

Analyzing a Philosophical Essay

Here is how to write an analysis of a philosophical essay for this class. First, 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, does not mean a particular section of it; it means 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 psychological 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.

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 analysis. Never simply substitute a quotation for your own summary of what the author is saying.

Format

Your analysis must contain the following three sections, in this order:

- Introduction
- Summary
- Critique

Be sure to identify each section. In other words, at the top of the introduction write the word "Introduction," etc.

A Conclusion section may be added, but this is optional. The critical part of your analysis should demonstrate an awareness of other relevant readings assigned in the course. You should be careful when you are reproducing criticisms that are made by other authors we have read. Be sure to attribute those criticisms to their sources and to reference them with proper citations. You should be careful to include or consider important criticisms made by other authors when they are clearly relevant to your own concerns.

Follow these specific instructions for each section, to the letter.

Introduction

This section must accomplish the following tasks in the following order, preferably by devoting 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.," while not evil, is VERY BAD.

Critique

1. 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 (select only one method to write your analysis).

- 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
 - (i) the author's reasons are false, or
 - (ii) the author's reasoning is mistaken, or
 - (iii) 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 (Optional)

1. If your analysis is sufficiently complicated, it may help the reader to briefly recapitulate the steps you have taken in reaching your conclusions. The conclusion should be very short and it should contain no new information or claims. This restriction prevents you from making closing comments which are not sufficiently articulated in the body of the paper.