About the Author

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Writing Assignments in Philosophy and Religion: Writing About Processes

Lynn Nelson

The Department of Philosophy and Religion offers a range of courses with different focuses: introductory and special topic courses in philosophy and religion involve both the learning of content and the development of analytical and critical skills; the courses in symbolic logic involve learning the techniques of formal logic; and Logic of Everyday Reasoning focuses on the recognition and evaluation of reasoning patterns in natural language and practical contexts. Despite the variety in focuses, many of the writing assignments developed by the faculty share the goal of encouraging students to focus on and write about processes: those incorporated into the critical skills they are learning and those involved in the learning of these skills, as well as the evolutionary process of developing their own views and skills during a semester.

Dianne Ashton

In Introduction to Religion, Dianne Ashton requires that students undertake a research project and write a formal paper. A typical research assignment is one in which students are asked to focus on a specific religious rite and are instructed to use questions like the following when organizing their material:
1. What is the rite you have examined, and in what religion?
2. What are the main points of the religion?
3. According to this religion, how important is this rite? What functions does it serve?
4. Describe the rite.
5. What new moral rules are those who are undergoing the rite expected to maintain in their new stage? What ethical justifications are given?

Dr. Ashton’s guidelines are designed to shape a coherent and substantive research project, and they provide general research techniques and ways of organizing material and introduce specific theoretical tools of the discipline. The questions also require that students view the rite within the larger context of the religion of which it is a part and that they become familiar with the justifications for it.

But Dr. Ashton also requires that, in addition to doing the research, students must also consciously attend to the research process, and must provide an account of the research process as an integral part of the final report.

*Howard Cell*

In Introduction to Philosophy, and Philosophy and Society, Dr. Cell requires that students keep journals in addition to other writing assignments. His “Journaling Guidelines” provide the rationale for keeping a journal and general guidelines for the kinds of thinking and writing involved in doing so. Students are asked to focus on their own responses to the claims and points of view they are considering and on the implications of these for their own beliefs and practices. The guidelines invite students to engage in the kinds of critical thinking that will preserve the integrity of the views they are considering and their own views:

The journal, then, provides an opportunity to meditate on what we read, but in such a way that the following possibilities are fully examined:
1. Reach—To what extent do the author’s claims apply to your experience, to your concerns and interests, to the beliefs you have about yourself and the world? To what extent do the issues raised by the author remain pertinent issues for you and/or for present American society?

2. Force—Are the author’s claims true? Are they significant? What difference would accepting a given claim make to you, to the way you live your life, to your aspirations and goals?

3. Coherence—Do the author’s various claims and positions fit together? Are they consistent? Do they correspond with what you already know about yourself and the world?

4. Connection—Do the author’s claims or ideas reinforce, or undermine, the ideas of other authors? Do they support, or conflict with, your own ideas?

In Philosophy and Society, Dr. Cell requires that students also write short papers. Here are some of the guidelines:

I shall offer comments and suggestions at each stage of the process: selection of a topic, outline, and first draft. Only the final version will be evaluated/graded....

Perhaps [these] specific recommendations will be useful at the outset:

1. That the more carefully, and narrowly, you focus the issue to be explored in your paper, the less risk there is that you will ramble.

2. That the formulation of a clear, specific thesis about the issue you intend to explore can guide/frame the research you may need to do, the way in which you read pertinent texts, and the process of writing the paper itself.

3. That I am considerably more interested in your thoughts about/reactions to the issues you explore than in the views of professor x or scholar y, as presented in an article in a learned journal. (To be sure, it may be useful to read this or that article which is immediately
pertinent; but the important thing is to formulate your own reactions to a given issue.)

As with the “Journaling Guidelines,” Dr. Cell’s instructions for writing short papers provide students with a clear sense of what is expected, the point of the assignment, and some tools for undertaking the project.

**David Clowney**

In Introduction to Philosophy, Dr. Clowney assigns three short papers, and in Introduction to Ethics, he assigns a term paper. The writing assignments have a two-fold purpose: to have students wrestle with specific issues and to foster the development of critical thinking skills. Students are introduced to the “how to’s” of doing philosophy and the writing of a philosophy paper through a two-page guide which outlines different approaches one might take to a particular author or issue.

The guide is designed to engage students in the process of “thinking about thinking” by providing general techniques for writing different kinds of philosophical papers: an analytic paper, an interpretive paper, an exploratory paper, a comparative paper, and a dialogue.

Dr. Clowney’s guidelines for writing an analytic paper direct students to focus specifically on the assumptions, arguments, claims, and/or reasoning of an author and to attend to these analytically and critically:

1. Pick a phrase, sentence, or paragraph from one of the essays, one that expresses one of the author’s main points or key assumptions, or that indicates a reason why the author thinks one of the key points must be right.
2. Restate the point in your own words. If you are not sure what the author is saying, and you can’t find out just by using a dictionary, then give two or three possible interpretations of what the author says. Tell which interpretation you think is most likely correct, and why.
3. Say why the author thinks this point must be correct.
Be careful to identify the author's actual reasons; sometimes they are not totally obvious, and you must read between the lines.

4. Evaluate these reasons. Are they sufficient to prove the point? Can you think of other reasons, not mentioned by the author, that tend to support the point? Can you think of reasons not developed by the author that would count against it? When you have weighed the reasons you can think of for and against the point, say what conclusion you come to.

