

Get it in Writing: Using Politics to Teach Writing and Writing to Teach Politics

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Introduction

Political science professors are often frustrated by the lack of writing ability that their students bring to the classroom and the inadequacy of conventional composition courses in English literature for social science writing tasks. In the last 15 years, many universities and colleges developed programs that foster writing across the curriculum or “in the disciplines” in hopes of addressing such frustrations (Zinser 1988; Monroe 2002). Some political scientists have taken on new roles as writing teachers within these programs. We have designed and taught three semesters of first-year writing seminars focused exclusively on political science material. We are convinced that the content of a political science course is well suited to develop student writing skills. Yet, we also argue that writing is an effective pedagogical technique with which to teach political science.

Using survey responses from our students and our own teaching experiences, we highlight assignments that go beyond conventional academic essays and challenge students to write within given political scenarios from the perspective of political journalists, campaign managers, interest groups, bureaucrats, politicians, and even political scientists. These assignments make the strategic writing choices of various actors and interests explicit, helping the students gain a deep and critical understanding of politics from the perspective of actors and the audiences for which they write.

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We recognize that few if any of our students will become political scientists, yet all students are likely to encounter political writing tasks in their life after college. Our task as teachers of writing and political science is to create assignments that simulate the ways in which ordinary citizens and professionals undertake writing tasks that require a knowledge of politics.

Moving Beyond Essays and Term Papers

Academic essays and term papers are undoubtedly the cornerstone of any writing program. Our most immediate task as teachers of writing is to prepare first-year students to succeed in the type of writing they are most likely to encounter during their college career. We would never eliminate essays and term papers. However, course syllabi that limit themselves to these forms of writing neglect an entire range of assignments that can bring students a deeper understanding of the political subject matter and actually support work on traditional essays and term papers (e.g., Brock and Cameron 1999; Freie 1997). The limitations of conventional writing assignments are well documented, even within political science (Bob 2001; Zeiser 1999). Unfortunately, writing assignments in political science courses are often used simply as devices for evaluating a student’s mastery of the material, as if we as teachers are simply “hunting for errors” in each student’s work (Walvoord 1982; Stanford 1992). We suggest some unconventional and creative writing assignments that place students within a hypothetical political scenario. We use these assignments in conjunction with conventional academic essays and research papers to help our students both master the subject matter and develop their writing skills.

Using Hypothetical Political Scenarios to Teach Writing and Politics

We have designed two courses that utilize hypothetical political scenarios as settings for many of the writing assignments. The first course is a writing

seminar on environmental politics. The second uses presidential primaries as the subject matter.

Environmental Politics

The environmental politics course places students in the midst of a land use controversy in a hypothetical Colorado county. The students receive periodic news releases that gradually develop the scenario as the sophistication of the assignments increases. We use the first assignment on the first day of any course as a diagnostic tool to assess each student’s writing ability. In this case, we ask each student to assume the identity of a resident living in the county (such as a Cub Scout den mother, a priest, or a professor at the state university). They then write letters, in character, about their view on the land use issue from these newly created perspectives to their congressional representative. Students are very comfortable writing in this format, and the creativity of the first assignment helps them loosen up for future projects. We use the subsequent classes to present environmental issues and aspects of the environmental policy process vital to the developing political scenario. The students write short critical essays on one issue at a time throughout the course to master the material. We also conduct student debates throughout the course, which assign each student to a particular side of an issue. Again, this helps to develop student mastery of the relevant material.

Next, a news release provides an open letter from the congressional representative outlining his or her political stance on the issue. Students take the opportunity to ask the congressional representative and other key actors probing questions at a staged press conference. The students write an op-ed piece in support or opposition to the representative’s letter and the press conference. These early assignments set the stage for two more complex assignments.

First, the students, still working within the persona they created, are asked to apply for an EPA Environmental Education Grant, an actual grant awarded to local community groups to

promote awareness of local environmental issues. The students now become community leaders looking to fund an environmental education project of their own design. They read real EPA grant applications, use the EPA grant writing tutorial, and ultimately compose each section of the grant application. When each student has finished a draft application, the students are grouped into EPA evaluating committees to assess and offer feedback on each grant application. Each student is asked to revise and resubmit his or her application.

