Argument Evaluation Essay Assignment

Due: Thursday, September 8 (in class)

Goals: The goal of this assignment is twofold: first, to gain experience in understanding an argument made by another, and second to write a short essay that evaluates such an argument. In this case the argument in question is Alan Turing’s lecture entitled “Can Digital Computers Think?”

Assignment: In Turing’s own words, his lecture explains “the main rational arguments for and against the theory that machines could be made to think”, together with a word or two about the “irrational arguments”. The first part of your task is to understand and summarize the key arguments in your own words. The second, more substantial part is to evaluate the argument as a whole using your own opinion supported by sound reasoning and evidence. As this is designed to be a fairly brief paper, you should not get bogged down in attempting to support or refute every point made in Turing’s lecture. (We will return to the topic of thinking machines in great detail later.) Instead, select those that you feel to be critical or representative of the overall idea that Turing is advocating. Keep in mind that your credibility is enhanced if you are able to give evidence that both supports and refutes the main idea (the potential ability of computers to think, in this case).

Unlike the writing assignments that will follow this one, research is not required for this paper. However, preparation and organization are required. For ideas regarding both preparation and organization consult the Purdue Online Writing Lab closely. (The section on “The Writing Process” in particular -- http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/1/) Do the same as you review your own paragraph structure, sentence structure, grammar, etc. (Other key sections of the Online Writing Lab will be discussed in class.) The OWL section on expository essays would be a particularly helpful guide for this assignment (https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/685/02/).

As part of your paper’s organization, there should be a thesis – that is, a point or objective. In the case of this assignment the objective is relatively clear – to explain Turing’s key points and evaluate them from your personal perspective. As you know from the OWL, there are many ways to introduce your thesis, or otherwise make it clear to the reader. You may select the best way to do this, but the thesis must be present and the overall organization must be clear, with clear transitions. You must provide evidence for any assertions that you make.

Again, this is not a research paper and no additional resources are required. If you do not include any additional resources, then direct quotes from “Can Digital Computers Think?” can be parenthetically noted with a page number. If you do include additional resources, then follow the MLA citation guidelines (also found in the OWL) and attach a Works Cited page. Please see the class web site for information on formatting.

Options: This is the first of your “presentational” papers for the semester. As such, it has a shorter length requirement – 500-750 words in length (about 2-3 pages) – as well as a shorter time allotment. There is no explicit assignment to submit a draft or to discuss your draft(s) with me, but you are welcome to do so. Just contact me for an appointment to sit down and read your paper together.