

Writing and Education in the *Phaedrus*

There is an interesting passage in the *Phaedrus* where Plato presents arguments that writing is bad. Plato has Socrates suggest that writing is only permissible as a “great amusement” (277e5), whereas writing with serious goals or aspirations deserves only “reproach... For to be unaware of the difference between a dream-image and the reality of what is just and unjust, good and bad, must truly be grounds for reproach” (277d8-e2). That is, Socrates claims that writing is a mere image of real speech, which cannot accomplish the things that speech can. It is ironic that Plato does this, since we know Plato mostly as a writer. I will review two arguments that can be drawn from Socrates’ words, first that writing is inferior to Socratic dialectic, and second that writing undermines the intellect because it makes people forgetful. Interestingly, both arguments reveal that Socrates is really interested in education. I will then suggest a reply to Socrates’ arguments drawn from the example of Plato himself: that these arguments do not apply to at least some writing, namely Plato’s writing. I will conclude by reflecting on this irony.

Socrates’ first argument against writing is about its static nature. Socrates explains that writing, unlike people who speak to each other in person, does not change once it is set down. It “doesn’t know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father’s support” (275e3-5). There are two claims here. First, that writing, unlike a living speaker, cannot choose its audience. Second, that writing cannot stand up for itself in response to criticisms or questions by readers. Socrates compares such writing unfavorably with what he calls “the art of dialectic” (276e5), the Socratic method of questioning and answering:

Comment [M1]: Start specific. You don’t need to give a biography of Socrates or Plato or a history of Athens—unless those facts are relevant to your argument.

Comment [M2]: This is how you cite Plato.

Comment [M3]: This is a technical term. I will describe what it means when I get to it.

Comment [M4]: The rest of the introduction is an outline of the paper. Notice that I get specific: I say a little about how the arguments work.

Comment [M5]: Ideally, the thesis would be a bit more specific. Perhaps something like: “I will argue that even if we accept Socrates’ premises, his conclusion does not follow. I demonstrate this by describing a counterexample: Plato’s own dialogues educate, so it must be false that no writing can educate.”

Comment [M6]: Notice the light signposting.

Comment [M7]: I re-express what is in the quotation in my own words, both to show that I understand it and to make it clear how it is going to fit into my paper.

The dialectician chooses a proper soul and plants and sows within it discourse accompanied by knowledge—discourse capable of helping itself as well as the man who planted it, which... produces a seed from which more discourse grows in the character of others. (276e5–277a2)

Comment [M8]: Notice the block quote for a quotation that takes up four lines or more.

Socrates claims that the person who is skilled in the art of dialectic is superior to writing in the two ways I mentioned earlier. Unlike writing, the dialectician chooses whom to address. Furthermore, because unlike writing she has knowledge, she can be responsive to her interlocutor and thereby transmit her knowledge to her interlocutor. Socrates' concern here, as usual, is with knowledge. Another way to describe the argument is that writing has two features—that it cannot choose its audience, and that it cannot defend itself from new questions or criticism—and that these features make it ineffective for educating its readers.

Comment [M9]: Notice that the argument consists of (1) a conclusion, that writing is bad or that writing does not educate, and (2) reasons. And the reasons are not just restatements of the conclusion.

Socrates' second argument against writing concerns the damaging effects of writing on the mind. He presents his argument in the form of the “Egyptian fable” of Theuth. In this story, the god Theuth invents writing, but is criticized for his invention by the king Thamus. Thamus claims that those who learn to write

Comment [M10]: Light signposting.

will not practice using their memory because they will put their trust in writing, which is external and depends on signs that belong to others... Your invention [writing] will enable them to hear many things without being properly taught, and they will imagine that they have come to know much while for the most part they will know nothing. (275a4-b2)

That is, since people can rely on written words instead of their own memory, they will use their memories less. Instead, people will have the illusion of learning without having improved their minds.

Comment [M11]: Ideally, the reasoning of this argument should be expanded and made more clear. But I don't really have the space... and that is why you should focus on just one argument instead of two or three, like I do here.

So Socrates has argued both that writing is ineffective for education, and that it damages the mind by deceiving people into believing that they have learned when they have not. How, then, does education work? We know something about Plato's views on education from Socrates' claims in the *Phaedrus* and from Plato's *Seventh Letter*, which is written in Plato's own voice. Plato believes that knowledge cannot be transmitted through words, but must come from the effort of the learner. The role of the teacher is not to give knowledge, but to cultivate it like a plant (*Phaedrus* 276e–277a) or a fire (*Seventh Letter* 524). Socrates claims in the *Phaedrus* that someone who is lucky enough to be born a “lover of wisdom” (248d3)—a philosopher—may be guided through the art of dialectic toward knowledge, as long as she also makes her own effort. Speech-making, writing, and other forms of communication that are consumed passively, rather than interactive, give only the impression of learning. In the *Seventh Letter*, Plato says about the most important things, that

it is not possible for [people] to know anything according to my opinions upon the matter; for there is not, and never will be, any composition of mine about them. For a matter of that kind cannot be expressed by words, like other things to be learnt; but by a long intercourse with the subject and living with it a light is kindled of a sudden, as if from a leaping fire, and being engendered in the soul, feeds itself upon itself. (524)

Here Plato endorses the view of education that Socrates describes in the *Phaedrus*, and claims that he himself never wrote down his own opinions precisely because he believes that such writing cannot be used to educate.

