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Microwriting for Better Learning and Happier Teaching

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Abstract: Philosophy students often struggle to write well and helping them to learn can be wearisome for instructors. This essay presents a set of scaffolded writing activities that I call microwriting. These activities can improve both student work and instructor satisfaction by helping them to write better. Microwriting helps students to develop skills that transfer to writing longer essays and to writing in other fields.

Divide each of the difficulties . . . into as many parts as possible and as may be required in order to resolve them better.
—Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, CSM I.120 AT VI.18

Despite the recent multiplication of platforms and media for discourse (blogs, tweets, podcasts, videos, etc.), the essay remains coin of the realm for philosophical conversation, especially at the professional level. There is nothing yet that beats the well-crafted philosophy paper for clear presentation of thought and ease of repeated and careful examination. Good writing is good thinking, for both author and reader. We do well by our students to help them to craft thesis-driven essays. Yet our students often struggle to write well and helping them to learn can be wearisome. We and they need help.

I have developed a set of scaffolded assignments that I call microwriting because of the brevity of the assignments.[1] These assignments have improved both student essays and my enjoyment of helping students learn to write. Microwriting helps students to develop specific skills that transfer to longer philosophical writing, including traditional essays, and to writing in other fields. These assignments also improve my experience of teaching philosophy writing, for two reasons. First, because they are mostly short, they are easier to read, and it is easier to provide feedback on them. Second, because these assignments focus on specific tasks clearly presented, students are able to complete them relatively successfully, building their confidence and lifting my spirits, since reading poor student work

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is disheartening. Moreover, because they are less generic and often kind of fun for students to write, they may tempt students less to turn to AIs for illicit help.

Here, after some brief framing, I share several microwriting assignments and show how they can be combined into more standard and longer philosophical essays.

Scaffolding

Scaffolded instruction is almost essential to good teaching. While it was introduced into educational theory in the 1970s, the core idea is central to philosophical methodology.[2] It is simply analysis applied to pedagogy, specifically, analysis of skills rather than concepts. Divide a complex skill, like writing a philosophical essay, into component parts. Design tasks to help students to master the parts. Help them to put the pieces together.

The twin problems of students struggling to write and instructors' consequent frustrations arise in part from our failures as instructors to recognize how many and varied are the aspects of writing in philosophy and how far some of them are outside students' knowledge and skill sets. To help to design appropriate tasks for students, attention to what Vygotsky calls the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) can be fruitful.[3] The ZPD contains the content and skills that we are ready to learn. When we ask students to learn or do things outside of their ZPDs, they cannot. Frustration for all ensues. So, one tool for effective writing instruction is to figure out how to parse writing an essay into smaller bits within students' ZPDs and to develop ways to help students to master and combine them. That's scaffolding.[4]

The terms "scaffolding" and "sequencing" are used to describe a range of practices. "Scaffolding" generally refers to instruction in stages. "Sequencing" generally refers to scaffolding a single complex task, like developing an essay over a series of drafts. Scaffolding may also be used independently of a targeted project like a term paper. The microwriting activities presented here are not intended to be sequenced though they may be. My goal in developing them is to help students to acquire transferable skills in different aspects of writing in philosophy, including identifying theses, illustrating claims originally, unpacking metaphors, and finding weaknesses in an argument.

These microwriting techniques generally involve responses to texts. There is of course a place in philosophy for free writing and development of one's own ideas independent of the work of others. Journaling is great for getting ideas going. Improvisational activities in class can also be useful.[5] Let us set these aside, along with the careful work we should do to help students to perform the antecedently essential tasks of reading effectively, though the tasks described here are likely to improve reading skills as well as writing skills.[6]

For a first level of analysis of writing skills, I separate, somewhat artificially, two moments in our work with texts: charitable interpretation and critical evaluation. (This distinction may usefully be shared with students: counsel them first to seek to understand how a text might be true and to surrender to criticism only when charity is no longer reasonable.) In the next section of this essay, I present writing activities aimed at developing skills in charitable interpretation. In the following section, I present activities aimed at developing skills in critical evaluation. Finally, I show how these microwriting activities combine for longer and more traditional kinds of philosophical writing.

Before we get to the activities, two final preliminary notes: First, I present these activities roughly in order from simplest to most complex task in each category. This is not necessarily the best order to assign the activities. Moreover, it is nearly impossible to assign all of these activities in any single class unless the class were focused exclusively on writing and used only as much philosophical content as would be needed to generate the writing tasks. All of these activities were developed in classes with robust philosophical content where the writing was a core learning goal but not the focus of the course.

