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Writing Assignments in World Politics Courses

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Walking out of Rounds Hall with me after class, Benny, a sophomore in one of my international relations courses, asked for, and received, some pointers on the required paper. “You’ve just told me to write exactly as I’ve been taught not to write,” said he.

“And who, pray tell, taught you?” asked I.

He gave an over-the-shoulder nod across the street, toward Ellen Reed House—the English Department.

“Hmmm. . . fine—I’m not surprised to hear they tell you something different,” I told him. “The English profs teach you to write in a generic way, say, fiction, or generically expository stuff. I want you to write a social science paper.”

With some “Hmmm-ing” of his own, Benny shuffled off, wearing a mildly annoyed and not altogether convinced frown. How dare they teach different ways to write in different departments at the same college!

Benny did make an effort to heed my suggestions, but it took persistence. For example, the introduction to his first draft, in-

cluded a vague statement like: “Conflict between Arabs and Black Africans in the Sudan is a serious problem and should be examined in greater detail. . . including its history, causes, and future.” The purpose statement I eventually settled for read more like this: “This paper will examine social, economic, and political aspects of the Sudanese civil war. The geography and history of the conflict will be briefly reviewed, followed by discussion of population characteristics, agricultural and commercial organization of the country. Political outcomes of these circumstances will be analyzed, with special attention to the impact of Marxist ideology and the Islamic faith.”

Such experiences have taught me that many students find the requirements for a social science paper substantially divergent from other writing instruction and assignments. They learn of the need to adjust their writing style to the demands of a given discipline. This article will describe and explain typical writing assignments for courses related to world politics, with emphasis on apparent differences from other forms of writing. I will deal with assignment objectives, choice of topics, purpose statements, organization, sources, the normative aspects, and some typical problems.

Assignment Objectives

One of the college-wide assumptions of liberal arts education is that our students acquire or improve their skills in written expression. Thus we shall deal only with objectives that may take on a different orientation in social science writing. Generic writing-skill values aside, three themes bear mention here: motivation, knowledge of sources, and relationships among various social science concepts.

One assignment serves partly to motivate. Required early in the

introductory course, it is designed to lead Benny, preferably as a freshman, to think of politics as something directly affecting his life. This essay asks Benny to relate a problem of world politics to his personal circumstances (e.g., to his family, lifestyle, or personal values). The idea is that writing what amounts to a quasi-personal letter to the instructor may help Benny deal with common inhibitions about what is for him and many others a daunting and even threatening subject. At the same time, depending on variations in high school experience, this is for some students the first attempt to write about political reality.

The assignment is to discuss changing notions of patriotism with various generations in the family. Like others, Benny reported that he never had a serious talk with Grandpa, or even with Dad, about “the war,” and results of such talks are sometimes startling. For example, by demonstrating a sincere and serious interest in the senior’s experience, after encountering resistance to discussions of war or patriotism, he may finally have begun a closer relationship.

Another occasional essay assignment leads the student to learn new and different usage of terms and related concepts. “State” and “nation” are routinely misused in popular American discourse, and specific new meanings and usages for these are difficult for some to conceptualize.

Other assignments are designed to acquaint students with specific sources of information, such as the *New York Times Index* and *New York Times Microfilm*, the *U.S. Department of State Bulletin*, the *UN Monthly Chronicle*, and the *Congressional Digest*. Increased skill in using specialized sources is a significant objective of political science courses. Regrettably, so far the technological revolution works against that. All too often students go to the computerized index relevant to the subject, punch in one or two key words from the assignment sheet, and in some cases end up with a bibliography identical with those of dozens of others in the

class. The hope is that directing students to other specific sources will compensate for this.

Typically, in a foreign policy course, the assignments are designed to force the student away from commonly used abstract generalizations (e.g., “U.S. economic assistance should be given only to democracies”). These are avoided by using concrete and specific questions (“As an intern for Senator Jones, you’ve been told to write a position paper for the senator on a bill to provide U.S. economic assistance to Guatemala. You are to consider constituent politics as well as foreign policy substance. How should the senator vote on the bill, and why?”)

The traditional full-length term-paper assignments occur in upper level “area studies” courses on the politics of Africa, Latin America, or the Middle East. Here the main objective is to improve understanding of how various political forces and movements interact. An acceptable comparative topic would be “How Islamic revolution affects the drive toward modernization in two specific countries.”

The expectation and hope is that the student’s interest in the subject will be stimulated, that familiarity with professional sources of information (e.g., regionally oriented journals) will be increased, that evaluation of relative credibility of sources will be practiced, that concepts and analytic approaches taught in text and class will be applied to different data, and that personal values will be engaged, and even committed, in statements of policy preference. (Example: “In region Y of country X, preservation of an indigenous culture may be a greater human rights value than modernization because. . .”)

Often I find that developing an appropriate topic, scouting the general availability of adequate sources for that topic, and stating the topic clearly, are the most difficult—indeed sometimes agoniz-

ing—steps for students. This stage typically calls for the most intense interaction with me, which is not to say that it always happens. It is often difficult to get students to realize that this interaction is a crucial step in producing the paper.

