be enclosed in quotation marks and a reference must be given to the source. If you are using someone else’s idea (reformulated in your own words), then a reference should be given to the source.

Be careful not to plagiarize accidentally. If you make notes on your reading, and if you have direct quotations in your notes, then make sure that you have them enclosed in quotation marks in your notes. Otherwise, you might put them into your paper as your own words, not realizing that they were originally a quotation.