

Guide for Writing Critical Summaries (Exegeses, pl. of Exegesis)

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A summary or exegesis is essentially a tool to help you in the task of *careful* and *critical* reading. Once acquired, the habit of critical analysis will serve you in everything you read. You should make it a practice to continue writing such summaries for your own benefit even when you are not required to turn them in. What follows are some tips on how to go about it.

A good piece of philosophical writing can generally be seen as an attempt to give *reasons* for believing a *thesis*. Your summary should do two things:

1. **Analyse the argument and exhibit its structure.** For a simple exegesis, this suffices.
 2. **If required, give a critical assessment of it.**
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1. To exhibit the structure of an argument, you will distinguish: *Premises* (the propositions that the argument requires you accept at the outset), and *conclusions* (the thesis that the author is trying to get you to agree with).

Sometimes (not always), the conclusion will be meant to follow *deductively*. Other times the argument will not be so tight. It will often be useful to ferret out unargued *assumptions*, including especially unexpressed ones, which are needed for the argument to go through. (Note that the premises don't necessarily come first. Often a writer, for reasons of convenience or style, will say not "A, therefore B," but "B, because A."

Pick out all and only the main points. Use a *Top-Down* approach: that is to say, first ask yourself what, in a sentence or two, is the point of the whole passage or article. In your summary, you can start with that brief statement. Then go on to each principal part of the argument, and repeat the process until you have got down to a level of detail adequate for the space available in your summary. If the passage is very long, there will obviously have to be less detail. But mastery of a text requires the ability to summarize it to any desired length. When something remains unclear, don't gloss it over, but draw attention to it. Pick out any "crux" or difficulty of interpretation. Don't be afraid of admitting that you don't understand something, but try to say as clearly as possible *what* you find had to understand, and *why*. Sharpen any difficulty found by offering *alternative interpretations*.

2. Make very clear when you are no longer *stating* what your author says, but have come to your own critical assessment. At this point, indicate briefly whether and why you think the premises and assumptions you have been asked to accept are true or false, plausible or implausible. If the argument is deductive, indicate whether it is valid; if it is not deductive say whether you find it acceptable, and if not, why. One way is to look for more or less remote *consequences* of the thesis that may turn out to be unacceptable. It is always a useful exercise to try as hard as you can to find good reasons to disagree with what a writer says, especially if you agree. Conversely, if you disagree with the conclusion, try hard to make up an independent defence of it. It is generally a good idea to assume that the authors you read are often wrong, but not that they are idiots.
3. If the argument is bad, explain how:
 - Are one or more of the premises false? (If not, this makes the argument *unsound*)

- Does the conclusion follow? (If not, this makes the argument *invalid*).
- A strictly invalid argument can still be a good argument. Very few arguments in science or ordinary life are deductive.
- Does the argument rely on assumptions that are unacceptable, or arbitrary, or debatable?
- Does the argument contain crucial ambiguities? (An ambiguous word or phrase is one that has more than one possible meaning. This can foul up an argument!)
- Is rhetoric substituted for argument at some crucial stage? (e.g. That couldn't be true, because if it were it would be TOO SAD.)

In addition, point out anything about the logic of the substance of the argument that seems to especially interesting. It can be interesting because you strongly agree or because you strongly disagree. In either case, you should try briefly to justify your view.

PRACTICAL TIPS:

Follow specific length and formatting requirements you are given in any given course. Number pages.

Form

- Reading for a summary and writing one is not easy. You should omit all the scholarly, decorative, and rhetorical features of an essay. This means: no introduction; no generalities; no background material; no footnotes; no bibliography; no quotations (**except when the precise wording raises a problem** to be discussed); no purple prose or fancy phrases.
- You do NOT need to avoid the first person!
- Don't necessarily follow the exact order of exposition of the original: many authors will use repetitions and amplifications that make it relatively easy to rearrange some topics.
- Provide references to specific pages or sections -- especially if you have rearranged the order.
- Do a spell-check yourself: your spell-checker can't tell if you mean "it's" or "its", and if you get those sorts of things wrong you will look illiterate.

Good luck, and remember to enjoy yourself. If the enjoyment is mixed with pain, think of it as spice.