The guidelines Dr. Clowney provides for the writing of "an exploratory paper" are quite different, underscoring that understanding a particular topic, a pattern of reasoning, or a point of view can be approached in a variety of ways. Students who choose to explore a question without consulting sources—students who "fly solo"—are encouraged to do so and are given general guidelines for undertaking that kind of thinking and writing.

1. Pick a topic suggested to you by your reading of one of the essays, or by one of the questions at the end of the essays.

2. Pose a question and try to answer it in the paper you write. E.g., "Is it possible to know for sure whether there is a God?" Or, "Is there anything else in the universe except matter and energy?"

3. Make use of essays in the text as they seem relevant. But this is a more original sort of paper; you are free to write it on your own without referring to other sources.... Again, be careful to identify lines of reasoning that you find persuasive.

The different kinds of thinking and writing assignments are designed to make students aware of the different kinds of thinking and questioning they can undertake. Each assignment encourages students to explore their own views and to use these, as well as
an understanding of other positions, to evaluate arguments and points of view.

*Faith Gielow*

Logic of Everyday Reasoning courses focus on fostering or developing students' critical thinking skills by enabling them to recognize and evaluate reasoning patterns. To encourage students "to think about some subject both critically and in depth" and "to think about what is involved in the critical process," Faith Gielow assigns a research paper that students work on all semester. The goal is to reach a conclusion, which, depending on the topic, may "attempt to resolve a debate," or "may be a discovery" about the topic. The assignment also requires keeping a journal.

Professor Gielow emphasizes that the purpose of the assignment is not just the production of a "final product" (in this case, a five-page essay). Equally important, she stresses, is learning what one needs "to do in the critical process if the final product is to be both knowledgeable and well supported."

She asks students to suggest topics very carefully and provides these general guidelines:

*Selecting a Topic

1. Choose a topic you do not know much about, whether you are opinionated about it or not.
2. Choose a topic you are interested in, something you would like to know more about—perhaps from within your major or for which you are sure research material is available.
3. Choose a topic which is frequently discussed in the media.
4. Be as specific as you can. Have a project in mind if at all possible.

*Possible Topics

1. An analysis of the reasoning used in advertising.
2. An historical and critical survey of the research done on cholesterol and the conclusions accepted and rejected.
3. An analysis of the issues surrounding the data banks which offer information on individuals and their finances.

4. An analysis of something which is very commonplace, something you take for granted. It could be your religious beliefs, your beliefs in the American public, etc.

_The Journal Paper_

A. Your journal will be collected several times throughout the semester to check your progress and allow for some feedback.

B. Materials to be included:
   1. A description of your topic and initial impressions.
   2. Collected materials: relevant newspaper, journal, or magazine articles; summaries of interviews; representative examples; summaries of your own or others' experience; etc.
   3. Dated journal entries—reflections and updates.
   4. A final essay—five pages on your experience.

_Lynn Nelson_

In Introduction to Symbolic Logic, I have found that asking students to write short essays about the techniques they are using, the process of learning these techniques, the rationale behind them, and ways these techniques can be applied to other contexts go a long way to further students' mastery of the techniques, their confidence in working in formal contexts, and their ability to recognize connections between reasoning in formal and informal contexts. As they learn to describe the process, they begin to master it—not simply as a mechanical procedure, but in terms of its appropriateness.

In introducing derivations, for example, I stress a goal analysis approach and provide a handout which outlines the process of constructing derivations using that approach:

Goal analysis is a technique that enables one to generate a connected series of subgoals that guide the construction of derivations. When using this kind of analysis to solve
derivations, one works backwards from the goal sentence of the derivation to its assumptions. Goal analysis involves a three-step cycle:

1. Analyze the goal sentence. What kind of sentence is it? If it is not an atomic sentence, what is its main connective? What kinds of sentences are its components? What rule allows you to introduce the main connective—should that be the way to proceed?

2. Analyze the sentences that are accessible to you (primary assumptions or sentences already derived), asking the kinds of questions in step one. Do they have components that are similar to those of the goal sentence? Is there a rule that would allow you to eliminate a connective so as to derive the goal sentence immediately? If you can derive the goal sentence immediately by eliminating a connective in one of these sentences, do so. Otherwise select a subgoal that will help you to get it.

3. Enter the subgoal sentence. Select either an introduction subgoal or an elimination rule subgoal. Enter this subgoal into the derivation, and regard that subgoal sentence as the new goal sentence. Return to step one and repeat the process.

These instructions are adapted from the text used in the course: Bergmann, et al., *The Logic Book*, 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Through class work and discussion, students are encouraged to see that this process is as necessary to constructing a derivation as the correct application of the derivation rules. On quizzes or tests that require derivations, students are also required to write a short essay describing the process, any difficulties they found in solving a particular derivation, ways that the strategy helped them, and any connections they see between the strategy they have used and problem solving in other contexts. I use a similar approach in introducing truth-table techniques to check for validity, consistency, and other logical properties, and for introducing truth trees. That is, in addition to solving problems
using these techniques, students are also required to write about
the processes involved and why these processes achieve their
intended goals.

As with all of our disciplines, Philosophy and Religion incor-
porate tools and approaches that are discipline specific, the
teaching of which is an integral part of introducing students to
the significant questions in our disciplines. We must also make
students aware of appropriate approaches to theories and issues
within the field. The attention to process I have described is a
way of achieving these goals.

But having students write about the processes they are learning
to recognize and use has further benefits. Studying processes
builds the critical thinking skills and confidence students will
need to face issues relevant to the larger community.