Formal Requirements

For traditional term papers, I require an outline and at least a first draft. Both of these receive a grade that counts as a quiz, and definitely bears no relationship to the grade assigned to the paper in final form. What is being evaluated is the process of planning and drafting a paper, not the paper itself.

The three points for which I mostly check both outline and draft are 1) appropriate choice of subject; 2) sufficiently explicit and clearly defined purpose statement, hypothesis, or question to be answered by the paper; 3) sufficiently organized structure of the body of the paper.

Topic assignments almost invariably call for the application of some sort of theory to a specific set of “real-world” data. That’s what social science is about. Getting typical American students to deal with theory beyond the most facile generalizations (“democracy si, communism no”) is a painful process.

As I’ve already indicated, the purpose statement tends to be a major stumbling block. Often this is symptomatic of student failure to focus sufficiently on a clearly defined problem. This is perhaps the main reason for insisting that the purpose statement be elaborated in substantial detail. This is also a general perception that the title of the paper can adequately take care of that. I often urge students to formulate an actual question that the paper will finally answer in a head-on fashion—preferably not one that can be answered simply yes or no. Of course, testing a hypothesis as true or false does just that, but it should present many if’s and but’s and gray areas whose pro or con evidence is discussed.

One line of reasoning I like to give students for carefully delineating a research question goes like this: Here's one option. With the question you have now, go to the library and collect everything that seems to vaguely relate to it until you have enough to fill "n" pages—the length of the paper suggested in the assignment instructions. Simply fill 15 pages to satisfy grouchy old Schlesinger. The other option is this: if you have a definite question to answer, the things you find in your research will either help answer it or not, and the length of the paper will derive to a large extent from that. In the end you'll have the true satisfaction of having answered the question, rather than just having filled pages. One of my favorite graduate school profs defined explanation, I remind them, as "when the mind comes to rest."

The purpose statement should be followed by an equally explicit preview of the organization of the paper, i.e., how the reader will be taken from point A to point Z. Like good speakers, the paper should tell the reader where (e.g., what assumptions or historical takeoff lines) it "comes from," how it proposes to proceed onward, and where it expects to end up. Suspense and surprise are great in other kinds of writing, but have, as a general rule, no place in a social science paper. A typical exception might be some especially startling evidence.

Students preparing more advanced and comprehensive papers are urged to attempt some overview and discussion of the existing literature on their subject. This should lead rather naturally to an explanation of the student's particular choice of sources for the paper at hand and can, in some cases, be supplemented by a requirement that the bibliography be annotated.

An obvious follow-up for the structural preview is the use of sub-headings. These help the student-author to stay organized as much as they do the reader. For students who have the least experience with formal papers and whose mind is again set on

writing in a more story-telling, rather than analytic style, this suggestion seems at times downright offensive. Why do you want to break up my beautifully flowing prose with your painfully obvious signposts? I like to be subtle, to make my reader feel and think. Sorry, Benny. There should be absolutely no doubt where the reader is at any given point in following your thoughts.

And as for the feeling, believe it or not, we do very much encourage it, but not by vagueness about the flow of the argument. Rather, the feelings should be engaged by clearly identifying the values implicit in specific choices of data, or problem formulations, and preferences adopted to resolve doubts. Once values are clarified, personal choices are strongly encouraged. The instructions typically contain statements such as “A good paper will contain some part of yourself, or your own personality; it will reflect and clearly convey to the reader your position on the values at issues.”

The question of values often arises with the choice of evidence. It is sometimes mistakenly assumed that social science instructors require “balanced” middle-of-the-road papers which end up lukewarm. This arises from confusion between presentation of evidence, its evaluation, and implied policy choices. Social science does indeed require that the selection of evidence avoid *a priori* bias; it requires that a representative sample of evidence be presented and that evidence on all sides of the issue be discussed. And, contrary to what is unfortunately taught by debating and reinforced by American law, there are invariably more than two. The value choices associated with “feelings” should emerge in the interpretation of the evidence and most of all in the evaluation of policies that inevitably derive from these.

Some Taboos:

- When assigned comparison of “X” policy in countries A and B, a frequent result is what I call the tandem comparison. Eight pages

of country A, eight pages of country B, and a page and a half of “comparison.” Comparison should be conceptually organized.

- Usually, but not always, I urge avoidance of the sexiest subject of the day. A current example is terrorism. Despite the obvious motivation that comes from current relevance, the beginner’s learning in social science benefits from a certain amount of distance. When one is nearly overwhelmed by the daily headlines, and by the liberties which the press takes with concepts and terms, that distance is reduced to zero. However, if the assignments lead students to dull topics, eventually there is retribution: once, when a professor moaned about the dull pile of student papers he had to read, a colleague replied, “You must make dull assignments.”

- “Sending away” for material is a scourge. I suspect students learn this from some teachers in K-12 who tend to abuse the public relations resources of government, corporations, foreign embassies, and international organizations by having their classes write them for brochures and press releases. This rarely produces anything that couldn’t have been found in the school library, except that the illustrations can be used in cut and paste fashion. For college papers the practice usually results in late papers and is detrimental to serious research and thoughtful analysis. Most of those who distribute a lot of material have big public relations axes to grind. I don’t know where some of this nonsense (and surely the related plague of cut-and-paste as “learning”) originates, but it’s not my idea of education.

