

Texts and Ideas: What is a Good Human Life?

# Artistic Exposition & Analysis Paper Prompt

**Paper Assigned:**

Wednesday, November, 10<sup>th</sup>

**Paper Deadline:**

Friday, November 26<sup>th</sup> at 11:59pm

## Response Paper Prompt: Artistic/Philosophical Exposition and Analysis

Unlike in our other papers, there is only one topic, but it's a prompt that gives you a great deal of freedom to choose your topic. This freedom gives you flexibility, but it also means that you should approach this paper very carefully.

**TOPIC:** You are to pick one art series, art exhibition, or (in the case of a particularly detailed or otherwise sufficient to let you properly address the questions below) an artwork currently on display

- (1) Describe the artwork, series, or exhibition. Don't just describe your experience of it but also make sure to explain to the reader (i) where it is exhibited, (ii) who created or authored the work(s), (iii) what the artwork(s) or exhibition literally consists of (i.e. what is the artwork made out of), (iv) what the artwork/exhibition purports to say (based on the claims made by the artist or museum talking *about* the works).
- (2) Describe some specific aspect or part of the exhibition (whether this is a single artwork or something more or less narrow than that is up to you) that you think either exemplifies, conflicts with, or can be used to comment on one of the views about what makes a good human life that we've covered in this class. To do this, you will need to (not necessarily in this order): (i) explain the overall worldview or specific claim(s) that you think the artwork communicates or illustrates, giving clear justification for your assertion. (ii) explain, *thoroughly*, the view defended in one of our readings, whether it be one of our philosophical essays or one of the works of fiction/literature we've read, that you wish to compare this artwork to. (iii) Articulate your claim about how the artwork relates to the part of the reading you've chosen.
- (3) Provide justification, whether in the form of positive argument, or by considering and responding to a possible objection to you, for your claim about the relationship between the artwork/exhibition and the view defended or depicted in the reading from our class that you've chosen. Your justification should make use of references both to specific claims in the readings as well as specific aspects of the artworks (as well as anything that the artists/curators/museum says about it). Explain how we should evaluate this artwork based on what you've argued here. Explain whether the artwork should be understood as having ramifications for whether we should accept or reject the view you picked from the readings.

**Museums:** You have some freedom in picking which museum you visit. However, your topic should be an artwork, art series, or art exhibition currently on display, or that has been on display this semester, at an art museum or gallery in Shanghai (remote students should contact me about substitutes that fit their situation). I have provided a list of options You are encouraged to peruse the websites of these museums and see which options most appeal to you.

- (1) The NYU Shanghai ICA (Institute for Contemporary Art) has an on-going exhibit called “Do Rocks Listen?” where they’ve partnered with the Karrabing Film Collective (an indigenous film organization based in Australia). This exhibit includes an in-person element in the ICA Gallery area on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor of the NYU Shanghai building at 1555 Century Ave, as well as an online element where some of the films produced by the Karrabing Collective are screened. You can register for both here: <https://ica.shanghai.nyu.edu/program/real-but-got-story-series/>
- (2) The China Art Museum. If you decide to attend, you must register online (it’s free) the day before in order to secure one of the 5000 reserved visitor slots available each day. They have a few ongoing exhibits as well as a wealth of permanent exhibits that you may find helpful: <https://www.artmuseumonline.org/art/art/index.html>
- (3) The Modern Art Museum Shanghai (MAM Shanghai) does not have a temporary exhibition at present, but it is still open to visits during their regular hours, and their permanent collection does include some artworks that you could make use of. Their website is: <http://www.mamsh.org/>
- (4) A few other options exist. Here are three others that either have current exhibitions that might be relevant to the questions we’ve covered in this course, or whose permanent collections may include artworks you may find interesting and helpful: The Yuz Museum on the West Bund has two current exhibits of paintings that would also be an option: <http://www.yuzmshanghai.org/> The Long Museum (whose main location, on the West Bund, requires that you purchase tickets, but whose satellite location in Pudong does not): <http://www.thelongmuseum.org/> and the Power Station of Art, which has some on-going exhibits as well as a permanent collection: <https://www.powerstationofart.com/>

## General Advice for Answering the Prompts:

- (1) Describe the artworks, the artist’s description of them, and lay out the arguments or justifications given in the readings you reference as clearly and concisely as possible.
  - a) Present your points in plain language prose. If it’s an argument, identify its premises and conclusion, then list the former and explain how they imply the latter.
  - b) Make explicit and presuppositions or principles which are not mentioned but are playing an important role in the significance of the artwork, or, in the case of an argument, the truth of the conclusion.
  - c) Finally, explain what broader theory the argument is supporting or criticizing. Explain how the truth of its conclusion is supposed to support or (partially) refute that view.
- (2) When explaining and analyzing an artwork or exhibition, you should try to find what the artist, curator, or museum has to say about the work
  - a) One good way to do this is to seek out the information on the museum website, the program/magazine made available to visitors at the museum/gallery, and to take pictures of the plaques affixed near or next to artworks in most museums, explaining something about the history of their creation and the intention behind them.
- (3) When analyzing the reading and making comparisons, focus on the ideas presented...
  - a) That is, the specifics of an author’s wording won’t be as important as making sure you have a clear and concise description of the point they’re trying to communicate.
  - b) When comparing a reading to an artwork, you should identify major points of comparison or contrast, and try to focus on points that are relevant to these connections.
- (4) Do not over-use quotations! Since you are comparing texts (whether readings in this class or writings about the artworks or exhibition you’ve chosen), you will likely have to cite certain

parts to justify your claims. However, you should focus on giving a *\*clear\** and *\*concise\** explanation of the views presented in the relevant parts of the readings, rather than just quoting them. For the non-philosophical works, you should feel more comfortable including quotes, but you should still always explain their significance in your own words.

