Rough Drafts without Tears: A Guide to a Manageable Procedure for Improving Student Writing

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In facing their writing assignments, students in my introductory philosophy courses confront two primary obstacles. First, they often don't have a feel for what sort of paper they are expected to write. They easily mistake an extended expression of opinion, or a replaying of assigned texts, for a philosophical essay. Second, although their abilities vary widely, most of them are not (yet) good writers. They have difficulties in both structuring and conveying their thoughts in written form.

That students have these problems is hardly surprising. Most students do not read even nominal philosophy outside of class, and those who do read "popular" philosophy may, as a result, have even less of an idea as to how to present a good piece of solid reasoning. And although we may—often justly—bemoan inattention to the development of writing skills prior to enrollment at the university, we can hardly expect those skills to be fully developed by students early in their undergraduate careers.

The first problem is addressed, to some extent, by simply having students read good philosophical works by professional philosophers, as well as by helping them to develop the skills necessary to understand such readings. Nonetheless, the gap between what students are likely to read (even in an introductory course) and what they can reasonably expect to write can be so large that assigned readings may be less helpful than one might hope. A student who doesn't know where to begin in writing a philosophical essay might be helped very little by reading, say, Descartes' *Meditations* or J. L. Mackie on the problem of evil.

The second problem is most commonly addressed by direct writing instruction. I have found it useful in my own introductory courses to

spend the beginning of several classes discussing writing strategies and suggestions.[1] Several of my colleagues now even set aside entire lectures for reviewing writing fundamentals. Again, however, such measures may well be less than fully adequate. In addition to direct instruction, students need—perhaps above all—practice exercising their writing skills. And in particular they need practice in editing and revising their work into finished essays. Too often one suspects students are becoming merely proficient at cranking out passable drafts under last-minute conditions rather than developing the skills necessary to produce high-quality papers.

All of this, I think, points toward the importance of students writing rough drafts of their own work and reading the work of their fellow students, as well as the need for us, as instructors, to encourage them to do so. With that in mind, I would like to offer a fairly simple procedure, developed from an initial suggestion by Robert Van Gulick, that I have implemented in my own introductory courses. The procedure allows for both of the problems mentioned above to be addressed simultaneously by having students peer-edit one another's work while avoiding many of the most serious difficulties associated with requiring students to submit rough drafts. The method—while of course no panacea—has proven remarkably effective in providing very high educational returns on a rather modest investment of instructor energy and lecture time.

Section 1 below visits the most traditional procedure for requiring rough drafts in order to highlight some of the difficulties which used to lead me—and have undoubtedly led many others—away from requiring rough drafts from introductory students. Section 2 falls into three subsections. Part (A) outlines the proposed alternative strategy as I use it in my own courses, and also suggests some ways in which it might be modified to better fit the needs of particular instructors. Part (B) discusses advantages of the alternative strategy over the more traditional approach to rough drafts. Part (C) then considers and responds to three major concerns raised with regards to the alternative strategy. Finally, as an appendix, I have included an example handout that I have used in introducing the procedure to my own students.

The Traditional Strategy

The most traditional method of requiring students to revise their work involves having them submit drafts to the instructor who then comments upon them herself. After the drafts are returned, the students are then allowed to revise in light of the instructor's remarks before they are required to submit their finished essays.

Clearly there much is to be said for this way of going about things. For one, students are guaranteed a conscientious and competent

reader who can give them useful and accurate comments. For another, instructors are positioned to redirect students who have drifted off track, or spot recurring difficulties which might best be addressed during lecture.

There are, however, considerable drawbacks to this traditional approach. (1) The most salient detriment is, of course, the dramatic increase in instructor workload: One faces two sets of papers rather than one; the two sets inconveniently arrive one on top of the other; and the quality of the drafts—which are often dashed off with minimal effort or concern—can be demoralizingly low. (2) Furthermore, because the instructor is commenting on the drafts, students often assume that anything that is not explicitly commented upon is correct, and they may become upset if something is pointed out in a later draft not remarked on in an earlier version. This concern is exacerbated by students who put very little time into their drafts in the hopes that the instructor will do much of their work for them. In addition to these sorts of problems, the traditional approach to rough drafts does not accomplish everything that we might hope it would. (3) In particular, I worry that my commenting on student drafts—even where it clearly helps to improve the quality of final papers—does not really contribute in many cases to the development of the *student's* writing skills. Indeed, it might even serve to discourage it. Someone proofreading students' papers hardly constitutes a clear incentive for students to learn how to do it themselves. (4) Another deficiency of the traditional approach is that it does not provide any genuinely new opportunities for addressing the difficulties stemming from students' lack of familiarity with philosophical essays. And although this area of concern need not be treated together with rough draft work—as should become clear below—I think that the revising process affords an excellent opportunity for students to get a better feel for how they might write an introductory philosophy paper.

