

Repulsions and Strategies in Writing

- A. Repulsive essay-types:** If you really want to guarantee yourself a bad grade, write one of the following:
- (1) *Glorified book reports:* The student merely reports what others have said on the topic without taking a stand on the issue.
 - (2) *A forestless set of trees:* Closely related to glorified book reports, this occurs when the student has gotten so bogged down in the particular details of a particular idea, text, or thinker, that he/she has no general point that he/she is making.
 - (3) *Weak-kneed muddling:* The student pretends to take a stand by saying that two opposing positions are right in their own ways, but fails to show how (a) the two positions are right, (b) how the insights of the opposing positions can be reconciled, (c) how the two positions are wrong. In general, if you're going to be conciliatory, be very clear and precise about the strengths and weaknesses of the positions you're reconciling and make sure that your compromise addresses the strengths and weaknesses of both positions.
 - (4) *Streams of consciousness:* Exploration and discovery of ideas are really important aspects of philosophy (and critical examination of any topic in general). In writing this paper, you'll have to use these processes to come up with a clear thesis and a clear way of arguing for that thesis. As a teacher of philosophy, I'm very interested in these processes, and we'll have plenty of time to discuss them in the next few weeks. However, let me be as blunt as possible about this: AS A READER OF A PHILOSOPHY ESSAY, I CATEGORICALLY DO NOT WANT TO SEE THEM IN AN ESSAY! I want to see the best possible argument for a thesis, not something that gives you a Eureka! feeling when you're operating on nothing but coffee at 2am in the morning. Restrict your processes of discovery and exploration to rough drafts: nothing but the argument in the final draft. (Compare: Would you rather hear a musician performing a series of trial-and-error steps on a piano while composing a score or would you rather hear the orchestra performing the finished score?)
- B. Strategies to avoid repulsive maneuvers**
- (1) *Have a clear thesis:* Take a firm position on the issue you're tackling. Without a doubt this is the most significant cause of the aforementioned repulsions. A good test of whether you have a clear thesis is whether or not you can state it in one clear, concise sentence.
 - (2) *State your thesis in the first page of your paper:* Glorified book reports and streams of consciousness almost always result when this dictum is not heeded.
 - (3) *Set up a "roadmap" for your essay in the first two pages of your paper:* A road map highlights the major and most *general* reasons you believe that your thesis is correct. However, DON'T get bogged down in details when setting up your roadmap (This would be the equivalent of someone telling you exactly how many degrees you should rotate your steering wheel when giving you driving directions). That's what the body of the essay is for.
 - (4) *Follow your roadmap.* This is a no-brainer, but people often lose the forest for the trees by losing track of their roadmaps. Constantly refer back to your roadmap to see if you're sticking to it. If you're not, think very long and very hard about whether you want to revise your roadmap or not, or whether you've just barked up the wrong tree.

- (5) *Divide and conquer.* In your roadmap, there are often identifiable and distinguishable parts of your argument. Don't be afraid to set up small headings in your essay corresponding to these parts. I think you'll find that many of our readings have several sections. For longer essays, I'd probably add short "Introduction" and "Conclusion" sections as well. The major upshot of dividing up your essay this way is that it breaks it up into more manageable tasks ("sub-essays"), and this generally discourages the writing of repulsive essays.
- (6) *Frequently use signposts to locate yourself with respect to your roadmap and your thesis.* It's a good idea for both you and your reader to take stock (about every 2-3 pages or so) of where you are in your argument. To avoid sounding pedantic, this should be very brief (less than three sentences). These "signposts" serve two crucial functions: (a) they remind you and your reader of the larger point you're trying to make and (b) stylistically, they make for natural transitions.
- (7) *Constantly question whether or not an idea, a paragraph, a sentence, a word, etc. is absolutely necessary for establishing your thesis.* A common way of getting off topic is feeling the need to say everything that you find interesting about a topic, or simply showing that you know a lot of stuff. Despite the fact that you may know many things about a topic, this doesn't mean that all (or even most) of them are relevant. Failing to respect this is the essence of stream-of-consciousness style offenses (think of this rule as a way of *streamlining* consciousness); essays that are otherwise quite lovely often temporarily veer into book reporting when this rule is violated.
- (8) *Aim for short sentences and short paragraphs.* In general, if you can say something in fewer words, you have said it more clearly (this is why professors mention things like avoiding passive constructions, run-ons, etc.). Always edit with this in mind. For similar reasons, I am also a huge fan of keeping paragraphs under a half-page in length and less than five sentences: it encourages having only one point in the paragraph, and discourages stream-of-consciousness-style offenses. Often, observance of the previous rule (keeping an eye on necessity) leads to observance of this rule.
- (9) *Don't get quote-happy.* This is partly an extension of the previous point. Authors often are wordier than they need to be, or include information that is not directly relevant to the point you're making. Paraphrase where you can. Also use ellipsis, e.g., "Khalifa is...handsome...and kind." Quote-happiness is typical of glorified book reporters.
- (10) *Avoid tropes and jargon.* Some professors like pretty essays. This typically means that they like metaphors, analogies, vivid quotations from famous people, and edifying prose. A little of this is fine, but never let these metaphors, analogies, etc. do the work that tight reasoning ought to do. To me, nothing is more beautiful than a deductively valid argument with clear premise- and conclusion-indicators.
- (11) *Consider that your worst enemy wrote your paper. endeavor to humiliate him/her.* Be self-critical! Be your own devil's advocate! Love yourself by hating yourself! This can take on (at least) two forms:
- How might a person completely unsympathetic to your paper object to your position? I help myself here by often having the section immediately preceding my conclusion be an "Objections are replies" section.
 - Might a person accuse you of writing a repulsive essay? Where are you most liable to get accused of such atrocities?

On this front, it's imperative that you give yourself some *critical distance* from your essay. Write, brainstorm, etc. and then take a nap, shower, go out to dinner, call

Mom and Dad, etc. Then return with a fresh pair of eyes. You'll be amazed at how much smarter you are after a few hours away from the computer screen!