

Undergraduate Reading & Writing Workshop sample structure

MAP Columbia chapter, March 2019

This is a sample structure for a series of two graduate student run reading and writing philosophy workshops aimed at first-time philosophy undergraduates. The first workshop is on basic writing skills and some tips and techniques for reading philosophical texts. The second workshop gives students a chance to deepen their understanding of those techniques through reading other students' work in small groups with supervision and help from graduate students. The workshops hopefully don't require teacher training to work well, though obviously experience in running the workshops and shaping them in ways that work best for the particular university culture and so on will pay dividends.

The workshops have two possible benefits (other than the direct benefit of hopefully improving reading and writing skills!) that we'll outline here. First, they give undergraduate students a chance to build community with each other and with graduate students outside of a classroom environment. This function works well when paired with mentoring programs or other events that bring undergraduates together. And second, they give graduate students a chance to reflect on their own practices and also to develop their teaching skills in a lower-pressure environment. Running the workshops might also be an opportunity to get faculty more involved.

Workshop 1 – Reading and Writing Philosophy (to be read together with the attached notes & handout)

In the first workshop, we begin with writing and end with reading, but it may work just as well/perhaps even better to begin with reading and then to try and apply those lessons to one's own writing. The overarching attitude we try to take is to give students a confidence in their own abilities – that although writing is difficult, there are some really simple and approachable ways to think about one's own writing that will serve as a basis for developing their own approach to philosophical writing. Part of that confidence involves really letting the undergraduates dictate the structure of the workshop by following their lead and their questions (though, of course, having in mind the structure below and the key take-home messages).

This is also just a guide to the topics that could be covered in each part – you may wish to emphasise different aspects of each topic or to change topics depending on how you conceive differently of the purpose of the workshop. We run the first workshop over 90 minutes, but it could be compressed or expanded.

1. Introductions and set-up (10-15mins)

- Introduce each of us, background, what we're working on, why philosophy matters to us.
- Ask undergraduates to introduce themselves with any particular things they would like to get out of the workshop, so that these questions can be addressed as the workshop proceeds
- The purpose of the workshop: a) to set out one approach to philosophical writing; b) to give undergraduates some simple techniques for reading and writing philosophy, c) to help undergraduates begin to think about their own conception of writing and its importance.

2. General paper structure (15 mins)

- Paper as response to a prompt (thesis + argument)
- Explain what an argument is, what reasons are, etc
- Structure of a paper as introduction, body, conclusion - explain role of each part.
- Say something about how this structure might change according to length of paper (eg short answer question, 1-2pg paper, 4pg etc)

3. Mechanics of sitting down and writing (15 mins)

- Tips on approaching writing a paper and planning
- outlining and revision and leaving time to review
- Use of "I"
- Distinguish between what one thinks/feels/believes etc and what one can argue for
- Active voice vs passive voice; importance of transition words ("because", "so", "therefore", etc) and signposting
- Read papers before handing them in! (perhaps out loud), or get a friend to look it over, etc.
- Whatever other tips come out of questions

4. Analysis of writing samples (20 mins)

- Run through provided undergraduate writing samples looking for points identified above re structure, role of introductions, clarity of expression, voice, argument etc.

5. Active reading (15-20mins)

- How to read philosophical texts:
 - o What is the author trying to do? Context. (Who is the author responding to? Who is the author speaking to?)
 - o What is the author's claim? What are the author's arguments for that claim?
 - o Note transitions in the argument/overall structure of text.
- Go through the texts on the handout (in small groups) to try to identify these points.

6. Conclusion (5mins)

- Reflections on workshop and final questions

Workshop 2 – Reading another's writing

The purpose of the second workshop is to deepen students' understanding of the above points once they have gotten a little bit of practice in writing. We normally hold this workshop in the second half of semester, at least a month or so after the first one.

Each student is to bring a small sample of their own writing – either a short paper (1-2pgs) or a section of a longer paper (an introduction + section of body). Note: there are different ways to structure this workshop (assuming students from different classes) – you could break students up along class lines so they understand the material, or you could mix things up so they have to read student writing on material they are not necessarily familiar with.

1. Introductions and set-up (5-10mins)

- Introductions
- Purpose of this workshop: to apply the lessons of the first workshop to their own writing

2. Recap of key points from first workshop (15mins)

- Following student lead, try to get them to recap the key points of the previous workshop
- Recirculate handout, or have new one page document with key points to circulate

3. Small group analysis (40mins)

- Break students up into groups of 4-5. Have them read each other's work and comment on writing, places to improve, bits where they were unclear, etc. Graduate students to go around and help.

4. Conclusion (10-15mins)

- Bring groups back together and reflect together on common issues, how reading another's work helps one think about one's own writing, what they've learnt from the workshops.