Sample Philosophy Essays

To provide some guidance in what we are seeking in a philosophy paper, here are three essays from undergraduate students in a course taught by Rob Reich about a decade ago. The course is “Ethics and Politics of Public Service” and the essay concerns a book called *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures* by Anne Fadiman. The book is about a young Hmong child with severe epilepsy. For the Hmong, epilepsy is a condition believed to confer special status on the person who has it, and the book tells the true story of the American doctors who seek to require certain medical treatment that might “cure” the child, Lia, and the parents who appear to reject the recommended treatment on grounds that it might be better for Lia to have epilepsy, so long as she is not drastically harmed by it.

The question is:  
*Using examples from the book, provide a principled argument that addresses the question: "When should professional or scientific knowledge override the preferences of persons who refuse to act on such knowledge?" Or even more abstractly, When is paternalism justified?*

SAMPLE A: “An Ethical Framework for Evaluating Paternalism”

- An A paper.  
- Effectively and concisely addresses all facets of the question prompt  
- Builds a convincing argument through efficient reference to the text and consideration of counterarguments  
- Incorporates some outside research  
- Excellent, simple style of writing. Formal but not stiff  
- No editing mistakes, grammar, or syntax problems.

SAMPLE B: “Deceptively Innocuous: When is Paternalism Justified?”

- A B/B+ paper  
- Addresses the prompt, but focuses narrowly on specifics rather than building a more general argument.  
- Well organized and structured paper  
- Strong stylistically, but not consistent throughout the paper  
- Some editing mistakes

SAMPLE C: “The Babel Problem”

- A C/C+ paper  
- Approaches the question, but relies on summary rather than synthesis and argument  
- Argument not well structured, and not convincing  
- Tone is overly conversational  
- Rambling and repetitive paper over 18 pages  
- Sloppy editing