An Alternative Strategy

Concerns such as (1)—(4) at one point led me away from requiring rough drafts from students altogether. In light of them, it seemed to me that students would benefit more from my requiring a greater number of finished papers without drafts rather than a necessarily smaller number of papers with drafts.

Such problems, however, are not inherent in the requirement of drafts itself. Rather they flow from limitations of the traditional strategy under which instructors do the work of editing for the students instead of encouraging students to do such work on their own. The alternative strategy I have come to employ attempts to make the draft

requirement more educationally profitable by shifting—from the instructor to the students—much of the responsibility for editing and improving upon rough drafts.

The Procedure

About a week before their finished essays are due, students are required to bring three copies of their rough drafts to class. I then collect all three copies in three rounds so that I have three sets of papers each containing an essay from each student. I keep one set myself. This allows me to look over the drafts quickly after class in order to see if I should make any general comments during the next lecture. It also gives me a record of each student's original work just in case of the unexpected.

The two other sets of essays are redistributed to the students so that each student has one copy from two different authors. In passing out the essays to students, I tend to follow a more or less randomizing process. I prefer this way of going about things primarily for its efficiency. One might, however, wish to use a more structured method of distribution. For example, one might decide to match up students on the basis of need and ability to help, or so as to guarantee that no one receives an essay from the same student twice.

Two problems can arise immediately here: (i) some students will fail to complete a draft altogether; (ii) other students, having completed a draft, will fail to bring three copies of it to class. In the case of (i) I tend to simply leave offending students out of the exchange process and penalize them in the grading of the finished essays. Instances of (ii) typically occur only the first time the procedure is used. Here one could again simply leave the offending students out of the exchange loop and penalize them accordingly. I've had some success, however, in allowing students who do not have three copies of their essays to exchange them after class via e-mail. This almost inevitably leads to some complications and is rarely one hundred percent successful. Nonetheless it can help to include some students who would otherwise be left out of the exchange. If one does decide to allow students to exchange essays via e-mail, I recommend having them print out hard copies of each other's essays, and having them put their comments on those copies. This restores uniformity to the procedure, and cuts down on the number of possible complications.

Having exchanged essays, the students comment upon them at home. I encourage students to be very liberal in their remarks, and in general to put down anything that they feel might be helpful. In order, however, to assist them in making useful comments, I take some time on the exchange day to suggest things that they might be on the

lookout for. Some trouble spots are, of course, particular to specific assignments, but in general I encourage students to look for the following sorts of problems: (i) essays which do not fulfill all of the requirements of the assignment; (ii) passages or sentences which are difficult to understand; (iii) claims which are not adequately supported; and (iv) general spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors. I also provide students with a handout of comments I have made myself on students' papers in the past. I think this is beneficial not only in giving them a model of the sorts of remarks they might make themselves, but also in giving them a list of mistakes which they might try to avoid in their own essays.

Other things might be done to improve the usefulness of students' comments. One possibility is working through a sample essay during class using an overhead projector. Like the handout of previous comments, this may have the double benefit of both helping students make better comments on one another's essays, and also giving students a better idea of your own expectations for their essays. Another possibility is to distribute a "reading" or "correction" guide.[2] Such a guide might, for example, require student commentators to answer questions such as: "Is the thesis of the paper stated clearly?" "What is the strongest point of the essay?" and so on. A particular advantage of using such a guide is that—because specific questions are posed for them—students shy about making any critical remarks might be more encouraged in pointing out the difficulties they find.

At the next class meeting students return the essays they have commented upon. Although I do not myself organize any activities around the returning of drafts, there are a number of options here one might consider. For example, one might leave fifteen or twenty minutes at the end of the lecture for students to discuss the comments they have given to one another. Or, alternatively, students could be asked to leave their e-mail addresses, and/or phone numbers, at the top of the drafts they have commented upon so as to allow students who have questions the means to contact their student commentators.

After the exchange process is complete, students have an opportunity to revise their drafts before turning in their finished essays. On the due date, I then collect not only the finished papers, but also the drafts used in the exchange process.

When grading the finished essays, I quickly look through the commented-upon drafts accompanying each and assign them a minus, check, or plus. Student's final essay grades are then either raised or lowered a third of a letter grade, or remain unchanged depending on their editorial work. I prefer such a coarse-grained grading scheme because—although it is quite easy to recognize poor, average, and excellent editorial help—it would be very difficult to

discern finer degrees of assistance. A more structured revision process—for example as when commentators use a "reading" guide—might make a more precise grading scheme feasible.