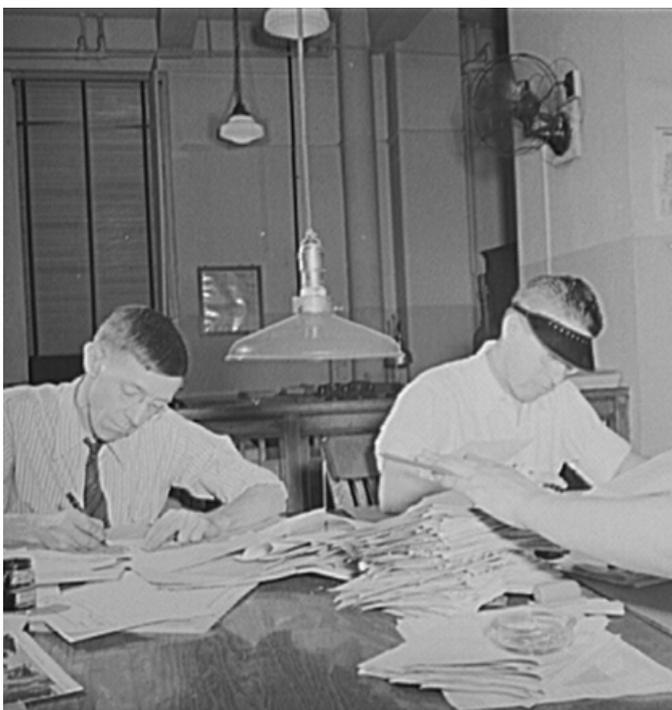
Finally, the capstone project for the course places each student within the Department of Energy (DOE), the agency at the center of the land use issue. The DOE hires each student as a community liaison and demographic expert to report on the environmental justice implications of the developing project. Each student is asked to amass all of the hypothetical information from the course as well as additional census data and details relevant to environmental justice policy in a comprehensive policy memo. Each student must use the memo to make an argument to his or her superior about the correct course of action for the department. As with many policy scenarios, there is no one correct course of action, so the students must carefully apply the information to support their recommendations.

Presidential Primaries

Presidential primaries are a rich communication environment, in which politicians use ads to reach voters, journalists write about the campaign for their various media outlets, and voters are the audience who receive this information. We found that assignments that embrace this communication flow are a valuable method for teaching writing and politics. At the end of the first class, students are introduced to the scenario they will follow during the semester. The story begins in the fall of 2003, a time when students start thinking of future careers. Hoping to get jobs as journalists, they write a short letter to potential editors describing themselves and why they want to become reporters. This assignment both introduces students to the career scenario they will follow throughout the semester and serves as a non-

intimidating diagnostic tool for us to evaluate the quality of their writing.

By the next class, all students are hired by one of two news organizations,



In the Newsroom. Students in the authors' assignment must emulate their *New York Times*' reporting kin, shown here cranking out a story before the deadline. Photo: Library of Congress/Marjory Collins.

either the *National Enquirer* or the *USA Today*'s sports desk. Since much of the course readings are on media, what better choice than to make them journalists? For their first assignment as reporters, they are asked to write a story about two Republican hopefuls from Springfield that dropped from the race: Homer Simpson and Mr. Burns. The students are given some facts about the town and where these candidate stand on issues. We use popular culture characters to lower the information burden, since the assignment is given early in the semester and students' knowledge at this time is quite limited. The second assignment accomplishes several things. First, students learn that news coverage quality and style depend on the news organization employing the reporter. Second, it familiarizes them with two relevant styles of journalism: yellow journalism (*Enquirer*) and horse race coverage (*Sports*), pivotal to understanding modern campaigns.

On the eve of the 2004 New Hampshire primary, and three weeks into primary election readings, the *New York Times*' editor hires our students. Facing a new audience and a more serious editor, they have to imitate the *New York Times*' style and coverage.

This assignment is their first attempt to incorporate not just the information provided by the instructor on that future event, but also the newly acquired knowledge they gained during the first few weeks of the course. Students also have a chance to play their role in a press conference with Al Gore, one of the 2004 candidates, for which they have to prepare questions. This assignment teaches students objectivity and detachment and gives them a taste of critical reading, as they experience peer reviewing for the first time (students served as their colleagues' editors).

