

A.Falk 4/12/07

Guidelines for Writing Papers for Falk's Courses

Assignment: Two papers are due on the days listed in the syllabus. For each paper, pick a recent article about our course's subject-matter from a reputable philosophical journal. Your assignment is to state a thesis, summarize what the article says concerning your thesis, and either critique it or develop it, or both, in the course of defending your thesis. The assignment's purpose is to help you write papers that have a chance of being accepted for presentation at conferences or publication in journals. (Think of your situation this way: There's an ongoing conversation among established philosophers, and you're trying to break into it. Your best strategy is to listen in and wrack your brain for thoughts they'll find useful contributions. It's unlikely you can simply distract the participants into joining you in a new discussion of your own choosing.) You should choose an article published in the last five years, because the philosophers who get published—you want to be one of them—tend to make no less than 1/3 of their citations to items published in the ten years prior to their own publication.

My approval of the article and your thesis is required; you risk my refusing to accept a paper on a topic or article I have not approved. The requirement of prior approval protects you from choosing topics that bore the grader or make him growl.

At a loss for ideas or unsure? You may pick any articles that I recommend in class, or ask me for advice. If you do ask me, I will not assign you a topic, but I'll help you become more aware of your own curiosities and perplexities and their possibilities for development. Papers devoted to stating the author's religious faith are inappropriate for me to grade, and so, if I receive one, I'll return it ungraded and ask for a different one.

Thesis: We readers dislike meandering, unfocused papers. I find they put me to sleep. Zonk; zzzzz. Make sure your paper has unity. You achieve unity by saying only one thing! That one thing is your thesis, something about your topic that you can state in one complete declarative sentence. "Declarative" means an assertion, not a question. State your thesis near the beginning of your paper so that I don't have to guess what idea you are developing. Yes, give it away; you're not writing a mystery! Avoid truistic theses; who wants to spend time reading the obvious? Your thesis should be one you feel some people would resist accepting, because of their ignorance of its deeper aspects or their disagreement with it. That resistance defines your work; you're going to address it and overcome it. For example, "it's not right to do what's wrong" is truistic; "there's more to avoiding wrongdoing than you might think" is not truistic.

Outline: You can take many pages to say one thing without repetitiveness; you can do it by developing your thesis: illustrating it with examples, defining its key terms, distinguishing it from similar but different theses, defending its importance, arguing for it, defending it against objections, and so on.

To reinforce this requirement of unity, *you must submit an outline with your paper.* The outline may be in the form of headings on the subsections of your paper. Here's what an outline is not: a list. If your outline is a 1-2-3 list of the things you write about, you failed to get the point about unity. Your outline must distinguish your major points from minor ones and show how the minor ones are subordinated to the major ones. Thus your outline must show indentations, and the deeper they go, the more unity you achieve. The same goes for subheadings in your paper; some headings should be subordinated to other headings.

You should work on your outline as you write, because it will help you discover your omissions and redundancies; it will help you to avoid abrupt transitions and suggest the

needed bridging or rubric sentences.

Title and Abstract: Title your paper. It's good practice to preface your paper with an abstract. An abstract states in about 100 words the thesis of your paper and the major points of your development of the thesis. Write it after you finish your paper.

Research vs. your own thoughts: This is a false dichotomy; your paper should show both. I expect citations of the works you used in preparing your paper. But I also expect more than a book report. I want you to take a stand on the issues you deal with. Avoid much quotation. It's a good exercise to put everything you want to say into your own words. Cite sources, then, for the ideas.

Style: Philosophical communication often seems like solipsists talking to themselves in front of narcissists who overhear only their own ideas. Philosophers are so involved in working through their own perplexities that they treat the exercise of writing as merely therapeutic for themselves; they dissolve their perplexities if they can write something that satisfies them: "Phew! Glad I got that out of my system." That's solipsistic in its treatment of the reader as incidental. Readers, on the other hand, are so involved in discovering in their reading just that which they already believe or at least understand, that they cannot appreciate a paper unless they find only ideas they already have had. When this expectation of theirs is disappointed, they lose interest and blame the text. That's narcissistic, if in fact the reader is not even seeing what's on the page because of its novelty. Let's avoid this trap. The point of these paper assignments is to get you to see philosophical writing as genuine conversation, not solipsists disgorging their self-exorcisms in a mess of words, while narcissists look at the pages in the hope that they are verbal mirrors.

To develop your own style in good writing, you need models of good writing in philosophy. I think the best American writers of philosophy in the past century are William James and George Santayana and, among recent philosophers, Richard Taylor and Thomas Nagel. Bertrand Russell, an English philosopher, was such a good stylist that his writing passes for good American style.

