How to Analyze a Philosophical Essay—i.e. write a “Philosophical Analysis” (for the online section of Philosophy 104: Bioethics, in the Fall 2016 at California State University-Sacramento, for professor Russell DiSilvestro)

First, please recall what the syllabus said:

✓ Paper (10 points): You can expand one of your original discussion posts into a full philosophical analysis by midnight Saturday December 10. Details in ‘Philosophical Analysis’ PDF (this PDF is more specific to this class than the general department standards for writing or the general department instructions for doing a philosophical analysis found online at the CSUS Philosophy Department webpage: http://www.csus.edu/phil). We will use http://turnitin.com for this paper.

Next, please compare this two-column chart, which is more important than the Department’s Guidelines:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Everything in this column is taken verbatim from the website mentioned first in the syllabus fragment above (since I did not write it, I cannot take credit for it): <a href="http://www.csus.edu/phil/Guidance/How%20to%20Write%20Analysis.htm">http://www.csus.edu/phil/Guidance/How%20to%20Write%20Analysis.htm</a></th>
<th>Everything in this column is an add-on or clarification that relates to our specific class (since I wrote it, I’m the only one to blame for what it says).</th>
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| **How to Analyze a Philosophical Essay**

In many of your philosophy classes you will be asked to write a critical analysis of a philosophical essay. This assignment has a specific form, which is common to most classes. This document contains the basic instructions for writing such an analysis, though the specifics may vary depending on the class or the instructor. At the end of this document you will find a sample analysis that satisfies all the requirements below.

The first thing you need to do is read the assigned article several times. When you think you understand it, select an aspect of the article that you find particularly interesting, troubling, exciting, confusing, or problematic. By an aspect of the article, I do not mean a particular section of it; I mean a claim or set of claims to which the author is committed, either by explicitly arguing for them, or implicitly presupposing them.

**Writing Style**

Your analysis should be concise and thorough. Absolutely do not engage in:

- Unnecessary editorializing
- Pointless repetition
- Personal attacks on the author or questioning of the author’s motives
- Complaining about the author’s writing style or choice of words

In short, always strive to express yourself in the simplest, clearest, and most precise terms possible.

**Writing Standards**

Your paper should conform to the standards of written college English and to basic guidelines for writing philosophy papers, which can be found HERE. It should be free of spelling, grammatical and structural errors. It is important to understand that any essay that begins with

The link mentioned by the word ‘HERE’ is this: https://sites.google.com/site/grandolphmayes/philosophy-writing-guidelines

Good rules of thumb: Write like Hemmingway. (Not like Kant.) Use shorter sentences. (More than 20 words is

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New: you are not required to “expand one of your original discussion posts” but you are permitted to.

I have removed the sample from this copy.