Second, for most of the activities, I provide students with models, usually versions of the tasks that I have written based on content that we have read for the class earlier in the term. Providing models has advantages and disadvantages. It reduces student anxiety since they can better understand instructor expectations. But some students hew too closely to the models and thus miss opportunities for greater creativity. To try to help students avoid this latter problem, instructors may lightly annotate some models, highlighting the important aspects and indicating ways in which the model may be extended or ignored. In an appendix, I provide a sample prompt for Writing Activity #3, including a lightly annotated model.

Microwriting for Charitable Interpretation

The writing activities in this section are designed to help students to develop skills in charitable interpretation, in part in order to help solve what we might call the problem of the untethered opinion. Every philosophy teacher has the experience of working through primary sources with students on a topic like free will or causation, only to find their essays to be a summary of their own pre-theoretical views disconnected from anything that, for example, Spinoza or Hume argued. It is tempting and natural for some students, especially students early in their college careers, quickly to move to writing about their own views on course material. Having students explore their own views is an excellent thing to do, in journal writing, say, or in classroom conversation. But we often want students to develop those views in conversation with source texts, rather than alongside

and independent of them. The writing assignments in this section help students to do that.

Writing Activity #1: Précis

A basic skill in philosophy writing is presenting an argument, distinguishing a conclusion from evidence or reasons for that claim. To help students to develop that skill, I ask them to find a single argument in an assigned reading and present it clearly as a précis of no more than 150 words. The précis should explicitly identify and explain the conclusion and indicate relevant assumptions.

My use of the term "précis" is somewhat idiosyncratic, and usefully contrasted with 'abstract.' As I use the terms, an abstract is a way of talking about an argument. The author of the abstract goes meta by stepping outside of the argument and describing it. The author of an abstract tells us what thesis is defended and describes the premises of the argument but does not actually argue for the thesis or the premises. A précis, in contrast, distills an argument to its core details, presenting a skeletal version of the argument. In a précis, as in the full version of the argument, the author defends a thesis. In contrast to an abstract, the author of a précis does not step outside of the argument to describe it; she does the arguing.

Précis may be written in either of two styles. One style is a typical narration in one-to-three paragraphs. The other style is a regimentation of the target argument into premise-conclusion form. Students who have already studied logic often like to try the latter style. Such regimentations are often easier to read, but more difficult for the students to do well. They are an excellent challenge for students with some logic background.[7]

Constructing précis helps students to identify and focus on arguments, a skill so basic, important, and ubiquitous in philosophy that it may fruitfully be used as the first writing task of the term. I ask introductory students to do it repeatedly, once per class meeting, until they can do it successfully.

The précis can facilitate charitable interpretation by asking students to write as if they are the authors of their chosen arguments. It is difficult to write as someone without actually accepting their views. One must develop a kind of intellectual empathy or humility in order to withhold judgment and grasp another's views as well as possible. For example, in an introductory class on infinity, I ask students to write their first précis on Parmenides' poem. I mention before they write that though they may find Parmenides' views counterintuitive, the précis style asks them to write as if his views are correct. They are not writing about Parmenides' ideas as if they are some odd thoughts of a distant or delusional person. They are writing as if they are Parmenides and they must try to make sense of his views in order to defend them.[8]

Learning to write précis well benefits students in both their reading, because it forces them to focus carefully on a source text, and in their future writing. Writing

a précis of a target text is a great way to start a longer essay. In upper-level classes in which I assign longer essays, such as 12–15-page term papers, I sometimes ask students to provide précis of their own work. This task is especially salutary for early drafts since it helps them to find the weaknesses and lack of clarity in their own writing.

Writing Activity #2: Thesis Statement

Another basic task is to identify and present core claims, or theses, in a given reading. This task may seem simpler than writing précis, since précis contain both premises and conclusions and thesis statements contain only conclusions. Whether it is indeed simpler depends on implementation.

To use the thesis statement assignment in the simplest way, perhaps even earlier in the term than précis, instructors can ask students to prepare for class by submitting a thesis statement from a reading or to do it at the start of class on an index card. During class, a productive conversation may be had among students in small groups, either evaluating each others' thesis statements or composing one together.

A more complex version of this task asks students to present thesis statements of each of several sections of a single reading. Writing thesis statements for multiple sections of a reading encourages students to reflect on the development of core claims in a philosophical essay. This task is helpful especially when the source text is complex and it is easy for students to get lost. For example, I ask students in an Early Modern class to write thesis statements for the sections of Kant's transcendental deduction of the categories; the task helps them to reflect on the larger picture.

