I. Reading Essays

You will write four reading essays for this class. A reading essay is a two-part analytic essay that focuses on some aspect of the assigned reading. These essays should be two pages in length. You may select as your topic any part of the reading assigned since the due date of the last reading essay. I will distribute topics for the first two essays, and then cut you loose for the remainder—part of the exercise is for you to become adept at identifying arguments or claims that can serve as foci for these essays. The point of these essays is to exercise your skills at close analysis of argumentative text. These are not the place for far-reaching philosophical pronouncements—the long essay is the place for that.

Before you begin to write, you must find a topic. This topic should be small enough to support no more than roughly two pages of discussion. When you consider that this is a two-part discussion, it should be clear that this must be rather focused and narrow. The best idea is to find an argument, i.e., a conclusion with supporting reasons, in the text and address it. You can use as models those topics that show up on the sheets I distribute.

After you select a topic, you need to convert your thoughts about it into the two-part essay. The two parts are as follows:

1. **Reconstruction:** In this part, you should reconstruct the argument that you have selected as your focus. To do this, you must identify the steps that are explicit in the text as well as those that are left implicit. Once you have identified the relevant steps, you must construct an argument out of the steps you’ve identified. It is important that your reconstruction be concise yet complete. Don’t leave anything essential out, but feel free to leave out what you regard as inessential. The flow of the argument you have focused on should be readily apparent from the reconstruction. (1 or 2 paragraphs)

2. **Comment:**
   
   a. This can begin with analysis of the reconstructed argument. Once you have reconstructed your argument, you need to comment on how it works. The author of this argument crafted it with a view to modifying how you regard the topic. Thus, the reasoning is intended to compel. Does it? How is it supposed to convey you from its premises to its conclusion? In this section, you comment on how the argument is intended to work as an argument. This could involve analysis both of the logic and the language of the argument. (1 paragraph)

   b. Develop your comment, whether negative or positive. That is, you can either criticize the author or you can develop their point. If you choose to do the latter, you might supply an alternative argument or pursue implications of their argument. Be sure to defend what you say. It’s important to make a claim or two,
but back them up. It is better throughout this to focus more narrowly and supply a detailed defense of what you say than to try to get everything into 2 pages. (1 or 2 paragraphs)

II. Tips

Here are some tips to bear in mind when you prepare your reading essays.

1. *No Summaries!* A reconstruction is *not* a summary. In your recon, you need to extract the main argument on which you focus and represent it in a way that best reveals what can be said for it. At the very least, this should involve identification of the relevant conclusion and associated reasons. This is crucial—all depends on this.

2. *Don’t worry about introductions.* In these essays, it’s best to get right to the point. Given this, you needn’t bother with paragraph length introductions to the essay. Just dive right into the reconstruction.

3. It helps to number the steps in the argument. You don’t need to do this in your write-up, but you should do it while preparing your write-up. If you can’t do this, then you haven’t identified the argument yet and you aren’t in a position to write an effective reconstruction.

4. Be sure that you note the paragraphs from which you take the argument steps. You can do this in parentheses after the step.

5. Be sure that your logical analysis is an analysis of the logic of the argument you reconstruct.

6. Be sure to tie any language analysis into the argument you reconstruct. Analyze the language that is relevant to the argument and note the connection explicitly.

7. If there are many arguments in the piece, do not feel compelled to reconstruct all of them. Pick one or two that you think are central and focus on them. Note that you are doing this, if you choose to do it, so that I am aware that you know you are skipping things. Apply the *paragraph rule:* try to select an argument that is contained within one paragraph of the text; such an argument will lend itself to adequate analysis and comment in the space of two pages.

8. In your comment, *defend your claims!* The comment should include an argument or two from you, and not a mere expression of a disagreement or an endorsement.

9. If you mention words, quote them. E.g., ‘word’ has four letters, which makes it a pretty small word. The first occurrence is *mentioned* (and so quoted), while the second is *used.*

10. I’m happy to look at preliminary drafts of these.