

JUDGING OTHERS: COMPARING STRUCTURED AND UNSTRUCTURED PEER REVIEW EXERCISES

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TWO TYPES OF PEER REVIEW EXERCISES:

(1) *Structured exercises*: Students are provided with a handout that guides them through the peer review process.

(2) *Unstructured exercises*: Students are asked to write comments on whatever aspects of their partner's paper need the most work.

OUR QUESTION:

Which type of exercise provides students with more useful feedback?

METHODOLOGY:

1) Students completed a structured exercise:

PEER REVIEW WORKSHEET – April 8th, 2013
Philosophical Conversations: God, Death, Morality, and the Meaning of Life
Homework: Adam True Bendorf

Reviewer: _____

Author of paper reviewed: _____

I. Before writing any comments, take fifteen minutes to read through and think about the paper. Then in how I want you to use these fifteen minutes:

- Read the paper straight through to get a feel for it.
- Try to look through the paper to mark specific points in the paper. Try to mark the following:
 - The author's thesis.
 - Key points in the paper where you felt things were either particularly smooth or rough.
 - Where the author begins their main argument.
- Think about the author's own experience. Is the line of thought clear? Do you find it persuasive?
- How does the author respond to the issues provided below. To guide your comments, remember that your job is to help the author improve their paper. To do this, you need to make concrete suggestions. Keep in mind that these are just suggestions; the author can choose not to follow them after thinking them through, so you won't come across as bossy or arrogant if you offer thoughtful criticisms of their paper.

1. Does the author provide a thesis? Yes No Unclear (circle one)

2. What is the author's thesis? _____

3. Summarize the paper's overall structure. _____

4. Does the paper's structure fit with the author's descriptions of what he or she was going to argue? If not, explain where it diverges. _____

5. How does the author motivate the issue they're discussing? In other words, how do they try to make their paper more interesting? How could they do a better job? _____

6. Regarding the author's evaluation of the argument that universal moral agreement about some moral principle provides evidence against moral relativism, which aspects of his or her evaluation worked well? _____

7. Does the author criticize or defend the argument? Criticize Defend (circle one)

8. What about his or her evaluation of the argument could be improved, either to make it more persuasive or simply to make this part of the paper more interesting? _____

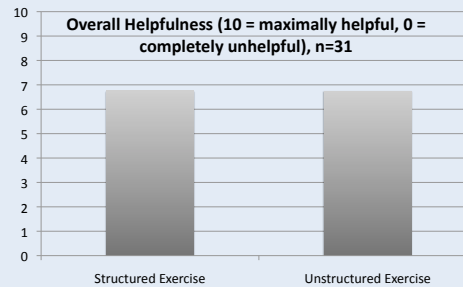
9. Summarize the paper's overall structure. _____

2) Students completed an unstructured exercise:

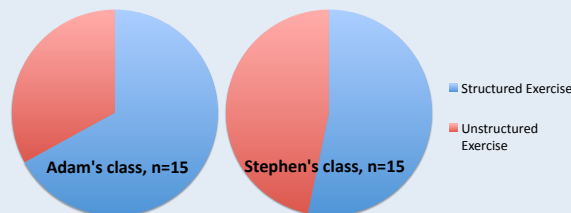
Write one to two pages of comments about your partner's draft. Focus on whatever you think is most important and helpful. This means you can write about, e.g., your partner's sentence-level mechanics, the plausibility of his/her primary arguments, the organization of the draft, or perhaps even the draft's formatting (if this is actually helpful). If the draft is short and primitive, you may also make suggestions about how it should progress and grow. In short, in this exercise, you have complete control over how you review the draft.

3) Students filled out a 16 question survey, which asked students to evaluate each exercise overall as well as along a number of different dimensions.

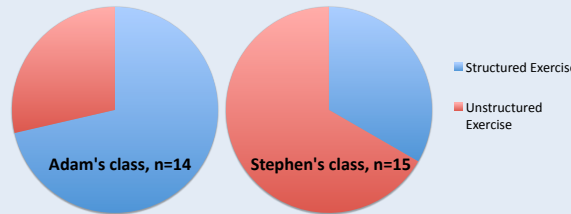
SELECTED COMPARATIVE RESULTS:



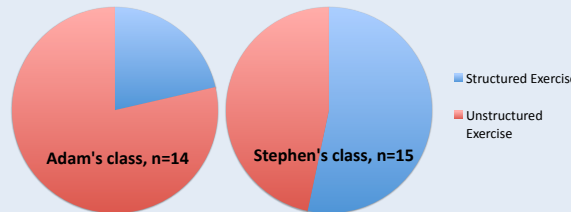
Which exercise provided more useful organizational feedback?



Which exercise provided more useful sentence-level feedback?



Which exercise provided more useful philosophical feedback?



FEEDBACK ABOUT THE STRUCTURED EXERCISE:

Did you find the handout's guidance helpful?

90.3% said "yes." (n=31)

Did you find the handout overly constraining?

29.0% said "yes." (n=31)

FEEDBACK ABOUT THE UNSTRUCTURED EXERCISE:

Did you find it difficult to complete the exercise?

10.0% said "yes." (n=30)

Did you feel like you had *too much* freedom to focus on the topics of your choosing?

20.0% said "yes." (n=30)

CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE DATA:

- Ratings of *overall* helpfulness were nearly identical for each exercise.
- Most students reported that the structured exercise prompted more useful feedback about the organization of their paper.
- But there was little consensus about which exercise provided more useful feedback about sentence-level writing and philosophical content.
- A sizeable percentage of students reported that the structured exercise was *too structured*.
- Nonetheless, students overwhelmingly reported that the guidance provided by the structured exercise's handout was helpful.
- A sizeable percentage of students reported that the unstructured exercise had *too little structure*.
- In light of these results**, it seems to us that both types of peer review exercises have a place in the classroom; neither is clearly preferable to the other.