Thesis statements may also be fruitfully used as a review activity. Instructors can ask students to provide one or two sentences of thesis statements for each or the readings for a unit, for example. Again, in-class conversations in small groups about this writing can be an effective summative exercise.

Writing Activity #3: Illustrative Exposition

Philosophical readings, especially challenging ones, can be highly abstract. Experienced readers can be expected to understand the context and applications of theories. Undergraduate students typically need more help to grasp those details. For example, consider the following well-known claim from Locke on abstraction.

> The senses at first let in particular ideas and furnish the yet empty cabinet, and the mind by degrees growing familiar with some of them, they are lodged in the memory, and names got to them. Afterwards, the mind, proceeding further, abstracts them and by degrees learns the use of general names. In this manner the mind comes to be furnished with ideas and language, the materials about which to exercise its discursive faculty. (*Essay* I.2.15)

Locke is quickly sketching a complex process of language acquisition and use, one that can seem compelling and convincing at first, but that leads to various complications. Problems with Locke's account are well known to experienced philosophers but not obvious to beginners. It is useful for students to take some time to unpack Locke's claims, illustrating the process he describes in careful, concrete detail.

For illustrative expositions, I provide students a selection of excerpts from recent readings, about a paragraph in length each. Their task, in 300–500 words, is to choose one quotation, frame it with some brief context, and provide original concrete illustrations. See the appendix for a prompt and a model illustration.

Writing an original concrete illustration provides several benefits. First, it forces students to think about what the reading means to them. They should develop illustrations from their own lives and experiences, which helps to bring the philosophy home.

Second, an illustration acts as a test on a claim. It is one thing to say, for example, as Max Black does about Zeno's paradoxes, that "We create the illusion of the infinite tasks by the kind of mathematics that we use to describe space, time, and motion."[9] It is another to try to show how that claim is supposed to help us understand a solution to the problem of the paradoxes. Asking students to illustrate such a claim helps them to see whether they agree with it or not. The task forces them to help the philosophers we read to show, and not merely tell, us something.

Finally for students, you cannot easily illustrate a claim that you do not understand. Writing illustrations forces students to reflect on a reading carefully and in greater depth than they would ordinarily, even if they are writing about it.

For instructors, this activity is generally a pleasure to read. Students use their creativity in ways that do not normally emerge in philosophy writing. And because it presupposes understanding, the activity really lets instructors know who needs more support, and quickly.

Writing Activity #4: Explaining Metaphors

Philosophers often use metaphorical language to stimulate our imaginations and help us to understand relations among different kinds of objects or concepts. Wittgenstein writes, "What is your aim in philosophy?—To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle."[10] Even in a course as applied as Philosophy of Education, we find many metaphors. "The school child, like the incarcerated adult, is, in a sense, a prisoner."[11] Student interpretations of these metaphors vary widely. Philosophers may expect that readers will understand the literal meanings behind their metaphors. Such expectations are often unmet, especially when working with students new to philosophy.

Perhaps for these reasons, Berkeley writes in §3 of *De Motu*, "A philosopher . . . should abstain from metaphor." Metaphors can confuse us, leading us to believe that

properties of one object or concept belong to another. When I say that your eyes are diamonds, I intend to communicate that they sparkle and attract, not that they are a solid and metastable form of carbon with atoms arranged in a crystal structure.

The explaining metaphors assignment, 300–500 words, asks students to choose a passage containing a metaphorical claim and explain its literal meaning: How does it literally hold? How does it not? How might the metaphor be misleading? I provide a selection of metaphors from which students can choose. In addition to unpacking the metaphor, they can present theses and illustrate concretely, building on the skills above.

Writing Activity #5: Quotation

Undergraduates receive conflicting counsel about how and when to use quotations in their writing. Expectations vary not only with the discipline but even within disciplines. Students need help to develop confidence in their use of source texts in different classes.

I begin conversation about quotation with an in-class activity consisting of a page explaining my expectations and a brief original essay. The essay is intentionally error-riddled around the techniques of quotation, but includes good uses of source texts, including block quotes, that students can use as models. Working in groups, students have to find the errors, some of which are tricky. It is not the most fun that they have ever had, but it gives them some confidence that they understand my expectations.

For their next individual writing assignment for the course, students must use at least three quotations, including at least one block quote. Unlike the other writing activities in this essay, which I ordinarily use mainly with first-year and sophomore-level classes, I ask even my senior thesis students to do this one. Typically, I combine it with the next assignment, on citation.