Before you decide that your paper is in final form, take to heart this conversation by two philosophers on the value of style.

Magee: . . . Karl Popper was once talking to me about the influence on him of Russell's style and he said: 'It's not just a question of clarity, it's a question of professional ethics.'

Hampshire: Yes. It's a question of not obfuscating—of leaving no blurred edges; of the duty to be entirely clear, so that one's mistakes can be seen; of never being pompous or evasive. It's a question of never fudging the results, never using rhetoric to fill a gap, never using a phrase which conveniently straddles, as it were, two or three notes and which leaves it ambiguous which one you're hitting. Russell's prose excludes even the possibility of evasion and of half-truth and if one looks back to the writing of the [eighteen] eighties or looks back to, say, Mill [1806-1873], I must agree with Karl's phrase about professional ethics; even in Mill, who was a very intellectually scrupulous man, one can be worried and perplexed as to which of two things exactly he means, and the fluent style allows him to leave this open; what he says is much more

plausible because it's left open, while in Russell's writing there's always this extraordinary nakedness of clear assertion. His doctrines and arguments stand out in a hard, Greek light which allows no vagueness.¹

How did Russell himself describe what he did? At the start of writing he was just like most of us: confused and tongue-tied!

[T]he last of my initial prejudices, which has been the most important in all my thinking . . . is concerned with method. My method invariably is to start from something vague but puzzling, something which seems indubitable but which I cannot express with any precision. I go through a process which is like that of first seeing something with the naked eye and then examining it through a microscope. I find that by fixity of attention divisions and distinctions appear where none at first was visible, just as through a microscope you can see the bacilli in impure water which without the microscope are not discernible. . . .

[P]hilosophical investigation, as far as I have experience of it, starts from that curious and unsatisfactory state of mind in which one feels complete certainty without being able to say what one is certain of. The process that results from prolonged attention is just like that of watching an object approaching through a thick fog: at first it is only a vague darkness, but as it approaches articulations appear and one discovers that it is a man or a woman, or a horse or a cow or what not. It seems to me that those who object to analysis would wish us to be content with the initial dark blur.²

So there's hope for the rest of us. A good textbook to help you improve your style is Joseph Williams, *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott Foresman, 1981).

Length: The required length depends on the number of credit hours you're taking the course for: 1500 words per credit hour, not counting the outline or notes. For a four credit hour course with two required papers, each paper should be around 3000 words of text. (Even if you have extra words in one paper, the other should still be around 3000 words; more words in one does not make for fewer in the other.) Your computer will count the words for you. (Click on "file," then "properties," then either "statistics" or "information.") Include in the count the words you quote from others, unless there are hundreds of them and I begin to feel you're avoiding having to put ideas into your own words—don't quote to excess, please. If you print your paper on a fine computer printer, you may set your margins at 1.5 inches or space your lines at 1.3, because I'm not using page-length as a criterion of length. You may print on both sides of the paper. If you handwrite your paper or your word processor cannot count words for you, you can estimate its length by counting the number of words you get on a page, and then turn in the number of pages that would produce the right number of words. (Although I prefer papers typed, you may submit them handwritten, if you cannot type or afford to have them typed. You may have to read your paper to me, if I cannot read your handwriting.)

Format: I'm not persnickety about the format of the paper and endnotes (or footnotes). But

for those of you who want to do it right: The standard guide that the Department prefers is Joseph Gibaldi and Walter S. Achtert, *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (N.Y.: The Modern Language Association of America). (*The Chicago Manual of Style* agrees for the most part with the *MLA Handbook*. The *MLA Handbook* is cheaper, and both books are sold by the campus bookstores.)

Spelling: Proofread your paper carefully! If you use a word processor, use the spelling checker, but don't rely on it to catch all your misspellings, since some of them may be words "to." ("To" should be "too," but the computer won't catch it.) If you type your own paper, it's no excuse that you're a lousy typist. When misspellings exceed one per page, it lowers my opinion of the paper (and so the grade). Automatic correction by a word processing program is also unreliable when it comes to spelling philosophical terms. For example, "causal" may get changed to "casual."

Grammar and punctuation: I consider these important. Punctuation rules allow more variation than grammar rules. For example, the classic guidebook on style, William Strunk, Jr. & E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 3rd ed. (N. Y.: Macmillan, 1979), has slightly different rules of punctuation from those in the *MLA Handbook*. Nevertheless, if your grammar and punctuation errors are frequent enough to become obtrusive, your grade will suffer.

