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Philosophical Writing: The Essay and Beyond

Summary

The primary method of evaluation in philosophy courses (both undergraduate and graduate) is usually some form of research paper or essay. There is an assumption, however, that the only kind of essay that philosophy students need to learn how to write is the argumentative essay. Indeed, philosophy instructors often consider other forms of writing less significant. This workshop intends to break down these assumptions by introducing participants to a variety of essay styles, and to other forms of practical writing that ought to be a part of undergraduate philosophy coursework. The goal of this workshop is to encourage instructors to create more purposeful and creative writing assignments in their own future courses.

Keywords

philosophical writing, philosophical essay, philosophy education

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Philosophical Writing: The Essay and Beyond

Michael Walschots

SUMMARY

The primary method of evaluation in philosophy courses (both undergraduate and graduate) is usually some form of research paper or essay. There is an assumption, however, that the only kind of essay that philosophy students need to learn how to write is the argumentative essay. Indeed, philosophy instructors often consider other forms of writing less significant. This workshop intends to break down these assumptions by introducing participants to a variety of essay styles, and to other forms of practical writing that ought to be a part of undergraduate philosophy coursework. The goal of this workshop is to encourage instructors to create more purposeful and creative writing assignments in their own future courses.

KEYWORDS: philosophical writing, philosophical essay, philosophy education

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this workshop, participants will be able to:

- distinguish between exegetical, expository, historical, and argumentative essays, as well as other forms of writing used by professional philosophers (e.g. abstracts, grant proposals, and research proposals);
- describe the importance and relevance of each kind of writing to the various levels and types of undergraduate philosophy courses;
- develop and use distinct criteria to evaluate different styles of writing;
- design writing assignments that align with the nature of a given philosophy course.

REFERENCE SUMMARIES

Kreuter, N. (2013, Apr. 10th). Teaching Writing is Your Job. *Inside Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2013/04/10/essay-responsibility-everyone-teach-writing>

In addition to recommending various ways to improve student writing, this article identifies some of the misconceptions that have led to a lack of appropriate writing instruction in universities. One of the main misconceptions is that only writing instructors teach writing. The author maintains that writing instruction is the responsibility of all instructors in all disciplines. Instructors are further responsible for creating *meaningful* writing assignments that help students in a particular discipline learn the kind of writing skills they will need as they progress through their degree and into the job market.

I will use these insights at the start of the workshop to emphasize that an instructor's responsibility involves teaching students the writing skills they will need to succeed as philosophy students, future instructors, and/or valuable members of the workforce. I will also emphasize throughout the workshop the importance of choosing *different kinds* of writing assignments to best help students develop their skills as writers.

Vaughn, L. and McIntosh, J. S. (2013). *Writing Philosophy: A guide for Canadian students*. 2nd Ed. Oxford: Oxford UP.

In this text, Vaughn and McIntosh focus on the philosophical essay. They distinguish between exegetical, expository, and argumentative essays and they illustrate the different goals of each. The authors briefly touch on the criteria used to evaluate these different kinds of essays.

In order to demonstrate the mistake in assuming that all philosophical writing takes the form of an argumentative essay, I will define the various essay styles introduced by Vaughn and McIntosh as part of the workshop. Participants will be asked to expand on these definitions and develop a more detailed set of evaluation criteria necessary to assessing different styles of writing.

Martinich, A.P. (1996). *Philosophical Writing: An Introduction*. 3rd Ed. Massachusetts: Blackwell.

Martinich suggests that good philosophical writing is precise (avoids vague or verbose language), and grammatically correct. Clear, well-worded texts are of particular importance in philosophical writing given the complex nature of the articulated ideas. Since these characteristics could be key criteria for any kind of writing, I use them as the core criteria for evaluating each style of writing explored in the workshop.

McNaughton, D. (2009) Why is so much philosophy so tedious? *Florida Philosophical Review*, Vol. IX (2), 1-13.

In this article, McNaughton discusses how the professionalization of philosophy has led to the primary focus of philosophical writing being placed primarily on the exhibition of cleverness for cleverness' sake. He proposes that philosophers need to reevaluate not only the style of their writing, but also what they are writing and why. Written works should be meaningful and significant additions to the disciplinary discourse. Furthermore, McNaughton claims that the kind of writing graduate students are trained to do (e.g., the dissertation) ought to be reevaluated given that this form of writing might not be entirely beneficial to their training as philosophers.

I will incorporate the spirit of this article into the workshop by encouraging participants to think about what kinds of writing styles will be most helpful to philosophy students. I will argue that students ought to be trained in a variety of essay writing styles, and in other kinds of practical writing (e.g., article abstracts, research and grant proposals, etc.)

Wolff, J. (2007, Sep. 4th). Literary boredom. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2007/sep/04/highereducation.news>

Jonathan Wolff, the head of the Philosophy Department at University College London claims that academic writing needs to be 'boring' in the sense that it needs to be ordered, precise,

and (above all) explicit. While literature often leaves much unsaid, academic writing must be explicit and thorough and leave nothing to the imagination.

