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.

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.

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 be the center of the land use activity and detachment and to provide not just the information they want to convey into a straightforward and powerful thesis statement. It also gives them a sense of the conventions and constraints consultants 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 students think about 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 consultants face. This is the students’ first attempt at pushing an argument.

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).

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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. 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 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.”

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

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**Notes**

*This project is a truly cooperative effort, and the authors share equally in any credit or criticisms generated by the results of this project. We recognize the John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines at Cornell University for its support in the development of these courses.*

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

**References**


