

Teaching Writing and Teaching Philosophy

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We would like to explore two questions concerning philosophy and writing: (1) How might the study of philosophy be used to teach good writing? And, (2) How might the act and practice of writing be used to teach philosophy?

The connection between philosophy and writing lies partly in the fact that philosophy, like any discipline, requires that its practitioners be able to communicate its main ideas. But there is also a rather special connection that arises from the fact that good writing—especially good critical writing—requires good reasoning. And the study of sound reasoning, logic, has been a special part of the subject matter of philosophy ever since Aristotle made the perfectly obvious point that none of our answers to life's big questions will be worth much if those answers have been arrived at by fallacious reasoning. In short, logic is an essential element in good writing and in good philosophy, and it should come as no surprise that the teaching of the two are, or should be, intimately connected.

But surely, sound reasoning is essential to every academic discipline. Why is there a special connection between logic and philosophy? One reason is that philosophy deals with questions that are highly abstract. They cannot be addressed by systematic observation and experiment (although the results of the empirical

sciences may inform the philosopher's treatment of some issue), and must be approached with nothing but unaided reason. However, this does not distinguish philosophy from other abstract disciplines, most notably mathematics. Unlike those in mathematics, however, the concepts of primary importance to philosophy seem especially vulnerable to confusion, conflation and vagueness. Mathematics often proceeds from stipulated definitions of its key concepts, and its investigations and proofs are thus "clean." The key concepts in philosophy, on the other hand, are those involved in messy everyday thought and discourse. We deal with such things as belief, desire, freedom, consciousness, knowledge. Logic plays the role here of clearing up conceptual confusion.

There is a further reason for the importance of writing in the teaching of philosophy. The medium of philosophy consists almost entirely of written essays or treatises. There are no experimental apparatus or laboratories, no statistical studies, and very few useful computer applications. There is no distinction in philosophy between experimentalists and theorists—philosophers are all theorists—and there is no branch of engineering that focuses on applying the results of philosophy to technological innovations. The practice of philosophy consists mainly of reading what others have written, thinking about it, and writing something new; so all philosophers must write. And to be persuasive, a philosopher must be able to lead readers from premises the readers already accept to the conclusion the philosopher wants to defend, in a manner which is both natural and rigorous. The ability to write clearly and effectively is thus essential to the very practice of philosophy.

In our department, the teaching of writing through the assignment of philosophy papers goes on at all levels of study, for majors and non-majors alike. Indeed, some of the most important instruction goes on in PY103, a general education course in critical thinking called *Thinking Intelligently*. This is our most popular course and provides the three who teach it with considerable opportunity for pedagogic experimentation, including experi-

mentation with writing assignments. Although we each approach the course in our own ways, we all put great importance on clarity of thinking and writing, on awareness of the power and seduction of emotive language and, especially, on the avoidance of fallacious reasoning.

Many of these writing assignments focus on the concept of cogent reasoning. Typically, the students have to critique a piece of persuasive writing—say, a political speech or a newspaper editorial. They must be able to identify the writer’s reasoning, i.e. the thesis and the reasons offered for it, and evaluate the reasoning in terms of its cogency or non-cogency—determine whether the reasons are warranted, whether they omit any relevant information, and whether they offer adequate support for the thesis.

One of us, Ray Perkins, has a number of ideas for writing assignments that he has found useful. In one, students are asked to read a *Concord Monitor* article on New Hampshire poverty and a letter to the editor critical of the article. The student is asked to evaluate the cogency of the letter. It’s a good exercise, because it requires a student to distinguish a news article from an opinion piece and to apply the canons of good reasoning to an emotionally charged issue. It also helps the student to see the connection between good writing, good logic and good citizenship. As a variation on this, Perkins has sometimes had his students write their own letters to the editor, on any topic—and to any newspaper—of their choice. He has done this successfully in at least one upper level course as well, PY 356 Philosophical Perspectives on War and Peace. Obviously, this sort of exercise will pay, potentially, many kinds of dividends to the student philosopher-writer.