- a) **WHENEVER** you use a quote, you must immediately follow the quote with an explanation, entirely in your own words, of what this quotation means and how it relates to the point you're trying to make in that part of your paper.

## **Formatting and Length requirements:**

- Pages: 3 to 5 pages (hard limit). If your paper is shorter than the minimum, you probably haven't explained your points thoroughly enough. I will stop reading at the end of the maximum number of pages, so if your paper is longer than the maximum, then the last parts of it won't get read by me (and I will grade your paper based only on the parts I read).
- Double-spaced, 1" margins (all sides), 12 point font (Times New Roman, Calibri, Liberation Serif, or some other inoffensive, normal-proportioned, font). Letter-sized or A4 paper formatting.
- No excessive introduction or conclusion. You do not need any "hook" or other extra sentences at the beginning to lead up to the argument you're discussing. You should immediately start your discussion, without any unnecessary scene-setting.
- Must be in .pdf, .doc, .docx, or .odt format.
- There are no requirements for citation formatting. However, you should make it clear whose views you are discussing and, if you do choose to use quotes or otherwise reference parts of a paper directly, you should indicate what reading and what sections you're referring to.

## **Who is Your Audience?**

- *NOT* me (I know too much about the material).
- *NOT* a layperson who hasn't taken any philosophy (they know too little about how philosophy papers work to understand what you're doing).
- Rather, consider your audience an old roommate of yours, who was a philosophy major, but who never took this particular class.

This roommate knows what words like necessary and sufficient mean, and understands what arguments, premises, and conclusions are, but they probably don't know what is said in any of the readings.

This roommate, you can assume, has *not* been to the exhibition in question and doesn't know anything about the artworks you're discussing, so your presentation of them should give whatever context is necessary for a reader to understand your points fully.

Moreover, this is a roommate whose seen you in embarrassing situations in the past, and so won't be impressed if you write using high-falutin language to make yourself sound fancy and smart (or to disguise when you're not sure about what you're saying, which is what that language is usually used for). Rather, you should just explain everything as simply and clearly as possible, so they won't have anything to make fun of you about.

# Grading Standards

The prompt is on the previous pages. What follows are my grading standards (so you know what to aim for in your assignment). These are the exact standards I will use to grade your paper.

## **Minimum Requirements to *Pass*:**

- A) Your topic should be one of the two prompts provided, above.
- B) Your paper should engage actively with the readings, but not be either a self-contained argument or a stand-alone part of a series of arguments for a specific positive view advocated for by the author.
- C) Your paper must answer all of the questions indicated in the prompt and must do so in a clear and easy-to-follow way.
- D) Your paper should avoid using excessive quotes, and avoid using very long quotes. Every quotation should be accompanied by a prose explanation of what that quote says and what its significance is for the point you're making in that section of the paper.

## **Requirements to Get a *Good* Grade:**

To get a good grade (rather than just a passing one), you must follow the prompt in a clear and organized way. Specifically, you must explain yourself clearly, thoroughly, in a focused way, and in a way that's accurate to the content of the reading or of the argument you're considering.

### **These conditions are listed in order of importance:**

- ***Clarity*** is the most important feature I'll be looking for. It must be evident to your reader what each sentence means, and what purpose the terms you are using are playing.
- ***Thoroughness*** is the second most important feature, and it also contributes to clarity. Your paper should explain your point in sufficient detail and with sufficient care that the connections between, e.g., the premises of the argument and the objection, are as explicit as possible.
- ***Focused writing*** is the third most important feature, though it also contributes to clarity and thoroughness. Your writing should not bring in irrelevant details or extra information or technical terms which do not contribute to your reader's understanding of the argument, objection, or response. You should come into each paragraph or sentence knowing what point you want to make and remove any excess or rhetorical flourishes.
- ***Accuracy to the content*** of your reading, and of your chosen argument is the last thing I'll look for. While it is important to get the material right, it's *much* more important to be clear, thorough, and focused in your explanation. Indeed, your paper will be better (and receive a better grade) if you openly acknowledge that you aren't sure how to understand a certain step in an argument or objection, but can hazard two or three possible understandings, and then clearly, thoroughly, and in a focused way explain those possibilities and what their significance is.

A note on what's ***NOT*** important to getting a good grade: At no point will I evaluate whether you, in your paper, "won" the debate. There are no points awarded for showing that an objection to your preferred view is false and confused, or for showing that the objection to a view you disagree with absolutely demolishes it. Philosophy is not about winning arguments, it's about clearly and carefully laying out the logical relations between certain claims, and using those connections to better understand the world. If your paper "wins" the argument, but does so by ignoring or underplaying the significance of a legitimate point which would be inconvenient for your preferred view, then your paper is sacrificing all four of the above virtues in exchange for a meaningless feeling of victory, and will be graded accordingly.