

Research Conceptualization, Craft, and Design

Prof. Sara L. Uckelman
Durham University
s.l.uckelman@durham.ac.uk
@SaraLUckelman

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Organization of the talk

- Identifying topics
- Turning topics into problems
- Turning problems into papers

Identifying topics (1)

Axiom 1: You will write better papers/dissertations/thesis if you're writing on topics that interests and excites you.

① Think about life outside of philosophy

- ▶ What do you read?
- ▶ What do you listen to?
- ▶ What do you watch?
- ▶ What do you do for relaxation?
- ▶ What have you been thinking a lot about lately?
- ▶ What have you been talking to your friends/family a lot about lately?

② Think about life within philosophy

- ▶ What have you been reading lately that interests you?
- ▶ What classes have you taken/talks you've attend that you enjoyed the most?
- ▶ What are do you need to be able to teach?
- ▶ What drew you to philosophy in the first place?

③ Ask: what is in the intersection?

An example of the “intersection” method

- What interests me in philosophy:
- What occupies my time outside of philosophy:
- What's in the intersection?

An example of the “intersection” method

- What interests me in philosophy: Philosophy of fiction
- What occupies my time outside of philosophy:
- What's in the intersection?

An example of the “intersection” method

- What interests me in philosophy: Philosophy of fiction
- What occupies my time outside of philosophy: K-pop
- What's in the intersection?

An example of the “intersection” method

- What interests me in philosophy: Philosophy of fiction
- What occupies my time outside of philosophy: K-pop
- What's in the intersection? What are the relationships with K-pop idols—does thinking about them as fictional characters help us understand these relationships—or does it raise new questions that no one has asked before?

Identifying topics (2)

- **Edge cases:** Take a traditional theory or a traditional question, and instead of working in the center of it, work on the edges. Work on the borderlines.
 - 1 How do theories of fiction deal with fanfiction?
 - 2 How do theories of meaning deal with conlangs?

Identifying topics (3)

- **What's in there?:** Here's a historical text. What does it say? How does it compare to what other people at the same time were saying? How does it compare to what we say today?
 - ▶ Subgenre: "What did they say?" Pick a topic/question, pick a selection of authors, explain their views and contrast them with each other and with modern views. What do we learn?
 - ▶ Benefit: low-hanging fruit!

Identifying topics (4)

- **Tool combination:** I have this modal logic. I have this temporal logic. I have agents. I have self-reference. What happens if I put them all together?
 - ① What happens if I take all these bits and put them together, what can I do with them?
 - ② What bits do I need to combine in order to be able to say something about What's in there?

Turning a topic into a research problem (1)

Axiom 2: You've got to ask the right questions.

- ❶ What do you want to know?
- ❷ What would count as an answer to this question?
 - ▶ How are you going to discriminate between things that are answers to the question and things that aren't?
- ❸ What would count as a good answer to this question?
 - ▶ How are you going to discriminate between competing answers?
 - ▶ What are your foundational principles, the things that you cannot give up?
 - ▶ What is the purpose of this answer (are you looking for something functional, moral, epistemological, etc.)?

Turning a topic into a research problem (2)

- ① (Once you've answered the question) Who cares? Why does it matter?
 - ▶ What has changed as a result of having this answer?
 - ▶ What *must* change as a result of having this answer?
 - ▶ Does having this answer affect our behavior?
 - ▶ Does it affect what philosophical position we must adopt to remain consistent?
 - ▶ Does it change the philosophical landscape by either removing or adding possible positions?
 - ▶ What difference does it make?

Instead of asking “Why is there something rather than nothing?” or “What is a fact?” ask what could possibly count as an answer to such a question, and what could possibly count as a *good* answer.

Turning a research problem into a paper (1)

Axiom 3: Getting the organization right matters as much as getting the content right.

1 Introduce and motivate the question:

- ▶ What is the question/problem/puzzle, and what is your answer?
- ▶ Why is this a question worth answering?
- ▶ Why this question rather than another question?
- ▶ What tools will you use to answer the question?

Turning a research problem into a paper

2 Contextualize the question:

- ▶ What has already been said to answer this question?
- ▶ Why are these previous answers inadequate? (If they aren't inadequate, then you don't have a puzzle/problem to solve!)
- ▶ How will your answer differ?

Turning a research problem into a paper

3 Motivate the answer:

- ▶ What will count as a good answer?
- ▶ How will you discriminate good answers from bad answers?
- ▶ How does your answer do things that other answers don't? What things are they?

Turning a research problem into a paper

4 Introduce and explain your tools

- 1 Either present all the technical apparatus in one go, and then apply it to your motivating examples/material.
- 2 Or introduce the technical apparatus and the motivating examples/material concurrently, in an interleaved fashion.

Note: hard to know which route is best!

Turning a research problem into a paper

5 Answer the question:

- ▶ Apply your technical apparatus to answering the questions.
- ▶ Explain how your answer answers the question and why it is a good answer.

Turning a research problem into a paper

6 Discuss the consequences:

- ▶ What have we gained from doing this?
- ▶ What have we learned?
- ▶ What has to change as a result of knowing this?
- ▶ What are the problems?
- ▶ What still needs to be done?

Turning a research problem into a paper

7 Build the ladder:

- ▶ Conclude, recap, future work.
- ▶ Remind your reader what the question and answer were.
- ▶ What are the next steps?

Writing as reporting vs. writing as discovery (1)

Axiom 4: Know what kind of writer you are.

Typical essay-writing advice:

- 1 Find all the relevant literature for your topic.
- 2 Read all the relevant literature for your topic, taking notes as you go.
- 3 Organize those notes into themes/questions/subjects.
- 4 Create bullet points from them, highlighting key facts and points you want to make.
- 5 Organise these points into the right order.
- 6 Rewrite each bullet point into a complete sentence.
- 7 Add more detail until each bullet point gets expanded into a paragraph.
- 8 (Depending on the length of the essay) Expand on each bullet point until you get multiple paragraphs/an entire section.

This method requires you to *know in advance what you are going to say*.
This is **writing as reporting**.

Writing as reporting vs. writing as discovery (2)

Writing as discovery: You figure out what you want to say *through* the process of writing.

- ① Write until you reach a knowledge gap.
- ② Read until you can fill the gap.
- ③ Generate new ideas and questions while you read.
- ④ Write these down until you reach a knowledge gap.
- ⑤ Read (or think) until you can fill the gap. . .

This is a cyclical process!

Writing as reporting vs. writing as discovery (3)

- Writing as discovery is a cyclical process, but actual essays are not!
- How *you* learned a topic is not necessarily how to present it to your reader.
- How to figure out the right order?
 - ▶ Turn the draft into a presentation. Where do people get confused, or ask questions?
 - ▶ Reverse outlining:
 - ★ Pick a chapter, section, paragraph: What is the *one* key take-away message you want your reader to come away with at the end?
 - ★ If you can't articulate *one*, consider splitting the chapter/section/paragraph into more than one.
 - ★ Why does the reader need to know *this* point *before* the next point?