Writing Activity #6: Citation

Citation is of course intimately connected with quotation. The questions and confusions around citation, though, are distinct. In the quotation exercise, students consider where to use source texts, how to use quotation marks and italics, and when to use block quotes and when to run a quote in-line. For citation, students examine the mechanics for both in-line and footnote citations, reference lists, and punctuation. It is important and useful for students to feel empowered around these techniques. Confusion about them can add anxiety to the writing process.

Again, I start with a workaday classroom activity designed for groups to find errors. Again, the individual writing task is just to use them correctly in their next writing assignment for the course. An independent assignment for either citation or quotation can be fruitful, too, especially at the introductory stages.

Writing Activity #7: Exegeses

Finally, for charitable interpretations, students can develop a longer exposition of a full reading: present a thesis statement and expand in careful detail the various arguments for it. The exegesis assignment asks students to make decisions about which aspects of an essay are central to the author's argument, and so should be included, and which parts are tangents or corollaries, and so should be omitted. Again, simpler skills, like concrete illustration and explaining metaphors, can be integrated into this more complex activity.

The exegesis is not a rhetorical, argumentative paper. It is an exercise in careful interpretation and clear exposition. Unlike the précis, in which students are asked to focus on a single argument, an exegesis should represent the central, overarching ideas of the target reading and may cover several different arguments. Students should identify (in boldface type) a main thesis statement in their exegesis.

For my Infinity class, I assign an exegesis on Cantor's theorem. Students may focus on the context, like how Cantor's work might be seen as a response to traditional questions or problems about infinity; the tools Cantor uses, especially one-one correspondence; the diagonal lemma, and its various manifestations; Cantor's use of set theory and how it relates to mathematics more generally; or the proof of the theorem itself. Choosing among different approaches to their exegeses helps students to see the various themes of an assigned text.

An exegesis can be a step in a sequence of writing assignments on a single reading or it can be independent of earlier writing. Exegeses can also be used as pre-writing for later work that asks for critical evaluation: let us get as clear as possible on what the authors say independent of (if not necessarily before) we develop our criticisms.

Microwriting for Critical Evaluation

While I have separated activities focused on interpretation from those focused on evaluation, we typically do not segregate our own work that way. While we teachers of philosophy writing must face the problem of the untethered opinion, it is concomitantly important to encourage students to develop their own voices and views early in a course. Activities focused only on interpretation can dilute the excitement of philosophy, being in dialogue with our sources and their ideas, and thus discourage students. Some simple critical tasks can be introduced relatively early, alongside the activities for charitable interpretation.

Writing Activity #8: Twenty Questions[12]

Perhaps the simplest critical act is asking a question. There are different kinds of questions, with different aims. The twenty questions activity helps students to

develop their skills in raising questions by asking them to reflect on some of those different aims.

Like the quotation and citation assignments above, I start this activity with a simple in-class small-group task: Here is a picture—write down twenty questions about it. The picture can be of anything: a starry night sky, a provocative work of art, a schoolroom. Once groups have written their questions, they categorize each according to the kind of activities that we would have to do in order to answer them. The categories could be taken usefully from Bloom's taxonomy.[13] I use instead a rubric adapted from James Gallagher and Mary Jane Aschner who analyzed classroom discourse.[14]

A. **Cognitive-Memory Questions** require only simple recognition, rote memory, or selective recall.
B. **Convergent Thinking Questions** require analyzing and integrating evidence, summarizing, or establishing a logical sequence of ideas or premises.
C. **Divergent Thinking Questions** require independently generated evidence or new perspectives, often in contexts in which conclusive evidence is lacking.
D. **Evaluative or Creative Thinking Questions** involve matters of judgment, value, or choice.

Once students understand how to proceed with this rubric, they can use it on an assigned reading. I again provide students selections of excerpts from a philosophical source from which to choose for their individual writing assignments. Students write twenty questions, addressed directly to the author of their chosen quote, distributing their question types roughly evenly among the four Gallagher and Aschner levels. Critical evaluation has begun. They are beginning to develop lines of inquiry, connected closely to primary sources. The rubric gives them a little metacognition, helping them to reflect on their own thoughts and develop a philosophical mindset.

Writing Activity #9: The Colloquium Question

A next step in complexity is to focus on a particular question and develop it in depth. Students choose a portion of an assigned text that they deem worthy of conversation. The assignment asks them to imagine that they are at a colloquium at which the author has just presented their chosen claim. What question would they ask? I urge students to focus on a narrow question that may have broader implications.

The colloquium question is designed to build both interpretive and critical writing skills. Students first frame the question in the context of the assigned work, showing its relevance to larger questions in the text or class. They can use

any of the interpretive skills from the previous section. Ideally, their questions are about premises in an argument that they can state as précis. They can illustrate the premises originally. Reference to the source text involves quotation and citation. And asking a question about how to understand a metaphor can be salutary.

