

The Virtues and Craft of Being a Good Writer

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Background: Virtues and Crafts

This note is not intended to be a comprehensive writing guide in any sense. It is intended to provide some brief and fairly general introductory advice about writing. It is slanted toward helping philosophy students prepare their written assignments, but the advice is applicable to nearly all college and university students' written work.

The remarks are organized into two general sections focusing, respectively, on the virtues, and on the craft, of being a good writer. This distinction is not well marked in many writing manuals for students, but it is of the utmost importance. When students seek help with their writing, they are usually asking for help with the craft of writing. That is, they rightly want to know the technical details of writing clear, well-organized, well-reasoned prose. Such instruction is abundantly available in altogether accessible terms in countless writing manuals. But students often find that they hit a wall putting this knowledge into effect. Typically, they are then dryly told they need "more practice" refining their execution of the craft of writing.

While this is no doubt good advice and true, the focus on craft and technique misses the opportunity to emphasize a more immediately personal aspect of writing that must be confronted and acknowledged by any aspiring writer: The good writer must also cultivate being a certain sort of person, a person with certain traits of character, or virtues, that facilitate good writing. The writer's virtues refer to character traits that a writer must cultivate and possess in order to write well. (A virtue is a character trait that is valuable for the agent to have and that is habitually expressed in action as and when it is appropriate.) I highlight a few of the main writer-ly virtues here -- patience, persistence, ability to manage time, toleration of solitude, and empathy for one's audience -- explaining something of how these are expressed in acts of writing. I have placed mention of the virtues first, since they are often not accorded the prominence they deserve and, more important, where they are not to some significant degree present in the psychological make-up of the aspiring writer, writing well will be next to impossible despite the most careful instruction about the craft of writing. Later, when I review some main features of the craft of writing, their reliance on these virtues to give them practical effect should be evident.

A. The Writer's Virtues.

1. Writing well takes patience, persistence, and ability to manage time.

This is especially true for those who are learning how to write, but it is generally true for anyone who wants to write well. If you are serious about writing well, you will need patience and persistence, so that when your writing is completed you can be confident that your ideas are cogently and persuasively presented and accessible to others. Patience and persistence by their very nature require time, so their exercise requires the ability to manage time and to make effective use of it. There are two main steps to cultivating and exercising these virtues.

First, you need to set aside enough time to read and digest your research. Make notes as you read and write down questions about things that are unclear to you. Typically, the process of writing notes helps you to grasp the material, since the act of writing can force you to make clear sense of the ideas you encounter in your readings. If you are

reading and taking notes on philosophical writings at a rate of more than ten pages per hour, you are reading too fast. There is no substitute in philosophy for reading slowly and re-reading and then re-reading again. Six pages per hour is not necessarily too slow. Time plus patience and persistence is obviously required here.

Second, you need to set aside enough time so that you can do a properly thorough job of meeting the written requirements posed by your topic. Ideally, you should plan on writing at least two drafts, leaving a day or two before you go back and re-visit an earlier draft. Sometimes this is not possible, but at the very least you should allow yourself parts of several days (at least three) where you can put sustained time and effort into organizing and presenting your thoughts on paper. There is no substitute for writing and re-writing and re-writing again. If you don't have the patience for this (being slightly obsessive helps too), it will be difficult to become a good writer.

2. Writing is a solitary activity.

You won't write well unless you can make room for and tolerate spending quite a bit of time by yourself. However, you can take some of the edge off the writer's monkish behaviour by taking the opportunity to talk to others (students, friends, and family) about the ideas you encounter through your readings. If you can clearly explain philosophical ideas to another person, you'll have a pretty good idea that you are on your way to grasping the material. Frequently, your attempts to express philosophical ideas will reveal gaps in your understanding that need to be filled, and this is helpful, too. Nearly always you'll find that talking to others will reveal important issues or problems that need to be addressed in defending or criticizing a philosophical position. Fortunately, you'll find that there is no shortage of people who are prepared to engage in philosophical discussion. But philosophical talk-about's can go too far if your aim is to get something written. Remember that eventually you will have to find a quiet place to sit down and write.