I use this article in the workshop as an example of the assumption that all academic (specifically philosophical) writing is the same. I attempt to breakdown this misconception by illustrating that there are many kinds of philosophical writing and that one can both design and complete assignments in creative and engaging ways.

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

Duration (min)	Subject	Activity	Purpose
10	Introduction: Philosophy Instructors are Responsible for Training their Students How to Write	<p>Brainstorm: Who do you think is responsible for teaching undergraduates how to write and why? Pose this question to participants and ask for two reasons that support their answer.</p> <p>Take up answers (e.g., record on board at the front of the room) and discuss.</p> <p>Questions to help facilitate discussion include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is currently responsible for teaching writing at your university/in your department? • How and from whom did you learn to write during your education, if at all? • How and from whom did your colleagues learn to write? 	To get participants thinking about their prejudices regarding who is considered responsible for teaching students how to write and to help participants understand the importance of philosophy instructors teaching their own students how to write in ways that are appropriate to the discipline.
20	Exploring Writing Styles in Philosophy	Put participants into groups and provide excerpts from different texts that illustrate the various writing styles (exegetical, expository, and argumentative essays; research proposal/proposal, abstract, etc.). Use representative examples.	Introduce participants to various kinds of philosophical writing and open up participants to the idea that there is more than one kind of writing style in philosophy (i.e. the argumentative essay).

		<p>Ask groups to identify the key characteristics of their text. Have groups share and facilitate a comparison of the differences.</p> <p>Distribute the handout (Appendix A) while groups are reading.</p>	<p>Participants will be able to distinguish between the various styles introduced.</p>
20	Criteria Design	<p>Ask the same groups from the previous activity to swap texts with another group and identify 3-5 assessment criteria that make that particular text an <i>exemplary</i> instance of that style.</p> <p>Compare and discuss the criteria. Note that some criteria may be common across different writing styles (e.g., precise writing, excellent grammar) but that there are dangers in assuming all the kinds of writing would have the same evaluation criteria.</p>	<p>For each writing style, participants identify and reflect on the key criteria necessary for assessing student writing assignments.</p>
25	Choosing an Appropriate Writing Style: Planning a Writing Assignment	<p>Ask participants to think of a course they have taught, are teaching, or will teach in the future and have them identify the style of writing typically used in that course.</p> <p>Ask participants to choose the style of philosophical writing discussed earlier in the workshop that would work best in the course and justify their choice.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are their choices different from typical expectations for that course? Why or why not? <p>Compare participant answers and discuss which styles of writing fit best with various kinds of philosophy courses (e.g., a particular style of writing might be best for an upper-year rather than lower-year course, or for a course in the history of</p>	<p>Have participants reflect on how to implement the different kinds of writing identified in the workshop in different settings. Participants evaluate and select different writing styles for assignments that best suit their learning objectives.</p>

		philosophy versus contemporary theory).	
10	Reflecting on Writing styles: Is Anything Missing?	Facilitate an open discussion with all participants. Were there aspects of writing styles missing from the previous conversations? Be clear that that the list of writing styles identified as part of the workshop is not exhaustive and that established characteristics are not set in stone.	This reflection/discussion drives home the idea that there is more than one kind of writing in philosophy courses and that instructors can be creative in the kind of writing assignments they assign.
5	Summary	Take a few minutes to summarize the content of the workshop and request feedback.	Provides participants with the key “take home” points of the workshop. The facilitator gathers feedback in order to evaluate the workshop and improve for future sessions.
Total Time: 90 minutes			

PRESENTATION STRATEGIES

The design of this workshop is interactive, with the presenter playing the role of facilitator rather than lecturer.

The facilitator introduces the various styles of philosophical writing and guides the development of criteria for good writing but the participants fulfill the key role of establishing those definitions and criteria.

As should become clear, the definitions and criteria are flexible and the main goal of the facilitator should be to get participants *thinking* about the distinctions and ideas raised in the workshop and to get them *creating* writing assignments on their own.

The facilitator should be prepared with his/her own thoughts regarding the questions presented during the workshop but also allow participants ample time to think for themselves and write down their ideas over the course of the workshop.

Participants will record the critical information on the workshop handout but the facilitator may want to have more paper on hand for participants to make notes.

APPENDIX A: Handout #1 “Philosophical Writing: The Essay and Beyond”

Definitions:

Essays:

Expository-

Exegetical –

Argumentative –

Historical –

Beyond the Essay:

Research Proposal –

Grant Proposal –

Abstract –

Others:

Activity: ‘Planning a Writing Assignment’

My Course:

Current/Planned Writing Assignment:

Revised Writing Assignment:

Justification of Writing Assignment (give at least three reasons):