
An Interview with Michelle Fistek

Mary-Lou Hinman

Following the recommendation of one of my colleagues on the Writing Task Force, I interviewed Michelle Fistek. During the last week of classes, we met to talk about her experiences with writing assignments in her political science classes. As I settled into the wicker chair in her office, she rifled through her files of course syllabi, pulling out sample assignments. "Writing is a big concern for me," she began. "I try to come up with assignments a bit different so students can't buy papers off a list. Unfortunately, too many people just tell their students, 'Write a paper.'" She closed the file drawer, and we settled down to the interview.

What kinds of writing assignments have you found successful?

Any assignment where my expectations are clear to the students. Assignments where the students have to figure out what I want don't work very well. Recently in my Political Parties and Interest Groups course, I decided to have students create their own theses for their essays. I discovered most couldn't write a legitimate thesis even though I had described the process at least twenty times in class. Many of them ended up scribbling down something the last minute in class, and in spite of individual conferences with me about their papers, I still got "reports" from many. Another time, I will restructure that paper assignment. Students need a lot more direction when the paper is assigned.

But back to your question, I have found that short papers seem to work relatively well, especially if I am asking students to argue a point or give opinions and back them up with evidence. These shorter papers are much more effective than having students write a “term paper.” In fact, I rarely give the kind of assignments where students write term papers or open-ended reports.

One successful assignment I use in my Presidency class asks students to pick a foreign country and compare the powers of the chief executive in that country to those of the chief executive in the United States. At the beginning of the term, students make their choices of country and write for information. I am very specific about the materials they should request. For example, they might ask for the constitution or information they can’t find doing library research. I try to encourage creativity in research. I get tired of seeing the same three books listed in every source list. Besides, material in books is always dated by the time it is published. For that reason, I also encourage the use of periodicals, journals, and other resources—something I wish my professors had done for me.

Do you use other kinds of writing assignments besides essays or research papers?

I use journals now with the interns I supervise. I have them keep a log of their activities so I can see what they’ve been doing. I tell them to think back to their classes and apply what they’ve learned—to see if it works in the real world.

I also used a journal successfully in one of my courses. I had students critique every reading they did for class as we went along. They read about fifty different chapters and articles. I had to make myself collect the journals periodically so the students wouldn’t sit down and do the entries all at once. It was a horrendous amount of work for me, but I found that classroom discussion was much better. I would love to do more of this kind of writing, but my classes are so huge right now that

the process is unmanageable. (I can't just assign things and not read them. I want students to know that whatever they write, I consider.)

I have also used workbooks with success in my Public Administration class. Because the workbook includes different real techniques of management such as cost/benefit analysis or budget formation, I like that experience for my students. The workbook has them gather information, respond to a problem, and evaluate the problem and their responses. I encourage them to develop their responses, to write more than a sentence or two.

When you responded to the Writing Across the Curriculum Questionnaire last spring, you reported negative results from some of the exercises we promote—for instance, freewriting and multiple drafts of essays. What went wrong?

Some of these techniques I tried with my Introduction to the Academic Community classes, and I think that was part of the problem. The students weren't committed to the classes. However, if I structured the exercise very carefully, it worked well. One of the best "brainstorming" activities happened when I personalized the problem. I told my class that I had a good friend who was an alcoholic, but who would not acknowledge his problem. I asked them what I could do. The students were incredible. They brainstormed about possible approaches I might take with my imaginary friend and made wonderful suggestions.

Was that because they perceived it as a real problem?

Yes.

But in general you are uncomfortable with freewriting and brainstorming?

These techniques were never used by my teachers, so I guess I'm not as comfortable with them. I'm not always sure what I should ask students

to write about. Then, too, if students haven't done the reading, they don't have anything to write. I can see that freewriting could be a good way to have students get their thoughts together about the reading they've just done.

What about your negative response to multiple drafts of papers?

I have never been able to get more than the barest effort from students when I've assigned multiple drafts. I asked for a first draft at one point, and all I got were their notes. (And this was after explaining what I wanted.) I've tried having students submit outlines, but I haven't received much of anything.

One of the problems I have is time. In many of my assignments I ask students to synthesize materials and ideas we are covering in class. It is hard to give them the material they need early enough in the term to allow me to read drafts of essays and get them back to my students in time for serious revision.

Do you offer them a chance to revise essays for a better grade?