On the critical side, for the colloquium question, students state their concerns about the premise by asking a succinct question addressed directly to the author. Starting work on critical evaluation by emphasizing questions encourages students to develop their own views out of their responses to primary sources. It helps students to develop real critical analysis rather than untethered opinions.

Writing Activity #10: Philosophers in Conversation

Once students have developed some comfort in asking their own questions in response to source texts, they can turn to working with other philosophers' questions. In standard thesis-driven essays, we often ask students to develop their own claims by considering contrasting views. While the model of philosophical questions always having two sides is simplistic, philosophers do respond to each other, presenting arguments and counterarguments. But just as students often struggle to represent the claims of a single essay veridically, they often struggle to represent precise points of agreement and disagreement clearly, even in cases where one author is responding directly to another. This assignment helps students to get philosophers talking to each other. Students sometimes like the creativity of an option to compose a short original dialogue that captures the competing views.

The philosophers in conversation assignment is like two connected (not merely conjoined) exegeses. The challenge for students is to highlight points of agreement and disagreement. Students should not at this stage defend a thesis and should not take sides. The goal of the assignment is to connect the arguments as closely as possible. Points of contact may be found more easily in specific cases than in general principles, so concrete illustration is especially useful.

The Philosophers in Conversation assignment is really at the boundary between interpretation and critical evaluation. The exegetical work is essential. The critical work is generally not original, but it comes mainly from within the source texts. Ambitious versions of this assignment can ask students to imagine or extrapolate counter-responses: How is Haslanger responding to MacKinnon? How might MacKinnon respond back?

It is important to choose source texts prudently, ones in which students can successfully find points of contact. Samples of philosophical correspondence, excerpts from author-meets-critics essays, and book reviews are typically amenable, as are curated excerpts often found in textbooks.

This assignment is more complex than the others so far. I typically expect 900–1200 words so that students can both present competing claims and reasons.

Still, the assignment is relatively micro and, if students have developed the simpler skills, easy to read.

At this stage, I also provide instructions for dividing essays into sections and providing transitional guidance to readers (e.g., "I have just presented Anaximander's argument. Now I turn to Aristotle's response."). Students find those elements unfamiliar and need guidance and practice. For students working on independent research, like thesis projects, activities of dividing a work into sections and providing road maps could be a separate microwriting task.

Longer-Form Work: Putting it All Together

Even using just a few of the above writing activities in a single course, there is little time at the end to put it all together. That's fine. These are not necessarily sequenced activities toward a single product, even though they may be used that way. In some larger classes, I find that it is more prudent to do just microwriting, leaving students to put these skills together in later courses. At the introductory level, though, it can be useful and satisfying to have a culminating writing assignment.

A culminating essay might be just a typical thesis-driven essay. In argumentative essays, students should write charitably by identifying arguments, as they do in précis; summarizing key ideas, as in thesis statements; illustrating abstract claims originally and concretely, as in illustrative expositions; carefully cashing out metaphors; using quotations and citations consistently and usefully; and tracing a longer argument, as in the exegesis. They should also evaluate source texts critically, by asking various kinds of questions; framing and contextualizing those questions, as in the colloquium question; bringing contrasting views into conversation; and entering into the dialogue themselves. Grading rubrics for students, emphasizing these various aspects of the scaffolded writing instruction, can help students see how the work from the term comes together. Students who have developed these skills typically produce better longer assignments, making them easier to read.

I include two further creative culminating writing assignments as representative samples of how the microwriting above might be assimilated.

Writing Activity #11: Letter to a Philosopher

Framing a typical thesis-driven compare-and-contrast essay as a letter to an author helps students to engage more actively with the material. A summative assignment can ask students to write a detailed letter to a philosopher whose work was studied in class, discussing the work of another philosopher. Writing in the first person directly to the target author gives students personal connection to the texts and often makes the essays delightful to read.

Students may approach their letters in one of three ways. They might support a view of one of the philosophers against criticism, urge the philosopher to alter their views in light of criticism, or encourage the philosopher to reject their views. As always, students should be counseled to seek a narrow theme for their letters so that they can discuss the work in appropriate, careful detail. I communicate a possible structure of the letter, while emphasizing that I welcome creative alternatives:

A. Begin the letter by stating your thesis (whether you urge support, alteration, or rejection of the target's views).
B. Outline the (narrow) view under consideration, as you understand it, in careful detail.
C. Proceed to explain contrary arguments. Here, you are likely to draw from the work of one or more other philosophers. You may also raise original criticisms.
D. Evaluate the arguments and the counterarguments, citing evidence for your thesis in detail.
E. Conclude, repeating the thesis of your letter.