Perkins has another favorite writing assignment dealing with cogent reasoning, but in this case a bit more room is given to the creative side of these budding logicians. He asks them to write a one-act play on any subject. But, in the course of the dialogue the characters must commit at least six fallacies (of the dozens or so which are studied). And at the end of the play, the author must identify, name and explain each of the fallacies committed. This

assignment was inspired by an idea originally tested by David Zehr of the PSC Psychology Department. He has had great results with it, and so has Perkins. Constructing, and explaining, your own fallacious arguments in a one-act play is admittedly easier than finding them in the letters to the editor, but it can be an enjoyable experience for both student and instructor (most of these are a lot of fun to read) and, of course, students get to exercise their writing skills in more than just logical ways,

Philosophical issues, while sometimes abstract, are intimately relevant to our lives. But, in the interest of objectivity, philosophers typically treat these issues in a cool, detached and analytic manner. While this approach is essential to progress in philosophy, introductory philosophy students often find the abstraction daunting and the detached perspective off-putting. In addition, most of our students are young and have little experience of the “real world.” For such students, unless one succeeds in helping them to emotionally connect with their topic in some way, one is not likely to succeed in enabling them to engage the abstract conceptual issues.

One of us, Dan Kervick, has occasionally tried to deal with these problems by giving assignments that involve embedding a traditional objective treatment of the issues within a more compelling imaginative framework. One assignment, for an introductory ethics class, asked students to imagine that they were the parents of a college-age daughter, that this daughter had written them a letter announcing that she was pregnant, that she was contemplating an abortion, and that she was morally confused and wanted help and moral advice.

This assignment was very successful for a number of reasons. The students seemed to have put more than the usual amount of effort into the assignment and were clearly much more interested in it. The process of writing the paper also seemed to have generated a certain amount of vicarious emotional discomfort, and it helped us, as a class, to deal with issues not often dealt with in an ethics class, such as those connected with the possibilities of

conflict between the objective standpoint of moral thinking, and the more subjective values involved in close personal relationships. Many students, for example, experienced the conflict between the desire to recommend a moral course of behavior, and the understandably natural desire of a parent to recommend the course of action that was in the best interest of the daughter, without regard to objective or universal moral concerns. In addition, a number of students felt misgivings about the whole idea of giving moral “advice” or making moral recommendations. They found this attitude to be too paternalistic. This naturally led to a discussion of the connection between paternalism and the moral responsibilities of parenthood.

Use of an imaginative framework is one technique for stimulating the creative process of writing. Another colleague of ours, David Haight, also recommends the practice of meditation as an aid in inspiration, coherence, clarity and concentration.

Haight also believes, and emphasizes with his students, that the biggest barrier to writing should be crossed by sitting oneself down at one’s desk, typewriter, computer or whatever and writing something. He also recommends “going the distance” with one’s writing. Frustration and discouragement often disturb the long-term goal of finishing in favor of short-term diversions and distractions. The failure to follow through to the end of something is a sign of the all-too-human tendency to hedge, fudge and cheat on something just to get through, get by and then get out of whatever we should be doing.

Students in Haight’s class are given three kinds of writing assignment: essays to be worked on during a full class period, summaries of what they read in a book, and term papers outside of class. Haight then selects the best summaries and papers for students to share with the rest of the class. That way, students are encouraged to do their very best. Some students are also encouraged to keep a diary or journal of their thoughts and to share them with the professor, who then responds to them verbally or in writing.

Finally, many members of the department seem agreed that there is another important purpose in assigning writing in philosophy, and in the college classroom in general. Our students are, through their progress as students, joining the community of educated people, and must have an awareness of and respect for the prevailing standards of writing within that community. So, in addition to their philosophical content, papers should be assessed on the basis of such things as syntax, style, grammar and spelling.