

# 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 list of analyses that satisfy the requirements below. These analyses, written by students, and are past winners of the department's [Weddle Award](#).

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 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.

## Quotations

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.

## **Your Audience**

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.

## **Format**

Your analysis must have the following three sections:

- **Introduction**
- **Summary**
- **Critique**
- **Conclusion (optional)**

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.

Follow these specific instructions for each section to the letter.

## **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.

## 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.

## Sample Analyses

Since 2017 the department's Weddle Award has recognized the best analytic essay written for a class during the calendar year. Part of the purpose of this award is to provide students with examples for study. Below you will find a list of links to the winning essays.

- 2017 Christian Green: [On Quine, Grice and Strawson, and the analytic-synthetic distinction](#)
- 2018 Nicole Stommel: [Korsgaard's Constructivism](#)
- 2019 Haley Sinfield: [Brennan's Moral Parity](#)