

## Tips on writing short critical papers in philosophy (3-7 pages)

Typically, a good paper has the following structure:

1. Introduction. Here you introduce your reader to the topic of your paper, ie author A's view on X. You state your thesis as precisely as you can, e.g., that A faces difficult objections or that A can respond to some objection O, previously thought to be devastating.
2. Presentation of A's claim and A's argument for that claim.
3. Evaluation of A's claim C and argument:
  - a. Is the argument for C good (valid? premises plausible?) Can you raise objections to the argument or to the claim that nevertheless shares the author's motives and assumptions (ie an objection coming from the same "camp")?
  - b. Can you respond to any objections raised?
  - c. Perhaps another round of objections and replies (depending on length).
4. Conclusion. Here you draw together what you have argued for in the paper in a precisely stated thesis (it is often only possible to state one's thesis precisely in the conclusion).

### Common weaknesses:

#### Ingredients missing:

A paper might be missing any or all of the following: a thesis, an explication of an author's view regarding a certain specified topic, objections to the author's claims and arguments, replies to objections.

#### Lack of clarity:

Your paper should be *self-contained* (another SF State student, not enrolled in this course, should be able to pick it up and read and understand it) and provide an argument for a certain precise *thesis* regarding a clearly defined *topic*.

The *structure* of the paper should be clear. It should be clear what work each section is doing, what each paragraph is doing, what each sentence is doing. Any words not doing any work should be left out. Any sentences not doing any work should be left out. Any paragraphs not doing any work should be left out. Any sections not doing any work should be left out. More is not better!

All technical terms needed for the argument should be *defined*. Any technical terms not needed should be left out. No jargon!

#### Lack of engagement:

You need to explain in *precise detail* the claims and arguments of the authors you discuss.

You then need to stand back from the text and evaluate those claims and arguments. I want *your* evaluation of the ideas involved. You need to grapple with the pros and cons of what the author *actually* says, as well as what the author *could* say. This means that your voice needs to be on the page. Five pages of "strings of quotes" is no real engagement. Always *cite* your sources, but only quote if either of the following holds: i) the reader would not believe that the author had written this if you didn't quote; or ii) what the author says is ambiguous. If the latter, please provide the relevant alternative interpretations of the text.