

G: All right. Hello, and welcome to the latest episode of Writing Across Cottey. So if you are new to this series, the idea is that we interview a faculty member from across the disciplines here at Cottey, just to get an idea of what kind of writing is done in their discipline, what kind of attitudes or experiences they have with writing, and maybe also just some general advice for they have that they might have for aspiring writers in their discipline or considering going into their discipline. So for this episode, we are very grateful to have Dr. Claire Mills, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, with us today, and we are going to be able to get Dr. Mills' experiences with writing and maybe, you know, some pointers that Dr. Mills may have for writers who are interested in going into philosophy. So Dr. Mills, thank you for being our interviewee for this episode, and I will just jump into the first question right here, and that is what kind of writing is done in your discipline?

M: So a lot of the writing that's done in philosophy is versions of persuasive writing. So it can take different forms, but usually it will be some type of argumentative writing, where you have an opinion or a thesis that you're trying to advance by giving good reasons and accounts to support it.

G: Yeah, and that's a lot of what we talk about in our first year writing classes as well. The FWS class and Writing 102 is starting with that, the thesis, and working from there. Can you say a little bit more about how you define that word thesis? What does it mean to have a thesis?

M: Yeah, so in philosophy, especially, it will tend to be kind of the broad summary of your main argument. So, for example, if I'm writing a paper, you know, about a philosopher, whoever it is, it tends not to be a descriptive essay, which would just be telling you all about that philosopher. There's often a point that you're trying to advance, an argument you're trying to make, and that can either be a subjective claim about that philosopher, so something like they don't succeed with their moral theory, you know, some type of judgment that you're making about them. But it could also be something where you're saying a comparative claim, so that Philosopher B has a better reasoning than Philosopher A for this reason. But in all of those cases, you have an opinion or a declaration, you know, that you've decided on that you're going to try to get whoever your reader is to come to the same agreement by the end of that paper. And you're going to have to include a lot of details for them, but largely, whatever you're including is working towards getting them to the same opinion, right? So what is some kind of claim or something that you can argue, not just a factual statement? It needs to be something that you can support with evidence. That tends to be the majority of writing, but we see that not be the case so much with our classic writers, you know, like, Plato didn't necessarily have a single claim to make, but as you read Socrates or Plato's writing, you see that he has a bunch of little points to make. And then so it's almost as though each paragraph has its own argument.

G: Oh, wow. Yeah, that's interesting. So why do you think it's important to be able to write well in philosophy?

M: So I see philosophy writing as being the kind of discussion that you have with people all the time at a dinner table or in passing where you believe something, you know, you think something to be true, and you would like that they think the same thing. Well, you know, philosophy of philosophy. Writing in philosophy is that type of argumentative writing, where you're working on getting other people to come to the same conclusion that you did or modifying your conclusion based on how they respond and working together towards whatever the thesis point was. And so I see it as being incredibly useful for not just academic disciplines but things like agreeing with your suitemates on a pet, you know, or coming to an agreement on where to eat for dinner. All of these, everything we do in our life, tends to have an

element of “And I would like you to think that as well.” And so anytime that that happens, these skills can be something that we that we put into play.

G: That's often a point that I bring up in the first year writing classes. Any text, really, in some way is making an argument, right? Even if you take one of these seemingly objective neutral genres, like a news story or something like that, the author still has that goal of getting the audience to, as you said, see things the way they do, and that in itself is kind of an act of persuasion. Right. So argumentation is everywhere, even in some of the places that we don't necessarily expect it to be.

M: That's right. And I think as well that it shows the positive nature of argumentation where we think of debate and arguing as a very negative thing, right? Like it's hurting someone almost, to debate with them or to argue with them. And so I think of instead seeing it not even collaboratively but just in general as sharing the reasons you came to believe something, you know that as opposed to the reason someone else came to believe something else can be very positive.

G: Maybe just opening minds rather than changing them.

M: Right.

G: But you're right, it is very often portrayed as a very antagonistic thing. I'm sure we'll see that in the upcoming election year. You know, whenever we have these debates, they're portrayed as these head-to-head clashes, these fiery events where one person wins and the other loses, which is really not the kind of mindset we want people to have about debate and argumentation.

M: Yeah, and I think bringing up the presidential debates is an excellent point of what isn't happening in philosophy because the structure of the debate only allows a little bit of time to respond to many questions in a row. There's no way to include the information you need to convince or to engage with someone productively; it just isn't in the structure. And so thinking of that as a debate I think is misleading, you know, whereas in fact, it's a series of opinions and attacks.

G: Maybe an opportunity to get sound bites in. Very good. What specific writing skills would you say are important for writing and philosophy? I think maybe you answered that a little bit in the last question, but specific skills.

M: Yeah, I think the identification of facts versus claims is really important. So it's something that I stress in my classes, this idea of being able to pick out when a sentence doesn't need any further proof and when a sentence would be like a fact. You know, just, things are “This person said this”; those are all just things you can include without much proof beyond, “Here's where I found that,” whereas claims are these kinds of opinions about that series of facts. And so claims will need to include the reasons that you think that, and so knowing when to identify a claim will be really important for knowing when to put into practice putting a bunch of extra reasons into it.

G: Yeah, I think it can sometimes be hard to distinguish between something that is common knowledge versus what isn't, right? You know, what is something that you can get away with just saying without necessarily having to support it? But then what are these claims that you're making where you can't just let them stand on their own; you need to support them with some evidence in order to be persuasive?

M: Yeah, and I think the thinking of it like, “Does it include an element of judgment?” is important, instead of thinking of it like, “Is it a common fact or not?” Because oftentimes, really complex and seldom known facts are still facts, you know; they’re not claims, and so being able to understand when further support is needed rather than more information, almost.