I also help students to understand how the microwriting from earlier in the course is intended to be assimilated in the longer assignment by giving them a list of the activities they completed and how they might be used in this more complex assignment.

Writing Activity #12: The Reflective Essay[15]

If we really want students to learn to write well, in addition to scaffolding their fine skills and having them practice and integrate those skills, we must ask them to reflect on their work. Personal reflections on our work reinforce the lessons we have learned.

Moreover, especially in days of artificial intelligence essay writing, instructors must communicate the utility of the work that we ask them to do. Good writing is inextricably linked to good thinking, and as much as our students will sometimes seek shortcuts, they do generally want to improve themselves. Asking students to reflect on what they have done in a course helps them to see the learning that they have done so that they can bring it to their future work.

In lieu of a final exam or term paper, we can ask students to achieve similar ends through metacognitive reflection. One important goal of such summative assignments is to have students reflect on and assimilate the work of the term. This goal can be achieved with a reflective essay critically assessing what they have learned in light of course, department, and institutional learning goals. Specific prompts asking for concrete examples of evidence can help students to avoid thin and unproductive reflections: On which course, department, or institutional learning goals did they make substantial development? What do they consider

their current weaknesses? How might they address them in the future? How do they imagine being able to use what they have learned in the future, either in later course work or in their careers? How might their work in the class change the way they meet the world?

Reflective essays can be a joy to read at the end of the course, and they do not require feedback. The goal of the essay is still distinctly philosophical: arguments and evidence. The theses concern their own learning. The evidence is drawn from specific activities that they have completed, which serve as the concrete illustrations.

To improve results on a reflective essay, students should be assured that their work is evaluated not primarily by how much they have learned, but on their candid assessment of their work. I provide a rubric with clear expectations: the most important elements are whether they articulate clearly, with uses of evidence, their progress and weaknesses. I also emphasize that their grades on the assignment will be based primarily on the thoughtfulness and thoroughness of their reflections. Candid admissions of weaknesses and how they might improve are better than boastful preening, though expressions of pride in learning are important and most welcome. “Honesty is the best policy.”

Questions of class size and student preparation are relevant to whether it is worth an instructor’s time to assign longer work like the activities of this section. In larger (~40-person) classes, I can typically do six shorter activities and one longer one. In smaller, writing-focused classes (~16-persons), I might have two longer assignments and include a round of revision, sometimes with a peer feedback process. In smaller classes, I also have students perform some of these tasks, like writing précis, repeatedly.

Learning Students, Happy Teachers

It is a truism that teaching would be great if it were not for all the grading. Reading bad writing is the real chore. When students write poorly, I pace, get distracted, and end up frustrated. When students write well, it is a joy to read. It is a good incentive to better instruction.

If we want our students actually to learn to write in an age of easy availability of artificial-intelligence-driven natural language processing tools, we must give them tasks that they can do, that will help them to learn, and whose benefits we can communicate effectively. These microwriting tasks fit the bill. Students often remark on how fun and useful these tasks are for them, and how different they are from the writing they are asked to do in other classes. They are motivated by both the novelty and the brevity.

While the microwriting skills I describe above are designed to support the construction of philosophical essays, they naturally transfer to other domains.

Philosophical arguments appear in blogs and podcast or video scripts. On all sorts of platforms, our work benefits from presenting efficient précis, concrete illustrations, unpacked metaphors, and thoughtful questions, carefully framed. These kinds of skills are also useful in other disciplines like literature, sociology, history, and political science; writing in any discipline that works with arguments in natural languages can benefit from careful attention to philosophical writing skills. Pretty much every academic discipline, perhaps outside of the arts, requires careful attention to texts, charitable interpretation, and critical evaluation, the core skills that these microwriting activities seek to develop.

At the outset of this essay, I said that scaffolding is almost essential to good teaching. Experts, as most philosophy instructors are in the discipline, perform, without thinking, tasks that are invisible to novices. Our students have to learn how to do what comes relatively naturally, now, to most of us instructors: identifying premises and presenting arguments, testing theories with various instances, unpacking metaphors, raising different kinds of questions, and so on. If we do not explicitly teach these skills, students have to learn them implicitly. The most determined students, or the most privileged, may figure it out on their own. But if we really want to teach all students what we do, rather than sit by and watch them learn it (or not) themselves, we must analyze and communicate the techniques that we take for granted in our own work.

