

Putting it into Words

Communicating your thoughts and feelings about animals and dissection

Many students who refuse to dissect encounter resistance—and even hostility—from professors, department heads, and deans. When your ethical beliefs are challenged, it's important to be prepared. Here are some arguments that you might come up against if you object to taking part in dissection, along with some possible responses.

Hands-on experience is essential to understanding biology.

There are many practical alternatives to dissection. I can get "hands-on" experience by using detailed models of animal anatomy, observing live animals, or dissecting plants. Also, some people learn



better from clear, detailed diagrams or computer simulations than from animal specimens.

Dissection is a course requirement, and you have to do what's required to pass the course.

I'm willing to be tested on my knowledge by means other than dissection. I'm willing to do as much work as anyone else, by studying books, photos, videos, and models, to meet the standards of the course.

The professor's academic freedom is at stake.

My freedom of belief is what really is at stake. All the professor is being asked to do is agree to allow an alternative procedure for me because I am morally opposed to dissection. Students who are willing to dissect can still do so.

You are not a vegetarian (or you wear leather shoes), so therefore you are not entitled to object to dissection.

I have the right to draw the line where my conscience dictates, and to have my beliefs respected. Some people believe that it is necessary to use animals for food (or clothing) while at the same time believing it is unnecessary to kill them for dissection. Others who eat meat believe it is wrong to eat dogs and cats, or to hunt. Everyone draws the line somewhere, and because of my moral beliefs, I draw the line at dissection.



You are just being squeamish. You should face your fears and make yourself do the dissection anyway.

Refusing to dissect has nothing to do with being afraid. Being sickened by dissection is not a sign of emotional immaturity, but of compassion for animals.

You don't have to kill the animal, it's already dead.

Using an animal that was captured, raised, or killed for dissection still contributes to the cruelty involved. Even if the animal was killed for other reasons (such as a dog or cat that was killed at an animal shelter) using the animal for educational purposes is supporting the notion that animals are merely "tools."

You don't have to dissect, just watch.

I can't watch someone else doing something that I think is wrong. Watching is still taking part in the dissection, and I am unwilling to do that. I would like to be excused from the lab while the dissection is taking place.

Dissection teaches us to understand life.

Biology is supposed to teach respect for life, but dissection teaches us that animal life is cheap and expendable.

Put it in Writing

When you refuse to dissect, it's important to send letters to your professor, department head, and, if necessary, a dean in order to formally explain your beliefs. Here are some suggestions for writing these letters:

- **Keep it short** and to the point.
- **Do not be defensive** or argumentative.
- **Stick to the issue**, i.e. your right to have your beliefs respected, and your willingness to perform an alternative project.
- **Be sure to include** a statement as to why you feel dissection violates your ethical or spiritual beliefs.
- **Provide them**, if you can, with suggested alternatives.
- **Ask them** to promptly reply to your request to do an alternative project.
- **State your willingness** to commit an equivalent amount of time and energy.
- **Always keep copies** of your letters for your own file, as these will be important if you ultimately take legal action. You should also keep a diary or other written document of your actions, including dates, times and subjects of conversations, as well as people involved.