Advantages

Some of the many benefits of this alternative strategy are common to any procedure by which students are required to submit rough drafts. One of the most important, of course, is that it forces students to give themselves some time between the completion of a draft and the due date for the finished essay. This at least guarantees that their papers are not written (entirely) at the last minute and encourages them to spend more time thinking about their topics. The gap between draft and finished essay also gives students a chance "to return to the drawing board" if necessary. This not only has the effect of allowing students to explore their own ideas more freely, but also helps stave off the frustration introductory students often face when their papers don't at first work out as they had planned.

Other benefits of the alternative procedure flow from the fact that students do the work of editing and commenting upon drafts themselves. This allows the alternative procedure to avoid many of the concerns raised earlier with regards to the traditional approach: (1) Instructor workload is increased only modestly in overseeing the exchange process and grading students' comments. (2) Because drafts are read by peers rather than by the instructor, there is less worry that students will assume that the comments they receive are exhaustive, or that they will imagine that they will simply be told how to best complete their papers. Such concerns are not, of course, entirely eliminated, and students may still become upset if they make poorly advised changes on their papers. For this reason, it is still important to emphasize that editors are only offering their own suggestions, and that authors are ultimately responsible for everything in their finished essays. (3) The alternative strategy also encourages students to develop their own editorial and critical reading skills in evaluating other students' papers. It is hoped—not unrealistically I think—that this will help students to cultivate the habit of both revising their own papers and exchanging their work with their peers. (4) The exchange process also gives students a chance to see different approaches, strengths, and weaknesses in the papers of their peers. This can prove to be tremendously helpful in teaching students how to write their own philosophical essays. For example, one of the most difficult lessons to convey to introductory students is the need to support their views with argumentation. This point, however, is sometimes only really brought home to students once they read the essays

of fellow students. Often they are genuinely shocked to find out that other students (and not just crazy philosophers!) completely disagree with their own beliefs. Only then do some students really start thinking about why they hold the positions that they do. Engaging with other students' essays also affords students another route into the material covered in the course. This can be an especially helpful route for students who feel overwhelmed or intimidated by assigned readings.

Concerns

There are three primary concerns which might be raised with regards to this alternative rough-draft procedure. The first involves worries about the actual administration of the procedure itself. The best guard against such a concern is very explicit, written directions explaining how the exchange process is to unfold. An example of the instructions I pass out to my own students can be found in the Appendix. If such precautions are taken, the exchange process can run very smoothly even the first time it is employed, and is generally completely unproblematic thereafter.

The second concern involves the fairness of the procedure. On any given exchange the quality of the comments received by two different students may vary considerably. As a result one might worry that on any given draft some students will receive more benefit than others. One way of addressing this concern would be to increase either the number of exchanges or the number of editors for each draft, thus increasing the likelihood that inequalities will cancel themselves out. Another way would be to intentionally pair students up with a view towards fairness.

However one wishes to deal with this concern, it may be worth bearing in mind the two following points: First, whether or not all students benefit equally from the exchange process may well be less important than the fact that it provides a beneficial opportunity for students in general. Second, much of the benefit of the alternative procedure arises not from the comments students receive on their drafts, but from engaging with the essays of their fellow students. Indeed it is primarily this aspect of the alternative procedure which I think makes it preferable to more traditional approaches.

The third concern involves issues of plagiarism. It is often thought that having students exchange papers will lead to more incidents involving students copying passages or ideas from one another. Collecting the rough drafts—and, of course, students knowing that you collect the rough drafts—goes a long way towards discouraging such improprieties. And, in general, I have had fewer problems with plagiarism since I have initiated the exchange of rough drafts. I suspect

that this is because students are primarily motivated to steal the work of others only when they find themselves in a bind to which they see no other way out. The exchange process—by encouraging students to begin their essays earlier—may help them to avoid those situations, and as a result avoid the temptation to plagiarize.

Conclusion

The alternative procedure I have sketched is intended to address two of the primary concerns I believe students face in introductory philosophy courses. First it provides a means and incentive for students to develop their own writing skills by working through rough drafts of their essays. Second, it offers students an opportunity to read and critically examine the work of their fellow students. The process itself has been remarkably well received by my students. In the surveys I have distributed, almost all of them have thought the process a worthwhile and beneficial exercise. And, on that point at least, we entirely agree.

Appendix
Paper Assignments Handout

Paper Assignments

Being able to write well is certainly one of the most important skills you should acquire as a university student. And although it is particularly important in philosophy, where it can be exceptionally difficult to put down your own ideas precisely, it is also crucial to almost any career you might choose. Good writing skills will serve you well and often, and conversely a lack of such skills will frequently hinder and even embarrass you.

