

Reflection Piece Writing Guide

Hello everyone!

I am producing this document in order to guide you through the reflection piece writing process. Some of what I say here will also be helpful when you are writing your essays later in the semester.

I will describe four basic reflection piece genres. You might find that it is possible to take an approach beyond these four, or to combine multiple genres into a single piece (though be careful not to try and do too much in a small piece of writing). If you're unsure of whether your preferred approach is a good idea, please feel free to get in touch with me first!

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Four genres of reflection pieces are: **critical**, **defensive**, **exploratory**, and **inquisitive**. Critical reflections provide objections to an argument from a philosophical text, defensive reflections provide further support for an argument from a philosophical text, exploratory reflections provide ways of thinking about the themes of a philosophical text that the author of the text did not themselves discuss or emphasize, and inquisitive reflections raise questions about the text that were unresolved within the text. I'll say more about each of these below.

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Critical Reflections

- (1) The goal of critical reflections is to advance a philosophical debate by showing that a theory or argument within that debate is unsuccessful or in need of further defense.
- (2) There are some specific argumentative strategies that might help you, such as showing that a philosopher's argument is logically inconsistent (not all of its premises can be accepted at the same time), or showing that their argument simply does not provide enough evidence for its conclusion (even if it provides *some* evidence), or showing that they fail to respond to an objection. This last strategy could be pursued by arguing that a philosopher's response to an objection is insufficiently plausible, or by pointing out that the philosopher offers no response at all.
- (3) Strong critical reflections will not only *state* that they think an author's argument is unsuccessful. They will provide *reasons* for this and they will explain how those reasons justify the conclusion that the philosopher is mistaken about something.
- (4) Consider taking another look at [Michael Cholbi's argument strategy chart](#) if you want help figuring out what argumentative methods you can use to criticize a philosopher.

Defensive Reflections

- (1) Defensive reflections are structurally similar to critical reflections, but with an opposite goal. In these cases, you are not trying to defeat or weaken a philosophical argument but, instead, to *secure* or *strengthen* it. Given this structural similarity, any of the strategies used in the critical case can be used to defend rather than attack a theory or argument.
- (2) One way to strengthen a philosopher's theory is to provide *new evidence* for it. Another way is to argue against opposing theories. This second strategy is a blend of defense and criticism: you are defending one theory by attacking its competition.

Exploratory Reflections

- (1) Exploratory reflections are not direct attempts to criticize or defend a philosopher's arguments or theories. Rather, they focus on the *themes* or general *topics* with which these arguments or theories are concerned.
- (2) For example, you might wonder whether a philosopher's views lead in a new direction. Maybe a philosopher has argued for X, or has generally wondered about X, and you happen to notice that X is interestingly related to Y. Perhaps the philosopher that you read has not discussed Y. Maybe they should have, or maybe it is worth discussing Y independently of whether the philosopher in question ought to have discussed Y themselves. You can point all of this out!
- (3) Indeed, one of the best ways to make philosophical progress is to open new space for exploration, rather than simply contributing to an existing debate about well-known theories. Sometimes philosophers think that the only theoretical options are theories A and B, and so they spend years trying to improve or defeat various versions of A and B. Eventually, somebody comes along and shows that C is also a theoretical option. Alternatively, somebody else comes along and shows that a slightly different topic—independent of A, B, and C—has not been noticed but is worthy of more of our time.

Inquisitive Reflections

- (1) Whereas exploratory reflections might suggest new views or ponder about new subject matters after being inspired by a philosopher's work, and while critical and defensive reflections make efforts to evaluate a philosopher's work, inquisitive reflections take up the more modest goal of asking questions about a philosopher's work.
- (2) The goal is to point out that a philosopher's work has left questions unanswered, and to emphasize that answers to these questions are worthwhile. Perhaps we need to answer the questions in order to *justify* a philosopher's theory. Or perhaps we need to answer the questions in order to better *explain* or *clarify* a philosopher's theory. That depends on the questions you are asking.
- (3) Asking questions is probably the easiest way to engage with a philosophical text, since we can easily come up with questions like "*what does this philosopher mean by X?*" or "*why does this philosopher claim Y?*" For this reason, good inquisitive reflection pieces should also at least *try* to answer their own questions, or to try and articulate *nuanced* questions. Thus, if you ask "*what does this philosopher mean by X?*" you might then say "*perhaps what the philosopher means is A, or B...but I am not sure because of C...*".