Here are several of my pet peeves:

- (i) I dislike having to explain that "it's" is not the possessive of "it," but rather the contraction of "it is" or "it has." I don't mind contractions, and I'd've used them more often, if I'd thought of it. (I won't mind a bit, if you pronounce "I'd've" as eye-duh.)
- (ii) Good writers observe agreement of singular and plural terms; it's still ungrammatical, for example, to say "a person waves their hand." The verb "waves" agrees with the singular subject "person," but "their" is wrongly plural. You aren't forced to use "his." There are so many grammatical ways to avoid sexist pronouns that it's a lame excuse for flouting agreement. Although it may become grammatical, it isn't yet.
- (iii) Write "cannot" as one word, unless you're making a distinction that requires you to write it as two, as in these sentences: "A contingent being can not exist" (true) vs "A contingent being cannot exist" (false). Many groups of words, their distinctness notwithstanding, are written as one nevertheless. For instance, pairs of words may be written as one or as two, depending on a slight difference of meaning, e.g., "everyone" and "every one of them."
- (iv) Use "than" with comparatives, that is, phrases that convey the idea of more or less of something. The words "different" and "differently" are not comparative. So the expression "different than" is not right. How would you then compare differences? You can be more different from x than from y ; red can be more different from green than from orange. Try expressing those comparisons with "than" doing "from"'s job, and the difference becomes clear. Don't use "than" differently from the way good writers use it, that is, don't say, "I use 'than' differently than good writers." The difference is in the uses or ways people use "than," not in the people, as that quoted sentence wrongly suggests. (A lippy rejoinder: But isn't 'different than' just a variant of 'other than,' which is grammatical? Isn't 'differently than' just 'otherwise than,' which is grammatical"? No; 'other than' and 'otherwise than' occur grammatically only in restricted contexts, and these contexts don't allow comparative forms.)
- (v) Latin neuter plural nouns (data, relata) have singular forms ending in -um (datum,

relatum). Greek neuter plural nouns (phenomena, criteria) have singular forms ending in -on (phenomenon, criterion). Some Greek words are Latinized (phyla, phylum).

The next two rules don't count as pet peeves, but good American writers observe them:

(vi) The American rule for possessives is to use "'s" to form the possessive of all names ending in "s." See section 2.2.7e of the *MLA Handbook*, 4th edition, page 55. (This may be the Achilles's heel of American rules!)

(vii) The American rule for punctuating at the end of quotations is to put commas and periods inside the quotation marks. See section 2.7.7, page 82 of the *Handbook*.

You'll discover that British authors follow British rules of grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Don't emulate them, unless you are emigrating.

Academic Honesty: Your ideas and your expressions of them in words are your property, your intellectual property. Just as you own your ideas and your expressions of them, others own theirs. You may repeat others' words and ideas, if you put quotation marks around the words and cite the owners. Under the pressure of grades, however, it's all too easy to steal the words of others by passing them off as one's own. That kind of theft is plagiarism. It's also easier than you might think for me to catch the plagiarizers. Students are responsible for making themselves aware of the policies on academic honesty in the Graduate Catalog (2004-2006, page 25), which also state the procedures for punishing violators. Plagiarism is defined there: "Plagiarism is intentionally, knowingly, or carelessly presenting the work of another as one's own (i.e., without proper acknowledgment of the source). The sole exception to the requirement of acknowledging sources is when the ideas, information, etc., are common knowledge." Even if an idea is common knowledge, always acknowledge your source if you use the source's actual phrasing to express it.

An important purpose of this course is to help you improve your powers of thinking and writing. Please resist any temptation to subvert it. My experience is that almost all students are honest and are not even tempted. Unfortunately, the words "almost all" are correct.

What holds true for you holds true for me and all other teachers. If we learn something from our students' papers and then use it in our own publications, we must acknowledge our indebtedness to the students. I can think of two recent publications of my own in which I acknowledged a student as the source for the specific idea that I used.

Due dates: Your paper assignments are divided into several writing tasks due at different times. A paragraph describing the topic you wish to write about, which, as you should recall, is *subject to my approval*, is due no later than two weeks before a paper is due. An optional first final version, to get my suggestions for improvement (of the grade as well as of the paper), may be turned in no later than one week before a paper is due.

Grade: A paper is 40% of the grade. Class reports and participation make up the other 20%. When I grade your paper, I will list the defects that caused loss of points.

Notes:

1. Bryan Magee, *Modern British Philosophy* (Herts: Paladin, 1973) 45. For the format of footnotes see *MLA Handbook*, section 5.8.5, page 185.

2. Bertrand Russell, *My Philosophical Development* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959) 133. He said much the same 40 years earlier in introducing his lectures on "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism" in Bertrand Russell, *Logic and Knowledge: Essays 1901-1950*, Robert Marsh, ed. (New York: Putnam, 1956), 179-181.