HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR PAPER BY A JUDICIOUS USE OF FACULTY

During a recent conversation with Brit Brogaard, we noticed that some students may benefit from some coaching on out how to properly use faculty to their advantage when working on a paper. The rules must be adjusted for context. If you are writing a term paper, you need to work with the instructor(s) for that course; ask others to read you paper only if you have your instructor's permission. If you are working with a thesis advisor, consult with your advisor before you send your work to others. If you are working on your own and you are at an advanced stage, feel free to ask different people for feedback. With that in mind, below are some tips that resulted from my conversation with Brit, with extra help from Taffy Ross. Mutatis mutandis, the tips apply to non-philosophy papers:

1. Before you write a paper, make an outline. State your topic and thesis as clearly as possible. An outline may be as short as a paragraph or a few bullet points.

2. Feel free to ask one faculty member for comments on your outline.

3. If you are trying to figure out which of many topics or argumentative lines to pursue, make several outlines and show them to a faculty member.

4. If you get stuck, explain your problem to a faculty member and ask for advice. You may show them an unfinished paper if that's the only way you know to convey the problem.

5. Write an actual paper. Don't ask faculty to comment on your notes or rambling, unstructured writing. How do you know you have a paper? At a minimum, it must begin with an introduction, state a thesis, give an argument, and offer a conclusion.

6. Treat your first draft as a final draft. Before you show your paper to anyone, edit it until you can't stand it. Check spelling and grammar. Format the paper carefully. Check and double-check your sources and make sure you acknowledge them all. Write a complete bibliography. Make sure the quotes are accurate. Make sure your writing is clear and precise. Make sure you understand every term you use. Make sure your argument is sound (by your lights). In short,

make it the best paper you can. It doesn't have to be ready for publication, but it shouldn't distract the reader with errors or omissions that you could have corrected by yourself. Once you've produced the best draft you are capable of, you may show it to one faculty.

7. While you are waiting for feedback, sit back and relax, or more likely, work on something else. Do not make any major changes until you get comments (within a reasonable amount of time). Otherwise, your reader is wasting her time commenting on something that may no longer be part of your paper. If you still have major revisions to make while waiting for feedback, it proves that you asked for feedback too early (see above).

8. If your first reader doesn't seem to get your paper at all, stop asking her for feedback and ask someone else instead.

9. While revising your paper, do not ignore any of the comments. It is frustrating to read a second draft and discover some of the same problems, because the writer has ignored comments on the first draft. Take all comments into account. If you don't understand a comment, ask your reader to clarify it. If you disagree with a comment, discuss it with your reader or incorporate it in the paper and give it a good response.

10. Before you ask more faculty members (besides your first reader) to comment on your paper, wait until your first reader appears to be satisfied with the paper. That is, wait until your draft receives a grade (if it's a term paper) or comments that fail to uncover serious flaws in the paper. Only at this point should you contact other faculty members and ask them to comment on your paper. Otherwise, everyone will be spending their time identifying the same problems, or worse, giving you conflicting suggestions.