

Some Thoughts on Writing a Short Evaluative Philosophy Essay

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How should I write a short evaluative philosophy paper (i.e., something in the 4-6 page range)? Writing such an essay might seem a little tricky at first, especially if, for whatever reason, you are taking this class without having taken the Yale-NUS Common Curriculum. To provide a rough roadmap, I offer the following guidelines that I hope will be helpful. My motivating assumption: just as you can fasten certain pieces of wooden particle board together to assemble an Ikea table, so too you can fasten certain pieces of writing together to assemble an evaluative essay. Like your first Ikea table, the result may not be a grand work of art; and, as with your first Ikea table, you may, in time, come to prefer something more complex, sturdy, and beautiful. Yet like a well-constructed Ikea table, an evaluative essay, if solidly assembled, will perform its function.

Your evaluative essay should contain four key components: (i) an introduction; (ii) an exegetical section; (iii) an evaluative section; and (iv) a conclusion. Eventually, you'll write longer papers, and these papers will require you to add additional components (to build fancier tables, as it were). But these components provide the main structure for your essay.

In what follows, notice my emphasis on essay *structure*. I do not discuss the question of writing *process*, i.e., the steps by which you might go about actually thinking through an essay assignment, drafting it, editing it, and rewriting it (often several times). I'd recommend discussing process-questions with the staff of The Writers' Centre: they can recommend different approaches that suit your temperament and past experience. Different writers might follow different processes, yet still end up with essays that contain the following structural components. You'll need to discover what process works best for you.

The Introduction

In an evaluative essay, your aim is to assess something, e.g., a view, argument, or policy. Is that view, argument, or policy good or bad, right or wrong, sound or unsound, plausible or implausible?

For example, consider the question, "Does Confucius endorse a plausible conception of how people can participate in government in *Analects* 2.21?"

If you think Confucius' conception of government participation is *correct*, your paper will be a *defense paper*. You'll be providing a philosophical *defense* of the view you're examining, viz., Confucius'. If, by contrast, you think that, e.g., Confucius accepts an excessively broad notion of participating in government, then your paper will be a *critical paper*. You'll be providing a *criticism* of the view you're examining.

In your introduction, then, your paper must present a clear and straightforward thesis, i.e., the main claim for which you'll be arguing. For an evaluative paper, your thesis will be the assessment or evaluation that you'll be endorsing. If you're writing a defense paper, your thesis will sound something like this: "In this paper, I shall defend the view that..." You should also provide a concise statement of the basis on which you'll defend that view. If you're writing a critical paper, by contrast, your thesis might go this way: "In this paper, I shall criticize the view that..." (Feel free to use the first person.) To inform your reader, you should also provide a concise statement of the basis on which you'll criticize that view.

Once you've spelled out your thesis, your introduction should provide a brief roadmap of the rest of your paper. Thus, your paper should briefly mention what you'll be covering in the subsequent parts of the paper.

The Exegetical Section

Your essay should begin by *articulating and explaining* the view or argument that you'll later be evaluating. In other words, your essay should provide a *straightforward interpretation* of the view(s) or argument(s) you'll be evaluating. In interpreting, you are translating what the author is saying.

As before, be sure to explain any special key terms and technical lingo. For this task, "i.e.," is your friend. Further: to articulate a view is not to quote some proponent of the view at length and to assume that these quotations speak for themselves. Extensive, unexplained quoting is just sloppy writing. Instead, per usual, put the view into your own words and state it in *common-sense terms*. Use quotations judiciously and explain them fully.

A good rule of thumb: imagine that you're presenting the view(s) or argument(s) to a family member who hasn't read the original text about which you're writing. Offering clear examples to elucidate your points is helpful.

The Evaluative Section

Here, you'll present and argue for your evaluation of a certain view or argument. You'll be arguing for the evaluation that you've already articulated in your introduction's thesis statement.

As you'll notice, both a defense paper and a critical paper cover a lot of the same ground. Both are concerned with *objections and replies*. By an *objection*, I mean a criticism of, or worry that one might have about, an argument or view. By a *reply*, I mean a response to that very criticism.

Some kinds of criticisms: (1) A criticism can focus on one of the premises in an argument you're investigating. Perhaps this premise seems false and open to counterexamples. (2) Perhaps the premises in an argument are true, but the argument is invalid. If so, then your criticism can focus on the form of the argument you're investigating. (Usually, the arguments we examine are valid, or can be rendered valid. Whether they're ultimately sound, however, remains more controversial.) (3) A criticism can focus on and bring to light the self-undermining or absurd implications of a particular view. If some view implies an absurdity, then that gives you reason to question or reject the view. (This mode of criticism is called *reductio ad absurdum*, i.e., "reduction to absurdity.")

