

## The Think Piece: A Guide

### The Form

Think pieces are short essays of *at least* 500 words. I place no upper limit on length. However, I will penalize you if your essay is long *and* filled with empty verbiage.

Given that think pieces are short, they must be tight. Every word counts. Your think piece should have a distinct point of view. Even more importantly, it must present this point of view clearly and consistently. I cannot emphasize enough that murky think pieces – essays that jump from point to point with no clear organization – fall short of my basic expectation.

Although I require think pieces to be well-organized and coherent, as a form, the think piece allows you to experiment with modes of writing as well as with ways of addressing problems. You might write a formal essay, citing sources. You are permitted to use the personal “I”; you are permitted to tell stories; you might even write a poem. But here’s a warning. Whatever form your think piece takes, it will be judged first and foremost by its success at elucidating the class’ subject matter.

### The Essay

There are many factors that go into a superior essay, no matter what the class. These include: the quality, depth, and complexity of the argument; the use of evidence to support the thesis; writing that is clear and elegant. These are important considerations for how I assess your think pieces.

Beyond such baseline expectations, I also judge a think piece by asking myself whether it is “analytic” or “synthetic.” What does this mean? *Analysis* is the process of breaking something down into its basic parts. *Synthesis*, by contrast, is a process of combining separate elements to create a new complex entity. An *analytic* essay explains a subject matter in its own terms; it draws out and clarifies the main points of a problem in ways that are intrinsically related to that problem. A *synthetic* essay, by contrast, elucidates a problem using terms that have no necessary relation to the original terms of the problem; it draws connections between otherwise separate bodies of knowledge.

One might observe say that Dr. Frankenstein analyzed the bodies of several corpses which gave him the raw materials with which to synthesize the body of his monster. Indeed, analysis must always precede synthesis. In order to write intelligently about a subject matter, you must first understand *what* you are writing about. However, a superior paper will engage in synthesis as well. That is to say, a superior paper will go beyond the evident facts about a subject to create something new, to show intellectual connections that are not evident or inherent in the subject matter itself.

### The Grade

All papers are judged by the clarity and elegance quality of their writing. Being innovative and intelligent is not enough. Strive to be a good writer!

✓<sup>+</sup> is reserved for insightful think pieces that demonstrate their authors’ ability to draw interesting connections between distinct concepts in the pursuit of new knowledge. The ability to think synthetically is an above average skill: it is rewarded accordingly. (Equivalent to A+, A, or A-)

✓<sup>\*</sup> is intermediate. It represents an especially analytic paper, or a somewhat deficient example of synthetic work. (Equivalent to A- or B+)

✓ is bestowed upon think pieces that demonstrate their authors’ ability to understand and analyze the subject matter. Some readings are quite difficult, and it can sometimes be a challenge just to make sense of them. Nevertheless, the ability to make sense of difficult material is the basic skill you are expected to develop as a college student. The development of that skill does not earn special credit. (Equivalent to B+, B, or B-)

✓ is an intermediate grade. It represents a lower than average analysis. (Equivalent to B- or C+)

✓<sup>-</sup> is given to think pieces that are neither synthetic nor effectively analytic. There are many different ways in which a think piece can fall short of expectations. If you receive this grade, I would advise you to come speak with me about why I found your work deficient. (Equivalent to C+, C, C-, D, or F)