3. Good writing requires empathy and respect for one's audience.

Although writing is a solitary activity, it involves constantly reflecting on how well others will understand and be influenced by what you have written. In effect, your audience is with you all the time even though you are by yourself when you write. This makes for an unusually difficult (and often crowded) act of imagination. The problem is that you are in immediate contact only with your own thoughts as you work. You do not directly interact with your audience, who cannot, therefore, give you direct feedback. You must, therefore, constantly attempt to step outside your own perspective to figure out how others will perceive and critically assess what you have done.

Sometimes writers say that they need to cultivate a sense of distance between themselves and their writing (you commonly hear that "I'm too close to what I've done right now"). What is principally implied here is a concern for being clear and succinct, but such remarks also express a concern about being impartial and fair in presenting ideas and arguments. The main way to achieve these goals is to cultivate a sort of empathy and respect for the audience that will be reviewing your work. This is not easy when you are wrapped up with your own ideas and perspective, which is a constant danger for the solitary writer. Taking a break can often help to broaden your perspective and to re-connect with the ideas and concerns of your audience. It follows, too, that a charitable approach to ideas that you disagree with is necessary and that inflammatory or opinionated language is to be avoided. The only way to be devastating in philosophy is with reasoned, fair, and nuanced argument. Carpet-bombing opponents with purple

prose or dogmatic assertions, even if they are heartfelt, has nothing to do with doing philosophy (or writing well generally), and it invariably demonstrates a failure of empathy, respect, and even-handedness.

4. Writers need to recognize when to finish.

A piece of written work is never really finished. It could always be improved by expanding or clarifying arguments or ideas or by enhancing the quality or succinctness of the prose. Nevertheless, at some point you have to make the decision that, for now, you have done your best and can move on to other things. There is a virtue here which I am not sure has a name, but I am going to call "the virtue of modest perfectionism." It sits somewhere between a vice of destructive perfectionist behaviour (being too much of a perfectionist, which prevents timely completion of tasks) and the opposite vice of having too little willingness to attend to the important details of properly completing tasks (being too little of a perfectionist, which allows timely completion of tasks, but in a slipshod manner).

Writers need to be modest perfectionists and to avoid the extremes of too much or too little perfectionism. There can often be regret associated with modest perfectionism, since you will know that you have left some things undone. But if you have given yourself the opportunity to meet your main goals in writing and have met them, you have fulfilled your aims and responsibilities. There should be no deep or lasting regret in these circumstances. By the way, being too much of a perfectionist can often be worse than being too little of a perfectionist, although they are both bad, since in the extreme case the former never gets anything done at all, while the latter may at least produce some things that have some degree of value.

5. Cultivating virtue requires habit.

Aristotle thought that character virtues had to be developed through habit in addition to proper instruction. That is, one has to practice being virtuous to acquire the virtues of being a good person. The same is undoubtedly true for acquiring the writer's virtues. Take your opportunities to write as opportunities to practice and develop the virtues required for writing well. Over time, you can mark your progress as a writer, in part, by how well you are reflecting the writer's virtues.

B. The Craft of Writing.

6. Writing is a dynamic, non-linear activity.

I suspect that students often get bogged down by attempting to write their papers in roughly serial order from beginning to end. In the most extreme case, the first sentence they write would appear as the first sentence in the paper, the second sentence they write would appear as the second sentence, and so on through the end of the paper. Such a rigid, highly linear approach to writing is almost always inefficient both in time and as a way of producing a satisfying result. What you should do is begin by preparing a rough and provisional outline, and then ask yourself what is the most efficient way of assembling the components in the outline. Sometimes it makes sense to start with mainly mechanical tasks. So, if a main part of your paper involves laying out some idea or the view of some philosopher which will then be subjected to discussion and criticism, this is probably where to begin. Other times, you may have an objection or argument that you are keen to get on paper, and it may make sense to start there because