Yes. Especially with any short assignments, I tell my students if they are not happy with the grade, they can try again. In my American Government class I assign only one short essay. The assignment asks students to pick a political columnist and tell me whether they agree or disagree with the person's opinion. But at this level, students make mistakes. Once in a while they choose editorials rather than political columns (even when we have discussed the difference in class). Sometimes they just summarize. Allowing them to revise for a better grade helps them to learn how to do the assignment. In my comments on their papers, I ask them questions to help them revise and create a better essay.

Do the papers improve?

Yes.

So in a way that's another approach to having students write drafts?

Yes.

Have you ever shown your students sample essays, especially good papers?

I did in the United States History class I taught last semester. The students worked in a "Taking Sides" book. They were assigned papers on several of the issues presented in the book. The first set of these essays was pretty dismal, so I picked several of the "A" papers and had them duplicated for the students. It helped some of them, but it scared many others. Their response was, "I'll never be able to do anything this good." It can have a backlash effect—especially for first year students who do not have the sophistication or background of some of their peers.

Do you assign more or less writing now than you did a few years ago?

It varies from class to class. In American Government I used to give all essay exams, but I don't anymore. I have too many students to make that practical. In the upper division classes, however, I assign quite a bit of writing. None of my upper-level courses is a W-course, but I probably could get a "W" designation for most of them. Students in those classes do a lot of writing for me.

To summarize, you have already said that a good writing assignment should be structured, creative, and specific. For you, are there any other components to good writing assignments?

We need to write more complete instructions, to be as clear as possible when we assign writing. When I write out a whole page of instructions as I did for my Congress class (see below), the work I receive is much better than if I just do a short bit on it, even if I talk further about the

assignment in class. At the same time, talking about the assignment gives students a chance to ask questions.

Another procedure I've used with success in a couple of classes is to have students present the work they've done. If they have to present, they are forced to do a better job at writing and structuring their work because they're not just throwing it under my door at the last second and forgetting it ever existed. As I recall my own experience in college, many of my writing assignments were done at the last minute.

I used presentations in my Public Policy Analysis class. Even though the presentations took time, some of the work students did in the class was incredibly good. One of my students, a fireman, wanted the state to pass a bill establishing a Fire Academy like the Police Academy. He wrote a paper on the topic for me last fall and ended up using much of the paper this month to testify to the State House and Senate on that bill. He was so excited about it.

The more links I can create like that, the better. I really do try to assign papers that students will learn from and are interested in—not “Here’s a list of topics; pick one.” Instead I like to ask, “What are your interest areas?”

Also, when students present in class, they pretend we are the House or Senate hearing the presentation. I try to get them to think about who will be listening to material like this.

So you are creating a “real” audience for their work?

Right. Many times when we ask students to write, they don't see any relevance to anything else. We need to create that relevance in our assignments.

SAMPLE ASSIGNMENT

The Congress
POLI 359.01

PAPER

Your paper should be 8-10 pages, typed and double-spaced.

You are a Member of Congress (pick a chamber). You have a pet project or issue and are going to submit it to your chamber in the form of a bill which you are sponsoring. The bill is to be your own, not a copy of a real bill.

In your paper, you will describe how you will guide your bill through your chamber. What is your strategy? How will you obtain support for this bill? How will the major internal and external actors react to your bill? (committee chairs, party leaders, lobbyists, the president, media, etc.) What committee does your bill go to? Assume that your bill makes it through committee. How will your opponents attempt to foil your efforts? Will you make any compromises? Does your bill pass?

Does your bill go to a conference committee? What happens next? (Assume that your bill has been introduced in the other chamber and has been accepted—or team up with another class member, each taking the bill through one chamber, then together dealing with the conference committee.)

You **MUST** use **ACTUAL** congressional committees and the actual committee members and real lobby groups—don't make them up. Find out how the significant actors in your chamber have voted on issues like yours in the past.

Your issue must be approved by me on or before February 28. Give me a brief description of your bill.

Papers are due no later than 5 pm on Friday, April 28.

You may start with a bit of research about your issue, but I am most interested in your recounting of how Congress deals with your bill.

The following sources should be of great help to you:

Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report

Congressional Quarterly Almanac

Other CQ publications

The DANCE of LEGISLATION - Eric Redman

CONGRESSIONAL ODYSSEY - T.R. Reid

Congressional Staff Directory

Your Member of Congress