Pick one of the 30 main authors we have read in the 15 parts of this course. For example, in part 7 (“Is Physician-Assisted Suicide Ever Ethical?”), one article was chapter 13 (“Physician Assisted Suicide is Ethical” by John Lachs), and one article was chapter 14 (“Physician Assisted Suicide is Not Ethical” by Patrick Lee), and then each author wrote a short reply to the other author’s article. You need to select one or more claims that at least one author in a given part is committed to (because they say it, or assume it, or imply it, in their article or reply).
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<th>such errors is likely to be dismissed by the reader (and hence by your instructor) as an incompetent piece of work. In general, spelling errors and grammatical errors, run-on and convoluted sentence structure, and long paragraphs with multiple topics make it very difficult to credit quality of thought. Always write with the aim of making it as easy as possible for the reader to understand and evaluate what you are saying.</th>
<th>pushing it.) Use shorter words. (Think how nice it feels to write or read a line like this.) Don’t use commas, or parentheses, or punctuation marks, unless you have to. (I know, I know, I broke my own tip here: thrice.)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Quotations</td>
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<td>All direct quotations must, of course, be identified as such with a citation. However, in general, an essay of this type should make minimal use of direct quotations. As a rule, one should only quote an author if the precise way in which he or she has chosen to express something figures essentially into your critique. Never simply substitute a quotation for your own summary of what the author is saying.</td>
<td>I do not care if you use a ‘style’ like APA or MLA in this class. But I do care that you cite your source on the same page of the text that you refer to it. And that you do not crowd the text with the reference. In other words, please use footnotes at the bottom of each page, not endnotes at the end of the document. If you want to make a list of references at the end, that’s fine too.</td>
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<td>Format</td>
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<td>Your analysis must have the following three sections:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Introduction</td>
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<td>• Summary</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Critique</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Conclusion (optional)</td>
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<td>in that order. (Be sure to identify each section. In other words, at the top of the introduction write the word “Introduction,” etc.) The critical part of your analysis should demonstrate an awareness of other relevant readings covered in class. You should be careful to note when you are reproducing criticisms that are made by others authors we have read. You should be careful to include or consider important criticisms made by other authors when they are clearly relevant to your own concerns.</td>
<td>The only difference here is that I make a “Conclusion” required with a specific structure (see below).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow these specific instructions for each section to the letter.</td>
<td>Be sure to <strong>boldface and underline</strong> section headers and set them apart with blank lines before and after:</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Like This</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Your critical part (‘Critique’) in only needs to demonstrate an awareness of the other elements of that part of the text that your author is from (for example, part 7, “Is Physician Assisted Suicide Ethical?”). If you quote or even “echo” one author (for example, Lee) against the other author (for example, Lachs), note that. It’s fine (but not required) for you to go beyond these authors to other authors in other parts of the book, or in other sources not covered in this class, or your fellow classmates on the discussion board.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Your Audience</td>
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<td>Even though your primary reader is your instructor, who will have read the article in question, you should approach this assignment as if you intend to publish it in a philosophy journal. This means that everything you say must be comprehensible to a philosophically sophisticated reader who has not read the article. While you are not accountable for summarizing the entire article (see summary section below), you must always refrain from allusions that would only be comprehensible to someone who has read the article.</td>
<td>A good rule of thumb here that I want you to keep in mind takes the form of a question:</td>
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<tr>
<td>if a sentence in your paper was read to a classmate from <em>this very class</em> who has read everything else in the course except this part of the book, what sort of things would she need explained, and what sort of things would she just take for granted because she does not need them explained?</td>
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Introduction
This section must accomplish the following tasks in the following order. I prefer that you devote a single short paragraph to each task.

1. Identify the article, and describe in one or two sentences what problem(s) it addresses and what view(s) it defends.

2. State precisely which aspect(s) of the article your analysis will address and precisely what you intend to accomplish. This must not be a vague statement like “I will evaluate the author’s views...” or “I will show where I agree and where I disagree....”. Rather, it must be a very specific and concise statement of the case you intend to make, and the basic considerations you intend to employ in making it. (You will probably find it impossible to write this section before your analysis has gone through the rough draft phase.)

Summary
The rules for constructing a summary are as follows:

1. For the most part, you should summarize only those aspects of the article that are relevant to your critique. If you summarize more than that, it should only be because anything less will not provide the reader an adequate understanding of the author’s basic concerns. Do not produce an unnecessarily lengthy or detailed summary. As a general rule of thumb, the summary and critique will usually be roughly equal in length.

2. The summary must present the author’s views in the best possible light. It must be a thorough, fair, and completely accurate representation of the author’s views. Misrepresentation of the author’s views, especially selective misrepresentation (i.e., misrepresentation for the purpose of easy refutation) is EVIL and will be heavily penalized.

3. The summary must contain absolutely no critical comments. (This restriction does not prevent you from expressing some uncertainty about what the author is saying, however.)

4. The summary should be organized logically, not chronologically. Each paragraph in the summary will ordinarily present argument(s) the author makes in support of a particular position. This means that, depending on the organization of the article itself, a single paragraph from the summary may contain statements that are made in very different places in the article. The summary itself should be organized in a way that makes the author’s views make sense. Under no conditions are you to simply relate what the author says the way that s/he says them. A summary that goes something like: “The author begins by discussing.....Then s/he goes on to say......then, etc.” is VERY BAD.

Suggested Introduction length: 100-200 words.
Believe it or not, this is the most important part of your paper. And I actually require you to have two short paragraphs.