you are highly motivated to do so and are liable to be distracted otherwise. Often, however, there is an advantage to starting with a description of a view that will be the focus of discussion and criticism. Writing it up will educate you about that view, and that will help you to be an informed critic. In all of these efforts, you will frequently be led to consider other matters that will need to be included in your discussion but which may not yet have occurred to you. So another thing to do is to keep a running file of points and ideas that you may want to integrate into your discussion later. I often keep these at the bottom of my file on a new page, and I review them at the end, and at the beginning, of each writing session. Some people jot down notes on recipe cards.

I am sure that the initial lack of order to this process disturbs and frustrates many people. However, once you recognize, and indeed give in to the idea, that the act of writing typically does not involve rigidly following a pre-set plan, you can learn to look forward both to the unexpected turns and discoveries that inevitably crop up and to the creative challenge of assembling your work into an organized form. It's like working with a puzzle in some ways, except that the process can be more open-ended than puzzle-solving, since you often have more control over which pieces to include and what sort of picture will emerge.

7. Write your introduction last.

Your introduction should be a sort of roadmap to the rest of your paper. It should make transparently clear to your reader where you are going with your writing (i.e., it should state the thesis you are going to present and defend); and it should tell your reader how you plan to get there (i.e., it should say how you plan to organize your paper to support your thesis). You must be as specific as possible about these things. However, you won't normally be in a position to say just what you are going to argue and how your paper will be organized until you have pretty much finished writing it. It follows that you should normally leave careful writing of the introduction until you have prepared the other parts of your paper. In effect, conclusions come first in essay writing, and the body of the essay (the argument) provides the warrants or justification for those conclusions. Often, however, preparation of the warrants forces us to re-think what our conclusions actually are -- the argument does not support the conclusions we initially thought it would, or it does not support them as strongly. It is important, then, to regard any written introduction as provisional until the main body of the paper is completed.

An introduction that says something like "In this paper, I will discuss the pros and cons of Kant's moral theory" does not say anything substantial either by way of thesis or about how the paper will be laid out. It is just about useless to your reader (and it usually implies that a student has taken the linear approach described above). If your topic is a critical discussion of Kant's moral theory, tell your reader at the outset just what you will show to be valuable/problematic about that theory and how the discussion will be organized to those ends. It takes some skill to do this, however. You don't want to engage directly in argument or discussion in the introduction. It will help to accomplish this if you do your best to leave definitions and discussions of criticisms until later in the paper. As well, the introduction should provide some background information that situates the discussion so that the reader can understand why the topic deserves attention. With all these matters, aim to be as succinct as possible without lapsing into vagueness and ambiguity. For most undergraduate essays, an introduction should be a paragraph long, certainly no more than two paragraphs. It usually takes real effort and skill to combine the components of a good introduction into such a limited space. But there is rarely better evidence of being a good writer or of understanding a topic than is provided by a good introduction.

Remember that reading is hard work (see #1 above), so if you have something interesting to say and want to communicate it to others through this medium, you should help yourself by making your writing as accessible and transparent to your reader as possible. A prime way to do this is to make sure that the introduction accurately maps out and prepares the reader for what to expect. If I don't know what to expect in a paper from reading its introduction, I know that my job as a reader is going to be much harder, since I'll have to put together the thesis myself and figure out how the paper is organized to that end.

8. Try to develop a thread to your writing.

Following the roadmap metaphor a bit further, you can help to organize your writing and to make it more transparent by letting your reader know after completing important steps in your discussion where you've been and where you are going from there (reviewing and foreshadowing, in effect). Basically, this involves connecting your discussion to your introduction and explaining how what you have done furthers the progress of the paper toward its goals. This is another step in the preparation of your essay that is often best left until the end.

