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# Backwards by Design Project Assessment Write-Up

Michelle Saint

*Western Washington University*

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**Michelle Saint**

### **Backwards by Design Project Assessment Write-Up**

In Fall 2012, I taught Phil 355: Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art. I used this course as an opportunity to test a new pedagogical technique. I will call this pedagogical technique the Incremental Exercises Model (IEM). Below, I will quickly summarize the course and its learning goals. Second, I will explain my previous method of meeting these learning goals. Third, I will explain IEM and how I implemented it in this particular class. Finally, I will provide some concluding observations about the successes and failures of this technique.

As a 300-level philosophy course, Phil 355 is expected to be reading and writing intensive. The skills students are expected to acquire in this course are related to the formulation and evaluation of philosophic arguments. My goal, in teaching Phil 355, is to help students improve their abilities to recognize, formulate, and evaluate arguments.

In the past, my course was structured around two major writing assignments. Students wrote a paper halfway through the term and then a second paper at the end. The goal was for students to use the feedback they received from me on the first paper to improve on the second. A third element of the final grade was related to class participation, generally in the form of short reading quizzes. These were intended to bolster students' motivation to attend class and complete the assigned readings.

Many aspects of this model dissatisfied me. First, there was no mechanism that truly encouraged student improvement. Students received my feedback, yes, but they could easily ignore it. Second, many students, even if eager and motivated to make use of my feedback, simply did not know *how*. There are skills involved in writing, and then there are wholly different skills involved in *improving* one's writing. Without the latter, no student stood a chance of benefitting from my assignments. Finally, I was very dissatisfied by the lack of connection between the three major components to my course: class meetings, reading quizzes, and papers. The class meetings were intended to teach students the material they would examine in the papers, but there was generally a disconnect between the content of class meetings and the work students had to complete to get a good grade. Similarly, the reading quizzes were intended to help students benefit from the class meetings, but often they were too insignificant to serve that purpose in a meaningful way.

These three sources of dissatisfaction lead me, under advisement of Carmen Werder, to adopt IEM. The theory behind IEM is that a skillset needs to be built up slowly, through incremental exercises. A comparison to physical exercise is apt. One does not simply run a marathon without ever having run a yard: in order to achieve great physical feats, one must start slow and exercise regularly. The same is true, when it comes to mental feats: writing a full paper is like running a marathon. So, instead of asking students to write a paper without any preparation, one instead assigns regular exercises intended to encourage the slow improvement of the skills students need to write a good paper. For my class, given its particular learning goals, this involved leading students slowly to recognize, formulate, and evaluate arguments in philosophic texts. The first assignment required students to find the main conclusion in an article. The second required them to find a conclusion in an article, then express clearly the argument used to support it. By the

final assignment, students had to find the main argument in an article, express it clearly, develop an objection to it, and then anticipate a response from the article's author.

My course had 12 assignments total: 11 of these incremental exercises and a final paper. The incremental exercises went up in value as they became more complex. The first was worth 5 points; the last 20 points. The final paper was 40% of the final grade.

Overall, I was incredibly satisfied with IEM. First, I saw marked improvement in my students' work. Given the regular assignments, each of which stretched their abilities just slightly, students had incredible opportunities to improve. Second, it was much easier for me to recognize when individual students were struggling—and it was easier for them, as well. This led to more students seeking help from me outside of class hours when they needed it. Third, the exercises improved class participation. The exercises did what I had previously wanted reading quizzes to do, but far more successfully. Fourth, the students appreciated the exercises. In informal surveys, the entire class said that they found the exercises valuable. Much of the class said they found the exercises to be difficult—but reasonably so. Many of my students encouraged me to continue using IEM in the future. Fifth, IEM made it easier for me to structure class lectures so that they connected immediately to the stated learning goals. The structured nature of the exercises helped me structure the information I wanted students to get during class time. Finally, IEM helped me get to know my students as individuals quite well. This made teaching the course even more rewarding.

A major problem I located in IEM has to do with the increasing difficulty level of the assignments. By design, the easiest assignments are due at the beginning of the term and the hardest, most complex ones are due at the end. However, students are the most pressed for time at the end of the term, and the least at the beginning! This led to some students turning in rushed and shoddy work on the last few assignments, which left all of us dissatisfied. I am not entirely sure how IEM could be modified to eradicate this problem. All the same, I plan to continue using IEM in my upper-division classes.

**Understanding Arguments: Incremental Exercises**  
**Phil 355: Aesthetics / Philosophy of Art/ Michelle Sainte – Fall 2012**

Below are the instructions for individual exercises that were provided to students. An exercise was due roughly once a week. Usually, an exercise revolving around a particular article was due on the first day that we discussed that article in class. However, if an article was particularly difficult, the exercise would be due on the second day that we discussed it.

In the exercises, I often make reference to “standard form” arguments. This is a bit of terminology students were introduced to in class. An argument in standard form looks something like this:

1. Premise
2. Premise
3. Premise

....

Therefore, Conclusion.

Writing an argument in standard form involves reading closely through a text to discover the author’s main point, as well as the reasons provided to support that main point. While the final result of the assignment, the argument in standard form, may look pretty simple and unimpressive, it can be difficult to develop.

Here is an actual example. This is a representation of one argument presented in Ted Cohen’s paper, which was covered by Exercise 2:

1. It is not possible to express/discover the principles behind one’s aesthetic preferences.
  2. If it is not possible to express/discover the principles for one’s aesthetic preferences, then searching for the principles behind one’s aesthetic preferences is pointless.
- Therefore, Searching for the principles behind one’s aesthetic preferences is pointless.

