

Demonstrating Your Knowledge: The Philosophical Essay

Short Guide for Explicating or Explaining a Philosophical Text

Adapted from Robert Burch

The task at hand: To write a critical explication or explanation of one of the assigned passages from the required readings.

To explicate means literally to "fold out." The task is to unfold the meaning of the passage in context and to come to some assessment of its importance and its truth.

What this assignment is not: This assignment is not a standard essay assignment where you begin with a thesis statement, provide a series of arguments in defense of it, and finish with a summary statement or reiterating conclusion.

What this assignment really is: Basically, this assignment is a matter of writing down in an organized and explicit way your actual process of thoughtful reading. Your task is to demonstrate in the essay how in your own reading of the text, you make sense of the passage in question and how you come to terms with it. Your essay will be judged on the basis of the depth, coherence, thoroughness and insight of the reading that it provides.

The underlying purpose of this exercise: To encourage the student to read actively. At its best, active reading is a process of critical appropriation, that is, a process of making the text 'properly one's own' by investigating its meaning and truth, ultimately with a view to how the position articulated in the text accords with or differs from, challenges or confirms, the constellation of your own fundamental philosophical beliefs and assumptions. To this end, you will seek first of all to understand the text sympathetically on its own terms as presenting a way of looking at the world, and then to respond to the challenge that this way of looking may pose.

Strategies: You are strongly advised to read the entire assigned text first, if only quickly to glean its basic outline and trajectory (see *How to Read Philosophy* handout). Without writing a word, ask yourself the following sorts of questions:

- What are the guiding questions and issues to which this text as a whole is addressed?
- (For essays based on longer readings) What are the immediate concerns and purposes of the section of the text in which the specific passage appears? How exactly does the assigned passage relate to these concerns and purposes?
- What precisely is the author trying to say in the passage itself, and what does he hope to accomplish by saying it?
- Do you understand the technical sense of the key terms being used?
- What is your initial assessment of the plausibility of what is being said in the passage?
- To make a start with the actual task of writing, you should focus directly on the passage itself and structure your essay by working out from the passage (as opposed to starting with generalities and trying then to narrow your focus to the passage). Indeed, your explication should explicitly begin by quoting the particular passage that you are explicating and proceed first to attend directly to it. The work of situating and contextualizing and assessing is best done as you move from the passage to its broader contexts, rather than vice versa. Starting with the passage, you will need to form a judgement about just what sort of passage it is; for example, does it state a supposedly self-evident truth? Is it a description? A definition? A rhetorical question? Is it an argument, or at least part of an argument (a premise, conclusion [here look for signal words, e.g., 'thus,' 'therefore'], a corollary)? Is it meant at face value, or does it have an ironic or ulterior purpose? You will need also then to situate the passage in terms of the unfolding argument of the assigned text. How does the passage fit into and serve the purposes of the proximate discussion, both preceding and succeeding, or the section in which it appears or the guiding purposes and concerns of the whole text?

Goals: The primary concern of your essay is simply to show that you have read the passage and understand just what is being said in it. The second concern is to add to this meaning by situating the passage in the larger context of the text, ultimately with a view to the role it plays both in the immediate discussion in which it is found and with respect to the broader purposes and main argument of the text as a whole. Third, you should try to come to some overall conclusion or assessment of the passage being considered. Be forewarned however, that whatever you may say in regard to a conclusion or assessment should emerge directly from your explication/explanation. Avoid tacking some positive or negative pronouncement on to the end of your paper just because you think it is expected. More careful and thoughtful work on the first two concerns with no conclusion or assessment will likely be better than less work on these two concerns but with some extraneous concluding comment added on.

Checklist for Philosophy Essays

Check your short or longer philosophy paper against the following:

- ___ My essay explains how I understand the passage in question. What view is being articulated or argued in the passage? What kind of passage is it? Is the argument believable?
- ___ My essay is organized, coherent and my reader will be able to make sense of it.
- ___ My essay offers insight into the passage in question. What is the author trying to say? How does this relate to the larger argument or goals of the author? I comment on the meaning and truth of the passage. I explain how the passage challenges or confirms common or my own beliefs and assumptions.
- ___ My arguments explore and analyze the topic in a high degree of depth and breadth by appealing to the elements of reasoning and critical thought.
- ___ My arguments are distinct from each other (NO REPETITION)
- ___ My arguments contain no informal fallacies (no 'sleazy' reasoning)
- ___ My essay is well connected with logical linking and lead-in words and phrases
- ___ My essay is free of all technical errors including spelling, grammar, punctuation, sentence structure errors
- ___ My essay uses proper methods of documentation.