

Dr. Shane Ewegen
Writing Fellow Summary

My project originated out of a growing awareness of certain deficiencies belonging to the essays I assign for my 200-level philosophy courses. These essays are meant, above all, to teach certain skills of analytic reading: namely, the abilities to distill arguments from a text, to represent those arguments clearly and linearly, and to understand the fundamental logical structure at work within those arguments. Such skills, while no means the final (or even intermediary) goal of my philosophy classes, are nonetheless foundational in developing the abilities to discern, to understand, and to create philosophical texts. However, in order to develop these skills, my assignments were necessarily somewhat dry and formal, affording little if any room to the students for creative exploration. For the most part, I would ask students to read a text, explicate its arguments, and reproduce them in their own words. Such a format, while essential to developing the skills mentioned above, is more than a little *dull*.

I joined the Writing Fellows program with the hope of devising ways to enrich or enliven these writing assignments. As the program began, I was fairly open in my approach, wanting only to listen and to learn from my colleagues about how they prepare writing assignments, and to be exposed to a greater range of writing pedagogy. Throughout the year I was provided a veritable feast of words. We read and discussed a number of rich and fascinating articles dealing with topics including source citations, multi-modal writing, genre specific writing, in-class creative writing exercises, and much more. We also read articles dealing with broader socio-political issues such as trans-linguistic writing and questions of Anglophone colonialism in and out of the classroom. As rich as these texts were, they were outshined by the many insightful comments made by my colleagues during our meetings.

In light of our sessions, and the many different pedagogical approaches that were presented therein, I attempted to restructure my writing assignments in such a way as to engender creativity on the part of the students. The hope was to create an assignment that both required analytic rigor of my students (for the reasons mentioned above) and afforded them the space to explore and create in a less formal and circumscribed way. However, as I played with various formats and forms, I soon realized that I was chasing a chimera. Every iteration that I came up with seemed monstrous and unruly, essentially consisting of two important, but incommensurable, parts.

After some trial and error (mostly the latter), I developed a new strategy. Rather than trying to incorporate these two elements (i.e., analytic rigor and creative space) into the same assignment, I would scatter the two elements across many different assignments. Whereas my 200-level courses used to have 3-to-4 writing assignments of the above explained type, each requiring the students to write about 5-7 pages, now I only have 2-3 assignments of that type, requiring of the students only about 3-5 pages. Moreover, I have added about 13 additional writing assignments (in the form of ‘weekly assignments’), each consisting of 1 page or less. Unlike my more rigid and formal assignments, these weekly writing assignments have nearly no formal parameters whatsoever. The students are allowed to explore any aspect of the text that they wish, and in any way that they wish. They can write in the first-person; they can write an angry letter to the author; they can create a dialogue between themselves and the author; they can even draw a picture! The only provision is that their responses relate to the week’s readings in some way—other than that, the format is entirely open, even allowing them to employ multi-modal approaches. (I’ve even had students offer their responses via text messages—not my preferred format, but interesting nonetheless.) The benefit of this new approach is that the students are given the opportunity to explore and create on their own terms, while still being bound to the strictures of analytic rigor.

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The overall hope with this approach is that the students will have synthesized within themselves, by the end of the semester, what I could not successfully synthesize in the assignments themselves: namely, a balance of creative expression and rigorous argumentative ability. By being given the space in which to explore freely and without my intervention, the students 'flex' their creative muscles, and become more inclined and willing to undertake the more formal and rigorous assignments. These two components, when working in tandem, provide the basis (in my opinion) of good philosophical writing.

While I will not know whether or not my new approach is successful for some time, I have already seen some encouraging signs. My students seem less bored with the 'analytic' assignments, now that they have the occasion elsewhere to express themselves more freely. Additionally, some of the writing *within* the 'analytic' assignments is itself becoming more creative and interesting: it is as though the students, on their own initiative, are carrying over the skills from one set of assignments into the other. Overall, I have seen an improvement in the students' writing this year, and am hopeful that this trend continues into the semesters to come. The Writings Fellow program has been instrumental in providing me with the time, the space, the resources, and the encouragement to make these structural changes.