Philosophy of Language Responses: Tips & Tricks

A couple of general pointers for how to improve your responses to the reading:

1. **Choose one!** Sometimes you will have lots of comments and questions on a reading. For your response, you need to pick just one and articulate that as clearly as you can. So you make some very clear choices: Do I want to ask a question or make a comment? What kind of question or comment do I want to express? (Clarificatory or substantive? Suppotive or critical?) Then stick to just one thought that you express as clearly as possible. Save the rest for in-class discussion!

2. **Be concise!** Less is more. Try and keep your response to two or three sentences (excluding quote). Boil it down to the essential point you want to make, and just make that as clearly as you can. There is just one exception to this rule: if you give an *example*, you should be as concrete and specific as possible about the example. Then it can be good to take a few more sentences.

3. **Be relevant!** Make sure that your question or comment directly responds to what the the author is saying. It's not enough for the question or comment to just be on the same topic as the reading. This is also about choosing the right quote: you want to find a quote that links up directly with your response. Sometimes you have a relevant question or comment whose connection to the text is not directly obvious: in that case you will want to briefly explain how it links up.

4. **Keep it concrete!** Avoid generalities and vagueness. Don't just say "I agree because I have noticed the same thing in my own life." Also tell me when and where and how you noticed! Don't just say "I disagree because I do not agree with the author's argument that *yada yada yada*." Tell me why you disagree.

5. **Tell me *your* thought**. Your response should be *relevant* to something in the text, but it should not itself be in the text. So try not to agree or disagree for a reason that is explicitly discussed in the text, and don't raise a question that is already explicitly raised and addressed in the text. *Tip:* a failsafe way of adding an original thought is to see if you can come up with a new example of whatever phenomenon the author is talking about. New examples always make for great contributions to the class, because they are automatically *original* and *concrete*, and they are really good for generating more discussion!