While I have done no formal studies yet on how microwriting has benefitted students, I can report my own improved experiences as I have developed and implemented these activities. I am happier in part because I am reading shorter assignments. When the student work is poor, and of course some will always be, it is over quickly, and I can focus my feedback on specific, achievable ends. More often, the work I receive is quite good, since the assignments are typically within students' ZPDs. I pace frustratedly less and smile more.

Appendix

Sample Prompt for Activity #3: Illustrative Exposition, with an Annotated Model

Philosophical readings tend to be dense and abstract. Good writing about philosophy is thus often explicative. Instead of assimilating a variety of sources, we often explore and expand on a very few, even a single one. The illustrative exposition is a 300–500-word explanation of one of five quotations from our readings given below.

Your illustration should contain two elements. First, you should provide some context for the quotation. Briefly explain its role in the larger work and the meanings of any technical words. Second, you should illustrate abstract concepts originally, making sure that they are clear and meaningful to you and your reader.

Use concrete examples. Show that you understand the work by connecting it, as well as possible, to your life and your experiences.

The illustration is not an exercise in critical evaluation, but in careful interpretation. Feel free to refer to other aspects of the work of the author whose quote you are assigned, or to other work we have studied. Strive for balance between faithful charity to your source and originality.

You will choose the quote you will be illustrating from the five below in class.

1. [The pineal] gland is the principal seat of the soul, and the place in which all our thoughts are formed. The reason I believe this is that I cannot find any part of the brain, except this, which is not double. Since we see only one thing with two eyes, and hear only one voice with two ears, and in short never have more than one thought at a time, it must necessarily be the case that the impressions which enter by the two eyes or by the two ears, and so on, unite with each other in some part of the body before being considered by the soul. (Descartes, Letter to Meyssonnier, 29 January 1640)

2. It seems that all determination of motion occurs through the impulsion of the thing moved in such a way that it is pushed by the thing that moves it, or else, by the particular qualities and shape of the surface of the latter. Contact is required by the first two conditions, and extension by the third. You exclude entirely the latter from the notion you have of the soul, and the former appears to me to be incompatible with an immaterial thing. (Elisabeth to Descartes, 6 May 1643)

3. The world (I mean not the earth only, that denominates the lovers of it *worldly men*, but the *universe*, that is, the whole mass of all things that are) is corporeal, that is to say, body, and has the dimensions of magnitude, namely, length, breadth, and depth. Also every part of body is likewise body, and has the like dimensions, and consequently every part of the universe is body; and that which is not body is no part of the universe. And because the universe is all, that which is no part of it is nothing, and consequently nowhere. (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I.46)

4. When a body is once in motion, it moves (unless something else hinders it) eternally; and whatever hinders it cannot in an instant, but in time and by degrees, quite extinguish it. And as we see in the water, though the wind ceases, the waves do not give over rolling for a long time after, so also it happens in that motion, which is made in the internal parts of a man, then, when he sees, dreams, etc. (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I.2)

5. I think that there are certain features of the bodily sensations especially, but also of certain perceptual experiences, which no amount of purely

> physical information includes. Tell me everything physical there is to tell about what is going on in a living brain, the kind of states, their functional role, their relation to what goes on at other times and in other brains, and so on and so forth, and be I as clever as can be in fitting it all together, you won't have told me about the hurtfulness of pains, the itchiness of itches, pangs of jealousy, or about the characteristic experience of tasting a lemon, smelling a rose, hearing a loud noise, or seeing the sky. (Jackson, "Epiphenomenal Qualia," 127)

Here is a sample illustration of the following quotation from Descartes's Fifth Meditation.

> I think the most important consideration at this point is that I find within me countless ideas of things which even though they may not exist anywhere outside me still cannot be called nothing; for although in a sense they can be thought of at will, they are not my invention but have their own true and immutable natures. (Descartes, Meditation Five)

In the First Meditation, Descartes doubts the propositions of mathematics. There could be a deceiving God who makes me believe even the claims about which we are most confident, like mathematical or logical claims. Claims like "two plus three is five" and "the tangent to a circle intersects a radius of that circle at a right angle" seem to be among our most secure beliefs. But the deceiver could make me believe that they are true when they are false. Even the feeling of surety I have when thinking about such claims could be a false idea placed in my mind.

In the Third and Fourth Meditations, Descartes argues that there is a benevolent God who does not deceive us, eliminating the source of doubt in mathematical claims. Here in the Fifth Meditation, then, Descartes returns to the question of whether we can know mathematics. He points out that mathematical claims hold even if we never see (or otherwise experience) perfect mathematical objects. Even if numbers or circles do not, "exist anywhere outside of me," we still know about them.

