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# WRITING IN PHILOSOPHY: REPLY TO FREDERICK

Brian D. Earp



Frederick (2021, see the preceding article) offers a critique of my writing tips aimed at undergraduate students coming to philosophy – and in many cases, essay writing – for the first time (Earp, 2021, in this volume) Frederick claims that most of my tips are good tips but characterizes two of them as bad tips, as follows:

> *Bad tip 1*. Be very careful about making any universal claims (involving words such as 'every', 'never', 'always'). Such a claim can be refuted by just a single counterexample. Do not leave yourself open to such refutation. Make a universal claim only if you are sure that there are no counterexamples.[1]
>
> *Bad tip 2*. Pick a smaller, more narrow thesis and argue for it thoroughly rather than a more ambitious thesis for which you argue less thoroughly.[2]

Frederick argues that following these tips 'will tend to produce a paper that says next to nothing'. By contrast, traditionally – and desirably in Frederick's view – 'philosophers often made bold, ambitious, universal claims to which there were many accepted counterexamples. But they then set out to explain why the counterexamples should be rejected'.

This seemingly contrasting prescription is not, however, inconsistent with the advice I was trying to communicate with my supposedly bad tip(s). The historical anecdotes Frederick shares primarily involve some scientist or philosopher making a universal claim, fully aware that there are many *apparent* or *alleged* counterexamples, but going on

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to show that these are not, in fact, true (that is, valid) counterexamples. Rather, they are merely 'illusions', to adopt Frederick's term. I suppose I might have said, 'Make a universal claim only if you are sure there are no *valid* counterexamples', but I anticipated, I think reasonably, that most readers will have understood what I meant. After all, an apparent counterexample that is not, as it turns out, actually a counterexample . . . is not a counterexample.

Anyway, that wasn't the point. Undergraduate students, who are just beginning to learn how to reason logically, draw clear distinctions, and make assertions they can properly back up, often use qualifiers in a careless manner. For example, as a way of stressing the badness of murder, they might say something like this: 'It is *never* okay to kill someone!' But in many such cases, this is not what they actually think – or is not what they would endorse upon reflection. Rather, if they tried to think through potential counterexamples to their universal claim – here, they might come up with the example of killing an unprovoked attacker as a necessary means of self-defence – they might realize that things are more complicated than they superficially seem. 'Hmm, if it is sometimes okay to kill someone, what ultimately *makes* it okay, and what kinds of cases might best be explained by that deeper principle?' Now they are on their way to doing philosophy. In short, 'avoid making carelessly broad claims that gloss over important distinctions' is not the same thing as saying 'don't attempt to argue for anything bold or surprising'.

Frederick acknowledges that my tips were 'aimed at college students, many of them right out of high school, most of whom had never written a philosophy paper before'. However, Frederick also draws attention to a perfunctory sentence at the end of my abstract, where I say: 'I hope you will find these tips helpful for teaching or writing in philosophy (or any other relevant field or discipline)'. To Frederick, this latter statement suggests that I think even the most seasoned of philosophers should make only very timid arguments, advancing narrow, unambitious theses

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that will ultimately limit the advancement of knowledge. But a minimally charitable reading of what I wrote forbids such an interpretation. For example, I say: 'As you develop as a writer you can sometimes move away from' certain beginner's guidelines I propose (i.e. without compromising philosophical quality).

I also say: 'Almost all of these rules can be broken, to good effect, by sufficiently sophisticated writers.' Moreover, I explicitly state that I am trying to help students with their 'course assignments', and my admonition to pick a relatively narrow thesis in such a context is motivated by the fact that 'giving a strong argument where you fully consider the most plausible competing views and compellingly rule them out [i.e., the very thing Frederick lauds from the history of philosophy] is hard'. I go on to say: 'The bigger the topic or thesis, the less well you will be able to pull this off in a short paper.' It is therefore clear that I am advising against picking a thesis for a short course paper that is so ambitious (or more often, vague) that it can't be reasonably well defended within the space of the assignment. By contrast, the 'bold, ambitious' theses Frederick heralds from philosophers of yore, such as Kant and Parmenides, were defended (I assume) at far greater length than what is typically feasible for a first-year college essay.

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## Notes

[1] What I actually wrote was this:

> Also be *very* careful about using terms like 'always' or never' or 'every' that admit of no exceptions. If you rest your argument on a claim like this that admits of no exceptions, all someone has to do is come up with *one* counterexample and they defeat your whole argument. Don't leave yourself open to such refutation. If you say 'always X' you had better be sure that there are not



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exceptions, and that a softer, more qualified claim won't work to make your argument go through.

[2] What I actually wrote was this: 'Pick a smaller, more narrow thesis or topic (hopefully one that is still interesting or matters in some way!) and argue for it thoroughly, rather than a more ambitious thesis or topic for which you argue less thoroughly.'



## References

Earp, B. D. (2021) 'Some Writing Tips for Philosophy', *Think* 58 (this volume).

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