**EXERCISE 1: 5 POINTS**

After reading through Miller’s article, your task is to find his main conclusion. Provide a quote where Miller expresses his main conclusion, and then state his conclusion in your own words.

This exercise should require only 2 or 3 sentences to complete.

**EXERCISE 2: 10 POINTS**

Your task is to find one complete argument in Ted Cohen’s paper, “On Consistency in One’s Personal Aesthetics.” This argument does not have to be Cohen’s own (you can use an argument

he explains but does not endorse), and it does not have to be the main argument in the paper. I suggest finding an argument that appears in a single paragraph.

First, quote the passage the argument is from. (If it's a long passage, just give me enough information so I can easily find it.)

Second, use your own words to state this argument in *standard form*. Provide any definitions necessary for understanding the argument.

### EXERCISE 3: 10 POINTS

Your task is to find one complete argument in Noel Carroll's paper, "Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding." This argument does not have to be Carroll's own (you can use an argument he explains but does not endorse), and it does not have to be the main argument in the paper. I suggest finding an argument that appears in a single paragraph.

First, quote the passage the argument is from. (If it's a long passage, just give me enough information so I can easily find it.)

Second, use your own words to state this argument in *standard form*. Provide any definitions necessary for understanding the argument.

### EXERCISE 4: 15 POINTS

Your task is to find the *main argument* in Gregory Currie's, "Realism of Character and the Value of Fiction."

First, locate Currie's main conclusion. Provide a quote that best expresses this conclusion.

Second, use your own words to state Currie's argument for this conclusion in *standard form*. Provide any definitions necessary for understanding the argument.

### EXERCISE 5: 15 POINTS

Your task is to find the *main argument* in Harold's "The Ethics of Non-Realist Fiction: Morality's Catch-22," available online through the library.

First, locate Harold's main conclusion. Provide a quote that best expresses this conclusion.

Second, use your own words to state Harold's argument for this conclusion in *standard form*. Provide any definitions necessary for understanding the argument.

### EXERCISE 6: 15 POINTS

Your task is to find the *main argument* in Berys Gaut's "The Ethical Criticism of Art" and then critique this argument.

First, locate Gaut's main conclusion. Provide a quote that best expresses this conclusion.

Second, use your own words to state Gaut's argument for this conclusion in *standard form*. Provide any definitions necessary for understanding the argument.

Third, analyze the premises to this argument in order to develop an objection. State which premise may be false and why. (You may develop an objection to the argument's validity, instead of its soundness, but this is often more difficult.)

Keep this in mind, if Gaut's argument looks obviously, unquestionably bad: did Gaut mess up when developing his argument, or did *you* mess up when expressing it?

### EXERCISE 7: 20 POINTS

Your task is to find the main argument in Karen Hanson's "How Bad Can Good Art Be?" and then critique this argument.

First, locate Hanson's main conclusion. Provide a quote that best expresses this conclusion.

Second, use your own words to state Hanson's argument for this conclusion in standard form. Provide any definitions necessary for understanding the argument.

Third, analyze the premises to this argument in order to develop an objection. State which premise may be false and why. (You may develop an objection to the argument's validity, instead of its soundness, but this is often more difficult.)

Fourth, provide a potential response Hanson may give to the objection you have raised.

### EXERCISE 8: 20 POINTS

Your task is to find the *main argument* in Mary Devereaux's "Beauty and Evil: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl's Triumph of the Will" and then critique this argument.

First, locate Devereaux's main conclusion. Provide a quote that best expresses this conclusion.

Second, use your own words to state Devereaux's argument for this conclusion in *standard form*. Provide any definitions necessary for understanding the argument.

Third, analyze the premises to this argument in order to develop an objection. State which premise may be false and why. (You may develop an objection to the argument's validity, instead of its soundness, but this is often more difficult.)

Fourth, provide a potential response Devereaux may give to the objection you have raised.

#### EXERCISE 9: 20 POINTS

Your task is to find the main argument in Lynne Tirrell's "Aesthetic Derogation: Hate Speech, Pornography, and Aesthetic Contexts" and then critique this argument.

Locate Tirrell's main conclusion. Provide a quote that best expresses this conclusion. Use your own words to state Tirrell's argument for this conclusion. Provide any definitions necessary for understanding the argument. Analyze the premises to this argument in order to develop an objection. State which premise may be false and why. (You may develop an objection to the argument's validity, instead of its soundness, but this is often more difficult.) Finally, provide a potential response Tirrell's may give to the objection you have raised.

Unlike in previous exercises, however, do all of the above in paragraph form. In other words, write it as you would if writing a full essay. No introduction or conclusion is necessary. This should not be longer than a page and a half (Times New Roman, double spaced, 12 point font, standard margins).

#### EXERCISE 10: 20 POINTS

Your task is to find the main argument in Mary Devereaux's "Oppressive Texts, Resisting Readers, and the Gendered Spectator" and then critique this argument. This paper is available online through the library.

Locate Devereaux's main conclusion. Provide a quote that best expresses this conclusion. Use your own words to state Devereaux's argument for this conclusion. Provide any definitions necessary for understanding the argument. Analyze the premises to this argument in order to develop an objection. State which premise may be false and why. (You may develop an objection to the argument's validity, instead of its soundness, but this is often more difficult.) Finally, provide a potential response Devereaux's may give to the objection you have raised.

Unlike in previous exercises, however, do all of the above in paragraph form. In other words, write it as you would if writing a full essay. No introduction or conclusion is necessary. This should not be longer than a page and a half (Times New Roman, double spaced, 12 point font, standard margins).