Evaluation and Conclusion

Social science writing assignments consist of a few rules:

1. Careful choice of topic.
2. Explicit and detailed statement of the problem being addressed.
3. Fully discernible structure and organization of the material.
4. Linkage of social science abstraction and generalizations to

“data”—concrete historical events—as well as personal experience and values.

5. Proper use and evaluation of appropriate sources.

While I know what I try to teach, I clearly have no better way than anyone else of determining exactly what or how much of that students learn from formal social science paper assignments. At the lowest, most direct level, it may be the instrumental value of familiarity with the kind of papers that will be demanded of them in graduate school. We all have the occasional good fortune of observing that a senior’s paper is much better than earlier work. Yet the cause for that improvement may lie in anything from daily flossing to the regular Thursday night partying.

Thus the nagging final question remains how to measure what and how much my writing assignments achieve? Guess you’d better ask Benny... perhaps after his first few months of grad school, or some time on a job where he must prepare and present reports.



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Revisiting “Writing Assignments in World Politics Courses”

In revisiting the piece, one question I asked myself was whether it addressed the problem of conventionalism, of mere form vs. good writing. My conclusion was affirmative, because I made it clear at the end of the article that I saw my teaching objective at least partly in training the student to become a successful graduate student, i.e. equipping the student to “do” social science,

perhaps eventually to get published in social science. At the entry level that means learning to wield the basic tools of the craft, to know and abide by the accepted conventions. For anyone to make up for the lack of that with creativity and originality, to sidestep that as a beginner, would require powerful content at true genius level.

Next, I asked what changes have occurred? Has the passage of time made a difference? And indeed, major change did occur in the research environment with the advent of the World Wide Web. In the original article I groused about:

1) students occasionally wanting to send away for information;

2) the superficial and uniform results produced by the apparent convenience of searching in computerized indexes on CD data bases in the college library, rather than conventional indices.

Regarding point 1), to the extent that high schools are acquiring computers and access to the World Wide Web, it is hard to imagine high school teachers nowadays encouraging them to send away for information. Instead, I imagine they're being encouraged to obtain information on the Web, and that can produce extremely diverse results, dependent as greatly on imagination and intellectual acuity as working with traditional materials.

Having retired at the end of 1994, I've not experienced the results of work along these lines, but have extensively "surfed" information resources on the Web and created a research-oriented Web site. The richness of sources "out there" is beyond belief. It evokes the metaphor of a true universe.

For example, there are a substantial number of different search engines available and well known on the Web. Just depending on which of these one uses, not to mention, of course, what keyword formulations and combinations one searches, and which leads and

threads one then pursues, the results will vary infinitely.

Thus I would guess that if college students today are encouraged to do their research on the Web, the outcomes may well be enhanced. Among other things, some academic journals and major newspapers and magazines have on-line editions that are searchable. In any case, the dreary uniformity that came from the near-monopoly (among electronic media) of a few CD's can now be avoided provided students are counseled in this respect.

My main thrust would be to have students understand how to use Web searching to obtain ideas that would lead to more interesting choices among conventional hard copy sources. To enhance and better focus their reading rather than replace it.

Shortly after its publication, I had selected advanced course students read "Writing Assignments in World Politics Courses" occasionally as a way to reinforce the importance of carefully formulating research question, outlining, and using headings. This was quite helpful in one or two instances. My harping on these things apparently no longer struck them as merely picky harping ... being difficult... once they saw that it had been put in print. The old "magic" of believing what one reads still persists to some degree.

A bizarre thought occurs: What would a video on writing papers, prepared by the instructor, do? Might we have more credibility coming out of the VCR onto the screen, than in the classroom or face-to-face in the office?

Finally, I asked two professional colleagues to review "Writing Assignments in World Politics Courses" and comment. A relatively young colleague found the article failing to maintain the same order of items in preview statements as in later discussing

them. I introduce them in one order, then discuss them in another. She turned out to be dead-right on this.

As a member of my discipline, this colleague also wished I had been more precise in delineating specific objectives, techniques, and types of analysis. This raises the question of audience for the piece and its level of analysis and technical depth. She also correctly points to the problem of explaining the conceptual, rather than geographical or chronological organization, in comparative analysis.

Overall, she agreed with the basic point of teaching social science writing in a different way, and with the emphasis on planning and drafting papers, stating that the article “forced me to think more seriously about how to improve my writing assignments and evaluation of world politics papers.”

Another quite experienced colleague at the state university found the article useful, agreeing “totally with the point that our writing requirements are totally different than those ‘taught’ in English 101.” He related that in his introductory courses he must engage in complete “hand-holding,” assigning a highly pre-structured paper, guiding the students through every single step in a prescribed format, and penalizing for deviation. He says that he’s “gotten good results for being a bastard on detail.”

That sounds very much like my own experience and like some of what I had tried to convey in the piece.