I have described two arguments given by Socrates in the *Phaedrus* that writing is bad because it is useless or damaging for education, and reviewed Plato's own views on

Comment [M12]: A little recap for the reader.

Comment [M13]: It would be better if I had citations here.

Comment [M14]: I indicate the name of the work as well as the line numbers because the sentence does not make it clear which work I am referring to.

Comment [M15]: Citations are used here to indicate the source, even though I am not quoting directly.

education. However, a reply to Socrates' arguments is suggested by the example of Plato himself. After all, we know that Plato was both a writer—author of the dialogues—and an educator—founder of the Academy. I suggest that Plato's dialogues serve as models of the art of dialectic itself, and that they can be used to teach the art of dialectic. That is, although the dialogues may not impart wisdom to their readers, they can show readers the path to wisdom. If this is true, then the dialogues are exceptions to Socrates' arguments.

Comment [M16]: More signposting.

Comment [M17]: Here I introduce a premise for my own argument.

Socrates' claims were that writing does not choose its audience, cannot reply to novel questions or objections, and that reliance on writing damages the memory. I shall accept for the sake of argument that all these claims are true. However, these premises do not apply to the action depicted in the dialogues. Plato's dialogues depict a skilled dialectician, Socrates, who interacts with interlocutors. Plato can choose the identity and qualities of Socrates' interlocutors, which allows him to bypass the first worry. His dialectician Socrates can also reply to the individual questions and objections of his interlocutors, and tailor his discussion to their concerns. Finally, since the point of the dialogues is to impart knowledge of a skill rather than knowledge of facts, reliance on the dialogues need not damage the memories of their readers. So while Plato cannot overcome the three worries that Socrates raises, in a dialogue he can represent a situation where they do not apply.

Comment [M18]: Remember that you can either object to the form of an argument or to its premises. Here I accept Socrates' premises, but will deny his conclusion. So I will be objecting to the form of the argument.

Comment [M19]: This is a bit tricky. I accept that Socrates' premises apply to the dialogues as writing, just not to the conversations in the dialogues.

I accepted Socrates' premises, that writing does not choose its audience, cannot reply to its readers, and that it damages the memory. However, I hypothesized that the dialogues aim to teach, by numerous examples, a method that leads to wisdom instead of aiming to transmit wisdom directly. If that is true, I argued, then Socrates' argument is invalid. This is because even if Socrates' premises are true, Socrates' conclusion that writing cannot educate is false. Plato's dialogues themselves can depict the art of

Comment [M20]: This just means that the form is bad.

dialectic so that a student who is a lover of wisdom can learn it. And this should be the case even if we accept Plato's view about the nature of education. After all, even the dialectician hoping to plant a seed of wisdom in her student must rely on the student's own effort. If the dialogues require similar effort on the part of the student, then they are not therefore worse than dialectic as an educational tool so long as they can ignite a love of wisdom.

I began with a puzzle: why is it that Plato, who is known to us as a writer, criticizes writing in one of his own compositions? I reviewed two arguments that Plato puts in the mouth of Socrates, and suggested that Plato's concern about writing is ultimately that it cannot be used in education. Plato's claim, both in the mouth of Socrates in *Phaedrus* and in his own voice in the *Seventh Letter*, is that writing is inferior to the art of dialectic. I then argued that if writing depicted the art of dialectic, as Plato's own dialogues do, then writing could be used to educate. But this just means, ironically, that Plato's own body of work is a counterexample to Socrates' claim that writing cannot educate. One must wonder if Plato also saw Socrates' conclusion as too strong, and left the irony as a clue to his readers about his own goals. Perhaps he wrote *Phaedrus* in order to ignite in his readers a spark of wisdom about how to read and write philosophy.

Comment [M21]: Now in the conclusion, I recap what I've done already in the paper. NOTHING NEW about your argument should appear in your conclusion. The conclusion is just for reminders and maybe a final thought that is in addition to your argument.

Works cited

- Plato. "Phaedrus." Trans. C.D.C. Reeve. In J.M. Cooper (ed.) *The Complete Works of Plato*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997.
- . "Seventh Letter." Trans. George Burges. *Wikisource*. Accessed 13 September, 2012.
<[http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Epistles_\(Plato\)/Seventh_Letter](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Epistles_(Plato)/Seventh_Letter)>

Comment [M22]: Your papers should have a works cited section. For Plato, you should indicate the author (Plato) as well as the translator. Some books also have a separate editor.