Still, there are lots of ideas which I can know easily and well. I know of the bitter taste of a lemon, even if there are no real lemons. I know of the pleasing sounds of The Minutemen's "Joe McCarthy's Ghost" and the inspiring colors of Piet Mondrian's "Broadway Boogie Woogie." But such knowledge is different from mathematical knowledge. It is sensory knowledge, and I know that even if the lemons and songs and paintings really do exist, my experiences of them are really at least in part about me. Other people might not find The Minutemen so pleasing or see the same colors in the Mondrian. One might even think of my experiences as "my invention," as Descartes says, or at least as the result of my interactions with the world.

Mathematical objects are different, though, since they have their own, "true and immutable natures." I do not invent mathematical claims. Everyone who knows addition knows that two and three are five. Everyone who knows geometry knows that the tangent to a circle intersects the radius at a right angle. If a person has not yet learned the truth of those claims, they are the kinds of claims that we discover, rather than invent. They do not require our participation in the world to be true. They are independent of me. Descartes concludes that our knowledge of mathematics is innate, discovered by reflection on our minds, and secure.

Descartes's view could be questioned by people who believe that mathematics is invented, and not discovered. If people of different cultures, perhaps even alien civilizations, have different mathematical beliefs, Descartes's argument that mathematics is not invented would be undermined.

A few observations on the sample:

It is 455 words, not counting the assigned quotation.

The first two paragraphs contextualize the quotation.

Especially in the third paragraph, I use specific examples, both for the claims that we are supposed to know and the ones that we are not supposed to know. These are original examples, demonstrating my understanding of the concepts and principles Descartes mentions.

There is just a little critical evaluation at the end. This is an illustrative assignment, not an evaluative one. But some brief, clear questions or criticisms are welcome.

Notes

Thanks to two anonymous reviewers for helpful suggestions and to the editors of this volume, Renée Smith and Sarah Donovan, for thoughtful and patient advice and shepherding.

1. The term "microwriting" has been used recently to various ends in informal settings (e.g., blogs). "Microtheme" has been used for a specific kind of short writing across disciplines. See John C. Bean, Dean Drenk, and F. D. Lee, "Microtheme Strategies."

2. See Wood, Bruner, and Ross, "The Role of Tutoring," 90, for the original use of the term "scaffolding" in the context of one-on-one instruction.

3. See Vygotsky, *Mind in Society;* Wertsch "The Zone"; Bruner, "Vygotsky's Zone"; and Chaiklin, "Zone of Proximal Development."

4. Belland, "Instructional Scaffolding," §2.1 and Wertsch and Rogoff, "Editor Introduction" provide core principles of scaffolding and useful references. Berger, "Writing to Learn" shares suggestions for a one-paragraph assignment that could be called microwriting; Fishman, "Writing-To-Learn" urges scaffolding in response. Coe, "Scaffolded Writing" presents an approach to scaffolded writing instruction in philosophy different from the one I describe here. Mulnix and Mulnix, "Writing Portfolio" provides excellent first steps in scaffolded

writing instruction. Rudisill, "Transition from Studying" and Padgett-Walsh, Prokos, and Bird, "Better Term Paper" present scaffolding toward semester-long research papers. Marcus, "Fine Philosophical Skills" presents some theoretical discussion and activities that overlap with ones here.

5. See Pryor, "Philosophy of Comedy."

6. See Concepción, "Reading" for advice on reading skills.

7. See Marcus, "Fine Philosophical Skills," 42–44, for more detail, including sample models in both styles. Other activities described here appear in sometimes greater and sometimes different detail in that earlier essay, and with different framing. For Activity 3, see 44–46; for Activity 7, see 47. For Activity 9, see 47–48. For Activity 10, see 52. For Activity 11, see 58–59. For activity 12, see 59.

8. Constructing a précis is like role playing in writing, which can be a highly effective way of encouraging immersion in texts. The paradigmatic role-playing structures for classroom uses are the Reacting to the Past series. See https://reactingconsortium.org/ and Watson and Hagood, *Playing to Learn*).

9. Black, "Achilles and the Tortoise," 101.

10. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §309.

11. Jackson, *Life in Classrooms*, 9.

12. This activity was inspired by Merritt Rehn-DeBrahl, "Philosophy Begins in Apathy."

13. See Bloom, *Taxonomy*; Bloom, Learning for Mastery"; and Armstrong, "Bloom's Taxonomy."

14. Gallagher and Aschner, "Preliminary Report," 186–88.

15. This activity was adapted from unpublished work by Kimberly Van Orman.

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