

## WID Teaching Portfolio - Susan-Judith Hoffmann, Humanities – Fall 2010

### C. Formal Writing Assignment

**Class:** *Introduction to Philosophy*

**Assignment:** To write a (1000 -1200 word) essay on a philosophical problem(s) or position (s) covered in this class.

#### Topic 1

**First part of the essay:** Imagine that Socrates and St. Augustine have been having a debate about the good life for a human being. The debate is over and each one is asked to make a brief final statement summing up what he believes about this important issue and why he holds this view. Write up their final statements. **Second part of the essay:** Reflect on their positions and respond to the positions you have outlined. Include an account of the relevance of what you have learned from reading these philosophers for your own life.

#### Topic 2

**First part of the essay:** Contrast Descartes' view of the mind and the self with that of Hume. Include a discussion of thinking, imagining, dreaming and willing and the possibility of knowledge of oneself. Make sure you include all the arguments offered by these thinkers on behalf of their beliefs. **Second part of the essay:** Reflect on the self and give an account of the relevance of what you have learned from these philosophers for your understanding of *your* self.

**Objectives:** To write a clear, thoughtful and fair interpretation of the philosopher (s) in question. To reflect critically on the strengths and weaknesses of their (and your) positions. To write a reflective response on the position of that philosopher, always keeping in mind the relevance of what you have learned from reading philosophy for your own life.

**Text:** *The Great Conversation*. Since this textbook only offers excerpts from philosophers, you should use the primary sources in question. For example, if you work on Plato and the excerpt from *The Republic*, you should have a look at the book itself although you do not have to read the entire work. All the primary sources are listed at the end of the chapters. You are not expected to use any secondary sources for your essay. It is your own careful interpretation of the primary source material that I am interested in, not your ability to research what other scholars have written about Descartes or Hume on the self.

1. **Write up a 250 word freewrite on your topic.** Your starting point is the articulation of a philosophical problem. Good writing in philosophy essays starts by expressing some uncertainty or doubt about a position or theory, or, alternatively, a philosopher has a question or problem that he or she would like to explore or address.

Good writers explore and brainstorm before they write the first draft. We did this in class when we wondered what the differences and similarities between science, religion and philosophy might be. We came up with a lot of great thoughts that could have been put to good use in an essay on this topic. **Do the same sort of exercise for your essay now. Hand it in for feedback once you are done. You will receive a participation grade for your brainstorm and some comments from the instructor.**

2. **Exploratory writing take two.** Good writers let temporal distance do some of the legwork. Take a break from the paper and let your understanding and ideas percolate. When you return to your brainstorming notes, and the comments I have made on your freewrite, you will see the strengths and weaknesses in your notes more clearly. It is possible that your perception of the problem you started out with has changed.

Continue to work on the exploratory writing and thinking. In class, in groups of three or four students, read and discuss each other's papers.

3. **Step Three: Writing a First Draft.** Write the first draft. How one does this depends on the writer. Some people benefit from a very formal outline, others like to just crank out the draft. Don't expect the draft to be the final version of the paper, otherwise you might panic and blank out. Don't be too hard on yourself at this stage. It doesn't have to be perfect!

Quote sparingly and often from the primary sources. Good writing in philosophy is engaged with the primary sources, is creative and critical. Your reader should be able to feel your interest and thoughtfulness on the problem you are grappling with in the paper. A good essay uses textual support for the position it elaborates. In other words, if you want to claim that Descartes' argument in the *Meditations* fails to make the case that God exists, then you must refer to the text to substantiate your claim. When you describe or summarize the position of St. Augustine on the nature of wisdom, you must refer to the passages in his texts to support your interpretation.

4. **Temporal Distance.** Leave the draft for half a week. Let temporal distance do more legwork. (Very relaxing for you!) You will be happy to discover that when you return to your paper a few days later you will have fresh critical thoughts and that you will be able to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of your draft.

5. **Step Four: Revise.** Make sure you understand the difference between *revision* and *editing*. When you revise the first draft you have to be willing to really start afresh if necessary. Often you find that your conclusion is really your true thesis and starting point! This is pretty common. Don't think that this means you have wasted your time and have to start from scratch. It does mean that you have found your focus and that you have to make major revisions in your work. Think about your readers. If you have discovered that the conclusion is really the natural starting point of the essay, your readers will probably have the same reading experience. Do you want the reader to write: "this is the beginning of your paper" next to your conclusion? Be brave and willing to make major revisions at this point. Make a new outline if necessary. It is good to be **brave and critical at this point in the writing process.** (At this point, students are often reluctant to make major revisions, preferring to tinker with the paper as they feel invested in the "amount" of writing they have done. This is not a good strategy.)
6. **Step Five: Edit.** Once you are satisfied with the revisions you are ready to edit. Editing is a craft, a technical skill rather than a creative process. Up until this point you have been (I hope!) focusing on the creative and scholarly process of writing. Now you are ready to apply your skills as an editor and polish grammar, spelling, style, edit out repetition and so on. Again, you may find that the paper is not as clear as it should be and you might return again to a minor brainstorming session as you rethink and reconfigure some parts of the paper.
7. **Step Six: Peer Review.** Ask someone in class to read your paper. Ask them to write comments on it in pencil. Then read it aloud to an audience. You will probably end up making a few more small revisions.
8. **Step Seven: Hand in the essay for feedback.** You will get back your drafts with the **Rubric for Essays** filled out as well as some comments on the drafts themselves.
9. **Step Eight: Using the rubric and the comments on your paper, revise once more and edit once more. Hand in the final draft.**

### **Frequent problems and how to address them:**

**Problem:** I feel like my paper is too "thin", I don't know what else to add.

**Solution:** Brainstorm with an idea map or diagram. Find examples, more details. Be your own devil's advocate and raise objections to your ideas. This will help you see the complexity of your ideas or position and will give you something to develop and discuss.

**Problem:** When I read my draft, I have lots of ideas but they are kind of confused and even I get lost when I read my own work! I am worried that the grader will get lost.

**Solution:** Make the paper clearer by stating your purpose: “In this section of the paper I propose to argue” “My purpose in this paper is threefold, first, I will....,second, I will....”

Make sure you make good transitions and that it is clear how one section of the paper follows and is connected to the previous one.