

Syllabus says: *The purpose of these assignments is to help you clarify your understanding of the readings and to help you think critically about the issues. These assignments should be one-half to one page, typewritten reactions or questions about some specific issue which you find compelling in the readings. On occasion, I will suggest a specific topic in advance. **Important:** your paper must not simply sum up the reading or repeat points made there. (I.e., no book reports, please.) Rather, you must try to raise a question or discuss some original insight.*

QUESTION: What should a “short paper” be like? Below are a few examples of what you might do—and should not do—to fulfill this assignment.

Sample Reading: Abortion. Let’s say the reading is an essay by a philosopher defending free access to abortion. In the essay, the author argues that that a woman has the right to control what happens to her body and because a fetus is not a person in the full sense, the government has no right to make abortion illegal. The author spends time describing and defending the important concept of “person” and also explains why the government has a duty to respect the individual citizen’s privacy.

Some “Good” Paper Topics

Good short paper topic # 1: Challenge a key concept with a counterexample. Discusses how the author defines the word “person” and focuses on one major counterexample that shows the definition to be inadequate. (Example: by defining “person” in the author’s way, we would have to accept, by this same definition, that anyone on life support is not a person, either. Therefore, the definition is too broad.)

Good short paper topic # 2: Recognizes why a concept is important and extends discussion to issues outside the reading. Discusses why the right to control her body is so important to a woman, and gives an example of how that right is violated in other situations.

Good short paper topic # 3: Compares the role a concept plays in two different arguments. Discusses how *this* article’s definition of “person” (which supports abortion-choice) measure’s up against *another* article’s definition of “person” (which opposes abortion-choice). [Notice: comparing two different *arguments* is usually too much for a one page paper, but in this case you just compare one *piece* of each argument.]

Good short paper topic # 4: Uses an important concept in reading to raise a difficult question. Discusses how “person” is defined in other ethical situations, e.g., in animal rights cases. Raises the provocative question: if human infants and mature animals are similar in crucial respects, does this mean that meat is murder?

Good short paper topic # 5: Focuses on something the author’s overall strategy in the essay by asking a specific question. For example, why the author has chosen to focus on the definition of “person” to decide the abortion issue.

Good short paper topic # 6: Spells out a list of unclear items in reading. Here, the writer chooses two or three major points in the reading they did not understand, noting specific passages in the text.

This is just a short list of ways a paper might be creative and critical. What other ways can you think of?

“Bad” Paper Topics

Bad short paper topic #1: Simply summarizes what author says in reading.

Bad short paper topic #2: Rambles for a page about the topic of abortion, but without making specific reference to what *this* essay said.

Bad short paper topic #3: Discusses reading assigned, but makes obvious mistakes about what the author said. (E.g., talks about why author is *against* abortion, etc.)