This paragraph should be 3-4 sentences max. An article’s original abstract is sometimes a good example of this (just don’t repeat it too closely; it’s often too long too). See that first sentence in the second paragraph to the left? (Hint: it starts with “2. State precisely...?”) You should do what it tells you to do, in your very first sentence of your second paragraph of your introduction. Make this a summary sentence, and make the rest of the short paragraph unpack that summary sentence just a little bit more. Believe it or not, this is the most important sentence of your paper. Make this sentence count.

Suggested Summary length: 400-800 words.
A bad sign that it’s unnecessarily lengthy is if you’re covering each section of the author’s article. A bad sign that it’s unnecessarily detailed is if you’re summarizing each of the four points in a section of an article even though your critique is only going to grapple with one of those four points. Believe it or not, you should almost always be more worried that you are covering too much than that you are covering too little.

This fits with the last point. You can be ‘thorough’ and ‘fair’ and ‘accurate’ without being too long or detailed.

The only “exception” to this nice “absolute” rule is when you want to critique (in your “critique” section) what author A says to author B in A’s reply to B, and so you have to report (in your “summary” section) the “critical comments” B made in B’s article in order to properly set up your summary of what A said in A’s reply.

It is surprising to me how many otherwise excellent students merely rehash the original article, even with a warning like this. Please don’t.
Critique

Your critique should be organized in a way that reflects the structure of your summary. This is easy to do since you have selected for summary only those aspects of the article about which you have something to say. Be sure your critique obeys the rules laid out in the Writing Style section above.

Here are three different approaches to doing a critique.

a. Define your project in terms of arguments and views that you find problematic. In your critique show how the author’s conclusion does not follow, either because (a) the author’s reasons are false or (b) the author’s reasoning is mistaken, or (c) the author has failed to make other important considerations that tend to undermine the conclusion.

b. Define your project in terms of arguments and views that you basically agree with. In your critique, consider ways in which the author’s views might reasonably be criticized. Then attempt to strengthen the author’s position by showing how these criticisms can actually be met. If you use this technique, be sure you don’t consider criticisms that the author actually does respond to in the context of the article (unless, of course, you think that the author has failed to answer the objections effectively).

c. Define your project in terms of arguments and views that you find interesting, but which you are currently disinclined to either fully accept or fully reject. Carefully articulate the strongest considerations in favor of the view and the strongest considerations against the views. Then carefully explain why you remain undecided and indicate precisely what sort of information or arguments would be required for you to be able to make up your mind.

Conclusion

Briefly summarize the steps you have taken in reaching your conclusions. The conclusion should be very short and it should contain no new information, claims or criticism. This restriction prevents you from making closing comments which are not sufficiently articulated in the body of the paper.

Suggested Critique length: 400-800 words.

A rule of thumb: if your summary focused on N (1, 2, etc.) claims, your critique should have at least N sections. Perhaps the sequence should map, but perhaps not (your summary might go 1-2-3 and your critique 3-2-1). Here’s an example. “Now that we’ve seen how Author is committed to claims 1, 2, and 3, we can evaluate each…”

Pick just one and put its label in your boldfaced heading:

Critique (approach A: problematic)

If you use this approach, you must insert one or more sub-headings introducing your points, in any order...

Critique (b): Lee’s reasoning is mistaken...
Critique (a): Lach’s reasons are false...

Critique (approach B: agree)

If you use this approach, you must insert three sub-headings introducing your points, in this order...

Why I basically agree...
Reasonable ways to criticize...
How these criticisms can be met...

Critique (approach C: interesting)

If you use this approach, you must insert four sub-headings introducing your points, in any order...

Considerations in favor...
Considerations against...
Why I remain undecided...
What would I need to decide...

Conclusion required; suggested length: 100-200 words.

1. Everything said to the left applies, but only to the first paragraph of your conclusion. However, for this Bioethics assignment, your conclusion needs to have a total of three paragraphs.

2. Second paragraph: What were your numerical answers to the target question from this part of the textbook (1) on the pre-class quiz (use your memory), (2) on the discussion board, and (3) on the post-class quiz? And why, for each time?

3. Third paragraph: What do you think you learned the most from about the topic of your paper: (1) our readings, (2) our online-lectures-and-then-quizzes, (3) our discussion board, (4) this paper? And why? (Note: you aren’t required to rank all four; just focus on the best and why.)