The students are fired by the *Times* (by this time we have finished the media topics and are moving to candidates and campaigns) and then hired as media consultants for John Kerry. The assignment is to write Kerry a new 30-second radio ad. This assignment, though small, encourages students to focus the information they want to convey into a straightforward and powerful thesis statement. It also gives them a sense of the conventions and constraints consult-

ants face. This is the students' first attempt at pushing an argument.

Following a terrible loss at Super Tuesday, Senator Kerry is out of the race and our students are unemployed. But there is hope in academia. Eight weeks into the semester students have a sense of what good academic writing in the fields of political science and communication is all about, and are ready to do some writing themselves. To get a job in the Cornell Government Department they are required to write an academic essay on the role that media and public opinion play in primary elections. This essay asks them to apply their newly acquired knowledge in this area to construct a convincing argument using evidence, examples, and academic works. Together with their last assignment, a research paper using original data to be submitted to *APSR* (their tenure is coming up shortly), we finally move to more conventional academic essays.

These assignments in environmental politics and presidential primaries make the strategic writing choices of various actors and interests explicit, helping the students to gain a deep and critical understanding of politics. This understanding, from the perspective of various actors and the audiences for which

they write, not only provides them with insight on the role various actors play, but also introduces them to various writing styles, audiences, voices, and degrees of objectivity and evidence they are likely to encounter and are expected to perform in their academic studies. And since they learn these various perspectives, they will be better prepared to write across disciplines, in the sad event that they decide not to become political scientists.

Findings and Student Feedback

Overall, the assignments made students better writers and gave them a deeper understanding of political actors and institutions. One hundred percent of students surveyed in both courses believed the assignments were good, or very good tools to help them understand the subject matter.¹ In their comments students repeatedly said that they liked the fact that the essays gave them a real sense of what various political actors do and how they fulfill their roles. As one student remarked, “each of these types of assignments [newspaper articles, ads, and papers] taught me something different about the nature of primaries that I would have otherwise overlooked.”

Moreover, by asking the students to write within various political roles, such as those of a reporter, policy expert, and community activist, students were pushed to perform some of the actions that various political actors undertake. “The

assignment on political ads,” wrote one student, “gave me an opportunity to actually produce an ad and to consider what information candidates want to convey to voters within a 30-second time limit. It allows you to think like a political campaign strategist.” Seventy-eight percent found the assignments to be good or very good devices to teach politics.



The Write Stuff. The instructors use plausible political situations to engage their students and to improve their writing skills. Photo: istockphoto.com/Kenneth Zirkel.

The comments on open-ended questions suggest that students welcomed the shift from conventional papers to these “hands-on” assignments, which they view as a close approximation of real politics. “The assignments were what you might actually be asked to do in the real world and the work just seemed more useful, and thus, more rewarding,”

wrote one student. Their comments demonstrate that, in general, students recognize the pedagogical value of the assignments and see them as more than as an evaluative hurdle they must leap before the semester ends.

Last, the political scenarios generated much enthusiasm and creativity, something that should not be taken lightly.

Students “didn’t have to write the usual essay on a reading over and over again . . . these types of assignments are fun.” In fact the word “fun” appeared on many of our students’ remarks, even though our syllabi were seen as daunting relative to the other writing seminars. One student commented, “I wrote more [in this course than in a previous one], probably 30 pages more; and drafts upon drafts, and yet I still enjoyed 90% of my time spent on the projects because they allowed for creative thought and imagination.” If these responses are any indication, we may have even converted some of them into political science majors (we hope they’ll forgive us one day).

The students exposed to our political scenario assignments emerged as excellent writers and knowledgeable political observers. These students gained direct insight to the political process by immersing themselves in it, even if for just one semester. Political science is not merely about political content, it is about the effective communication of this content. We are only as good as we write. Therefore we should see ourselves as instructors of both politics *and* writing.

Notes

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1. Students were surveyed either before or immediately after the end of the semester. The response rate was 55% (27 out of 49 students).

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