A. If you're writing a defense paper, your evaluative section should contain three components:

Component (i): Articulate what you think is the best, the most powerful, and most reasonable criticism that an opponent of the view you're defending can make against the view. Don't pick a silly criticism (a waste of time), and don't list a heap of potential criticisms (which will dilute your paper). Instead, for this paper, focus on *the single best criticism*—"the SBC"—and spell out the SBC as clearly and as plausibly as possible. Explain how the SBC threatens the view you're examining.

Component (ii): Once you have articulated the SBC against which you'll be defending the view you're examining, your paper should *respond to* the SBC. How does the SBC go wrong? Why should the reader not be persuaded by the SBC? Again, don't pile on a heap of different responses to the SBC: doing so dilutes your paper. Rather, focus on your *strongest response* to the SBC and

present this response as clearly, as straightforwardly, and with as much detail as possible. Again, your response should directly address the criticism. Don't stomp your feet and simply insist that the original view is right. Instead, show exactly how the criticism fails.

Here's an example. Suppose someone rejects Confucius' view (in *Analects* 2.21) that people can participate in government by being filial. A criticism might run as follows: "Filial people do not, simply by being filial, have a direct significant influence over their communities. But having a direct significant influence is necessary for participating in government. Therefore, even if filial people have some limited influence on their communities, simply being filial is insufficient for participating in government in any real way."

A weak response to this criticism might run, "In reply, Confucius can argue that filial people participate in government by influencing others." This reply amounts to foot stomping, i.e., simply repeating Confucius' view. The opponent agrees, after all, that the filial influence others; the opponent, however, rejects the thought that anything interesting follows. Another weak response: "In reply, Confucius can highlight the bad results that occur when people fail to be filial. Being filial, then, conduces to social order. Therefore, Confucius can argue that we do participate in government when we exercise filial piety." Perhaps Confucius *can* make this point. But this response does not directly respond to the criticism at hand. At best, this response perhaps spells out some other reason to think that Confucius' view in *Analects* 2.21 is correct.

Instead, a good reply should *answer the objection*. Such a reply might directly challenge the assumption that filial people, simply by exercising filial piety, can't have direct significant influence over their communities. (Perhaps you could offer potential counterexamples, perhaps historical ones, of people who have had outsize influence in this way.) Less boldly, you might challenge the assumption that one participates in government in a real sense only when one has *direct significant influence* on one's community. (Perhaps my vote in any given election does not have direct significant influence on my community, but perhaps it still constitutes political participation of some sort. Or perhaps having some other weaker, indirect influence suffices.)

Component (iii): So far, you've spelled out your main line of defense against the SBC. But your work of defense isn't done yet. In component (iii), briefly consider how your opponent could respond to your defense. And in turn, offer a final brief response to your opponent. Thus, in component (iii), your paper should (a) briefly indicate how your opponent might retort to your strongest response to the SBC; and (b) offer a final brief response to this retort.

B. If you're writing a critical paper, your evaluative section should also contain three components:

Component (i): If you're writing a critical paper, you want to be a *charitable critic*. For instance, you might spell out two reasons why the view you're opposing (i.e., the view you've spelled out in the exegetical section) is *plausible*. Explain what the view you're examining has *going for it*.

Component (ii): Here, your paper should spell out your single best criticism of the view you're attacking. Don't list a heap of potential criticisms. Instead, focus on *the single best criticism*—again, the "SBC"—and spell out your SBC as clearly and as plausibly as possible.

Component (iii): So far, you've spelled out your main line of attack against the view you're criticizing. But your critical evaluation isn't done yet. In component (iii), briefly consider how a defender of the view you're examining (i.e., your opponent) could respond to your SBC. And once you've done this task, offer a final brief response to your opponent.

The Conclusion

Regardless of whether you're writing a defense paper or a critique paper, you've accomplished the main task of your essay. You've defended the thesis that you spelled out in the introduction. Now it's time to wrap things up.

Briefly explain what you've shown in your paper. No matter how well you've defended your thesis, you probably see some potential problem with your thesis or that you haven't had room to address. Hence, in a final sentence or two, you might indicate an issue that you think needs to be addressed, but explain that it's an issue to address in another paper

To conclude: other essays that you write down the road will have other components. For *this* paper, however, the goal is (i) to write clean, crisp exegesis and (ii) to offer plausible, charitable arguments on behalf of your evaluations of various views. Do that, and you've accomplished the main tasks of an evaluative essay.

From there, it's onward to building fancier tables.