G: Yeah, that makes sense. So I’m curious. Dr. Mills, what has been the most important thing that you’ve learned about writing in philosophy?

M: I think that I think of my reader negatively, and that has been very helpful. And I know that sounds a little strange, but I picture the person who’s reading my work disagreeing with me at every turn, being incredibly irritable, purposefully, you know, obtuse, just being the worst type of reader. Because I believe that if you can convince that person of your point and really write in a way that doesn’t leave them much room to go, “Oh, well, what about this?” then you’ve written a stellar paper, you know, a really convincing paper for all of those real readers that you get that tend to be giving you benefits of the doubt and things like that.

G: Oh, that is that’s a really good strategy. I find myself using that and telling my students to use it, too, in our writing classes. I kind of call it “planting a naysayer in your text.” You know, envision this person who would pick apart your argument and find all these counter arguments against you and preempt those, you know, think, “What would I say to this person before they can even ask that question that would, you know, put that out of their mind?” I think, you know, we talk a lot about in my rhetoric classes the six part oration model that Cicero talked about, and he said Part Five is the refutation. That’s where you talk about, you know, “Some of my opponents might say x, but to them, I say y.” So that again, you don’t even have those questions come up afterwards. You’ve already addressed them in the paper. You’re in the

M: It also helps you how to structure how you’re writing it because I find that if you’re reading a piece, and you come to a point where you have an objection, that gets in your head and almost prevents you from continuing to listen, right, as you continue reading the paper. And so in philosophy, I encourage my students to address it at that moment, rather than kind of being like, “Oh, well, I’ll get to it later in the paper.” So they should just know that two pages later that responded to it. Don’t assume that they will make those connections or give you the space to do it if they’ve already shut down by listening, you know, because of an objection from earlier.

G: Just take care of it in the moment. Yeah, that makes sense. So, last question here, and this is kind of a broad one. What advice—what general advice would you have for a student looking to improve their writing in philosophy? And you can have multiple advices.

M: Yeah. I think that when you’re starting out, over-explain everything. You know, the connections that are missing are often ones that seem obvious, but when you actually sit down and think about them, you realize that you don’t have a good reason to think that, so things like, “Oh, well, if we did this, it would lead to violence,” and then they move on. Well, why is that bad? Right? Why is it that that version of violence is necessarily worse? Or how does that reason mean we can’t do the thing? You know, all of those are further questions that we have that seem obvious but are actually important to your argument. And so that would be my first advice is just to explain to the point of absurdity, and then back off of that, because it’s not actually so far that you need to back off of that explaining to absurdity, especially in philosophy as opposed to other disciplines.

G: Yeah, I tend to tell my students, it's a lot harder to go into too much detail than not enough detail, so dump out all the detail, and then if you need to go back and make things a little more concise, you can, but just start out by getting it all out there.

M: Another thing to do is to work from an outline. You know, making an argument is hard. You know, you have something that you believe, but that getting other people to believe it as well. It's hard to not just say a bunch of things you think is important, right? But you want to try to structure it in this way that builds from the foundations up to whatever your conclusion is. So by writing an outline, you can try to do bullet points where you know, "The point I want to prove is breed-specific legislation is bad for dogs," you know, and then then I go, "Okay, well, what types of things do I need to talk about in order to prove that?" You know, euthanasia rates and shelters—I'm going to have to mention that, you know, why would it be good as ordered, you know, and so just by bullet pointing, I can see, "Okay, here's all the big points I'm going to need to get to. Now I can put those as paragraphs, see a way to organize it, and then I will end with a conclusion that hopefully convinces someone to take away their breed restrictions and apartment housing or whatever my point is."

G: I like the idea of being very thorough, exhaustively thorough, because as you said earlier in the interview, it is really easy to assume that your audience already accepts something that you believe or just kind of take for granted that people will of course agree with you on this particular point. But you really need to think from the perspective of that skeptical person in the audience who, you know, they need convincing. They don't automatically agree with what you're saying. So you need to be detailed and specifically spell out for them why they should accept the claims that you're making. Yeah.

M: And on that point, then my second bit of advice would be to try to back off the level of claim you're making, because as soon as you try to make a broad statement, imagine how many data points that would take to prove and to argue it. It would be—it'd be a whole dissertation, you know, to prove something that we think of as common sense. And so really try to restrict the type of thing you're convincing so that it can fit into the number of pages that you have. And oftentimes, that's quite a tiny claim, you know, that will still take a few a few pages to argue.

G: Yeah, I see that a lot. You know, students want to write about these really important topics, but they're very broad, you know, very broad, all-encompassing topics. And you know, the paper is supposed to be four or five double spaced pages, and I say, "You know, you can't begin to scratch the surface of this issue." And the broader the topic is, the more opportunities of attack you have—your opponents have to criticize you, so narrow it down perhaps to a particular demographic that's affected by this issue or a geographical region that's affected by it. But the tighter—the more focused the argument, the more insulated it is against some of those attacks, right?

M: And a good way to do that I think for students is to say the thing you want to argue, right, the big picture one, and then do the thing where you break down bullet points. Probably you can just take one of those bullet points and actually make that your paper because that's going to require enough.

G: Yeah, that's an excellent piece of advice. Good. Well, that is all the questions that we had for this episode. So Dr. Mills, thank you once again for taking the time to speak with us today. So we will have this video interview as well as the written transcription posted to the Writing Center website very soon, and then I will be sending a link out to campus with that. So until next time, thank you, everyone, for your

support of the Writing Across Cottey project and your support of the Cottey College Writing Center.
And I will see you for the next episode of Writing Across Cottey!