9. Take ideas one at a time and develop them fully.

Probably the most common problem beginning writers have is determining when they have explained things fully enough to put their meaning across clearly to their readers. Remember you are not merely writing to explain ideas so that you understand them, but so that others can understand them too. What might be meaningful or understandable to you may appear quite cryptic to others who do not have your background. This is related to the distance metaphor discussed above. Take time to explain things clearly and fully. Write in short sentences and use simple, straightforward language. Again, quite a bit of patience is required for this, and so is a certain ability to see things from the perspective of your readers (see #1 and #3).

A frequent related problem with undergraduate papers is compression of ideas (running ideas together that need to be treated separately). This usually shows that a student has not taken enough time to prepare a paper and is trying to get all the relevant information down in a hurry. Again, thinking about what you have written from the reader's perspective can help to identify this sort of problem.

A helpful test for clarity and completeness for undergraduate philosophy writing is to ask yourself whether a fellow undergraduate student, who has not yet taken your course, could properly understand the ideas and arguments that you have presented. Meeting this test will require providing accurate definitions of the concepts and terms of art (academic jargon, in effect) that must be explained to understand philosophical discussions of your topic. Later, once you complete your undergraduate training and start professional, academic, or other careers, you may begin to address audiences of specialists with your writing. At that point, you may need to change your test to avoid taxing the patience of readers with whom you will have many shared understandings that do not require explanation. But even so, an appropriate test in these circumstances would often be whether a bright undergraduate philosophy student, who had not yet confronted the material presented in your essay, could understand what you have written.

10. Read your papers aloud.

This helps to put yourself in the position of your audience. Your ear will often help you to pick up infelicities in style and even gaps in arguments.

11. Make sure your paper is cleanly presented.

Don't distract your reader by failing to run the spell-checker, or by forgetting to include page numbers, or by omitting a cover page or your name, or by having nothing to keep the pages together (not having a paper clip, for example). And make sure you use a common system of referencing. Failing these tasks immediately suggests that the content of the paper was prepared with similar carelessness and inattention to detail. Usually, this is true.

12. Use gender-neutral language as far as possible.

This shows respect for both sexes in your audience. To my eye and ear, locutions like "he/she" "s/he" "his/her" "himself/herself" are often infelicitous, especially if they show up frequently in a piece of writing. Make an effort to use gendered pronouns only when they cannot easily be avoided.

13. Use first person pronouns sparingly.

While many writing manuals discourage the use of the first person pronouns "I" and "my," some disciplines permit their use, particularly when introducing the author's thesis. Philosophy and law are two such examples. In particular, in philosophical writing it is common to find thesis statements to the effect that "My aim in this paper will be to..." or "I will show that ..." This may upset the sensibilities of some writing instructors, but in fact it is a very direct and unambiguous way of signaling to your reader that you are making a thesis statement. However, the general advice to avoid first person pronouns is correct. A paper that is littered with such pronouns is stylistically awkward, not least because it gives the impression of self-centredness and lack of interest in one's audience.

14. Find a good writer's style manual, read it carefully, re-read it, and put it into effect.

My favourite is Strunk and White's classic, *The Elements of Style*. It is admirably brief and contains many useful points about how to write clearly and effectively. This work should be available at almost any bookstore. After you become a good writer, you will break every one of Strunk and White's rules at some time or another. But learn the rules and the point behind them first. For most of us, that will be a long term project in itself.

15. Write and re-write; read and re-read.

Not everyone must be a good writer, but everyone should at least aim to write well (in at least one language). There is no substitute for practice here, and that means making the most of opportunities for improving your writing by re-writing in light of your own and others' criticisms. Recognize that constructive criticism of your own writing is pure gold, even though it is often difficult to bear. Being a careful reader is also essential to this process. Read not only for the content of ideas but to determine how good writers find ways to convey ideas effectively. Try to incorporate those techniques into your own work.