We will be working on your writing skills over the next eight weeks of this course. I encourage you to see this as an opportunity to improve your writing. I have watched (and helped) students progress from being very poor writers to becoming notably good writers. I have, of course, also seen students simply get by on their papers and improve very little—if at all—in their writing. I hope that you will take the time and the considerable effort required to make the most of the opportunity which this course will present for you. With my sermon done (for now at least), we can move on to three keys to good writing:

1. Writing is a skill, like riding a bike, or juggling. It takes practice to become any good at it. Sometimes people do not realize this,

perhaps, because writing is so closely associated with speaking, and the vast majority of university students did not need any special training in order to learn how to speak properly. Good writing does not, however, come so naturally to anyone; indeed it doesn't come naturally at all to most of us.

2. If you want to write optimally, you will have to write in drafts. Most first drafts stink. It is likely that the essays you have been reading in class have not only gone through a dozen or more drafts, but have in addition been carefully scrutinized by at least several editors. I tell you this because a completed paper often does not bear the scars of earlier revisions—it looks clean and reads smoothly, as if someone eloquent were speaking to you. Don't be fooled though. Nothing rolls out of printers smooth and clear without having been revised at least several times—the same will hold true of your printer.
3. In revising your writing, you can make great use of your natural speaking ability by reading your paper out loud to yourself. As you are reading, listen carefully to what your paper sounds like. You will often be able to hear ungrammatical sentences, poor transitions, and unnecessary verbiage. This tack won't, of course, help you with all of the problems you will encounter. You can't, for example, hear whether the contraction for "it is" is spelled "its" or "it's", but nonetheless, it will help you tremendously if you put it to good use. ("Its," by the way, is the possessive form of "it" (like "his" is of "he"), while "it's" is a contraction of "it" and "is.")

Because drafting and revising is so important to becoming a good writer, I have adopted a procedure to give you an opportunity to comment upon other students' drafts and, in turn, to have your own drafts commented upon. This procedure will not only allow you to get feedback on your papers, but it should help you in learning how to spot troubles in your own writing. (Psychologically, it is often easier to see mistakes in others' writings first and then recognize those same mistakes in one's own work, than it is to spot such trouble in one's own work straight away.) Because the shuffling of papers required in order to make this opportunity possible is potentially overwhelming, the following procedure will have to be strictly followed.

Procedure for the exchange of papers:

1. On the date marked on the syllabus as "Paper Draft Due" bring *THREE* copies of a draft of your paper to class.
2. Make sure that your name is written at the top of all three copies, and that each copy is stapled. (If you are particularly shy

about having other students read your paper, write only the name of a famous person at the top of two copies and your name and the famous person's name at the top of a third copy. Then let me know the name of the person you have used either after class, or by e-mail, or by phone.)

3. I will keep one copy of your draft and will distribute the other two copies to other students.
4. Write "Commented on by:" and your name on the top of the two drafts you receive.
5. You should read and make comments on the two drafts you receive and bring them to class on Thursday.
6. Your two, now commented-upon, drafts will be returned to you during class.
7. Revise your papers over the weekend.
8. On the "Paper Final Draft Due" date marked on your syllabus, you are to turn in both of the drafts of your paper commented upon by other students, as well as, your own paper.
9. In order to make this procedure work, both the initial drafts and the commented-upon drafts must be completed and brought to class on the assigned date. If you cannot produce a draft in time, or you forget to bring it to class, etc., you will not participate in the exchanging of papers. (As I am sure you can see, this is simply a procedural necessity.)

Grading procedure with regard to student comments:

1. The real incentive for doing a good job here is, of course, mutual obligation, and the personal benefit in improving your writing skills. Nonetheless, you will receive a "plus," a "check," or a "minus" for your efforts in commenting upon other students' papers.
2. A "plus" will raise the letter grade you receive on your final paper by a third of a letter grade (e.g., from a B- to a B). A "check" will not change your final paper grade. A minus will lower your final paper grade by a third of a letter grade (e.g., from a B- to a C+).
3. Students not participating in the exchanging of papers will automatically receive a "minus" for the assignment. If you have a documented excuse explaining why you cannot work on your paper three days prior to the draft due date, please bring it to my attention.

Notes

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1. Many of the best of these I learned from Jonathan Bennett and are helpfully explained in Jonathan Bennett and Samuel Gorovitz, "Improving Academic Writing" (*Teaching Philosophy* 20:2, 1997), 105–20.

2. Stanley Werne provides an example of the sort of thing I have in mind in the appendix to his "Taking Rough Drafts Seriously" (*Teaching Philosophy* 16:1, 1993).

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