**Reading and Writing Philosophy/ Guidelines for Assessment**

I. Reading

Main objective: comprehension of content/point (what is said) and structure (how it is said) of argument/position (with a view to critical assessment).

1) Pre-reading: read over to get a general sense of the text - "flag" words you do not understand and write definition in margin of text (or on a separate post-it note).

2) Detailed reading: attempt to uncover content/structure of the author's argument/position/view -- more extensive flagging will likely help.

Common flagging symbols:

| | |
|---|---|
| dfn | Definition of a term |
| ?? | What? I don't get it |
| =X? | What exactly does this mean? |
| I (vertical line) | Important |
| II (two vertical lines) | Very important |
| sum | Summary of the foregoing |
| arg | Argument |
| P1)P2) | Premises (steps) in the argument |
| conc | Conclusion of an argument |
| e.g. | Example illustrating a point |

Notetaking: comprehension of a text (esp. a philosophical text) is often facilitated by simply jotting down important points (in your own words) and passages that you are not sure you understand -- working out how you understand the text (on paper) will likely aid in revealing its structure and point.

Voice: it may be unclear if the argument/view/position being put forward is the one the author is defending/criticizing - look for structural "buzz-words/expressions" such as "it may be objected" or "some have thought" to determine whose position is being discussed.

Inference indicators: look for other words which signal arguments -- e.g., expressions such as "in summary," "thus," "hence," and "therefore" often (not always) signal conclusions...and phrases such as "for," "since," "because," "this is shown by" often signal premises.

3) Re-read: after the detailed read you should have a good sense of the point and (for the most part) the structure of the text. You will also (likely) have a sense of areas of the text that you disagree with or find problematic (this is essential since most of your assignments will be critical expositions) - A final read will often help to crystallize your comprehension and highlight your areas of disagreement.

II Writing

Having obtained a good sense of the text (and some potential problems), you are now (hopefully) in a position to say something about it.

The standard philosophical paper (assignment) is a critical exposition - the aim is to evaluate the success (truth/plausibility) of a philosophical argument/view.

A major (and very difficult) part of critical exposition is exposition: to clearly, thoroughly and plausibly express the point and structure of the argument/view in question (within the context of the assignment).

Starting

In a critical exposition, the expository element should be guided by the critical element: you should have a firm idea of the general point you want to make about the text (i.e., a general thesis for your paper), and the exposition should be selective enough to reflect only material relevant to establishing your thesis.
Begin by "brainstorming": write your ideas out in point form (everything you want to say, both interpretive and critical), then try to arrange these points in a systematic sequence.
General format
A) First draft: formulate the basic ideas of your point sketch into complete thoughts (sentences).

B) Introduction: start with a clear expression of your thesis (what you will establish in the paper) and a very brief overview of how you will establish the thesis.

Note: There are a number of different formats a critical essay may take:

1) a direct criticism of an argument /view (i.e., a criticism of its conclusion/reasons in support of the conclusion). You will offer a direct criticism of an argument if you think the argument is mistaken or weak, and you want to refute it entirely, or if you want to just reject part of it – e.g., sometimes you agree with the author's conclusion, but disagree with how he/she arrives at it or you might agree with the author's main premises, but think he/she draws the wrong conclusion from them. Hence, your critique will set out to establish this.

2) A criticism of another author's interpretation/criticism of the first author's argument...in this case you may be defending the original author.

3) A criticism of both views...you might think that both authors are out to lunch (i.e., that both offer unpersuasive arguments) and that you have the right view/solution. In this case you'll set out to refute all (or part) of their arguments with a view to establishing your position.

C) Exposition: this is where you set out and explain the issues relevant to your thesis (i.e., you will include your interpretation of the argument/ view you are criticizing).

Note: avoid "padding" (i.e., unnecessary or irrelevant detail) such as autobiographical information about author, e.g. "Rene Descartes was born..." in your exposition.

D) Discussion: this is the stage at which you advance reasons in support of your thesis (i.e., where you will offer your criticism), and attempt to respond to potential objections to your view.

E) Conclusion: a brief recapitulation of the point you have tried to establish (and how you have established it)

Note: do not introduce any new ideas in the conclusion.

Revision: The first draft of your paper will likely be rough on a number of counts (unclear expression, weak spots in the argument, disjointed transitions and other mechanical problems) -- read through your paper a few times for various faults and try to fix them.

** References: quoting and footnotes

The general rule of thumb is to use direct quotations from a (primary or secondary) text sparingly.

Quotations can be very effective if they are used to either emphasize or establish a point in your interpretation/assessment of the text. So, for instance if you say, "Descartes believes such and such for this and that reason," a quotation that reflects this (i.e., that Descartes really does believe that "such and such for this and that reason") can greatly enhance the strength of your paper (especially if your interpretation is unorthodox).

However, over-quoting greatly detracts form the strength of your paper: do not attempt to let the words of others substitute for your own by stringing together quotation after quotation to make your case.

Finally, if you do use quotations, make sure that you provide the reference for the quote in a foot (or end) note. (See example)

Rene Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," reprinted in Eliot Sober, Core Questions in Philosophy, Second Edition (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1995), pg. 214.

III Assessment

Just as your task (as a student of philosophy) is to critically assess an argument/view, my job (as an instructor of philosophy) is to critically assess your argument/view. The criteria by which I will assess your work is as follows:
Clarity: Your work should be expressed in clear and complete sentences. Obviously, if I cannot understand your explanation or assessment of a concept, point, argument, etc., I won't be able to judge the quality of your ideas. Poorly expressed ideas will result in a poor grade.

Thoroughness: Your work should be as complete as possible -- that is, it should not leave out details that are required to fully explain or assess a concept, point, argument, etc. Incomplete work will result in a lower grade.

Plausibility: Finally, I'll assess your work in terms of the accuracy/plausibility of your explanation or assessment of a concept, point, argument, etc., Since philosophy is sometimes abstract, and so occasionally somewhat vague, there is some room for interpretation of a concept, point, argument, etc. However, this is always a matter of degree, and interpretations will vary from downright implausible or false (e.g., when an interpretation contradicts other parts of a text) to more or less well-supported. I'll assess your explanations and assessments in terms of their persuasiveness.