

December, 1995 – Eugene J. Cornacchia, Political Science

Faculty often look for ways to increase the amount of writing in their courses without overburdening either themselves or their students. The following practical suggestions, none particularly new or innovative, are nonetheless useful for including more writing in undergraduate courses. I have successfully used these assignments for several years, and they are generally well received by students. All of these assignments may be easily adapted to any particular course or subject matter.

The underlying theory in my approach is that students are better able to cope with writing when the assignments are briefer and varied, though more frequent. Furthermore, it may be more productive to focus on what students are saying rather than on how they say it (MacAllister, 1982; Sommers, 1982). Adopting such an approach is not to advocate grammatical anarchy. Rather, it recognizes that good, grammatically correct, effective writing must be taught to college students in a manner that is sensitive to their prior experiences and capabilities.

Journals/Scrapbooks

A journal is much like a diary (Fulwiler, 1987). In it, students record their thoughts, observations, and feelings about the political world or specific course material. Students may be asked to write about questions or problems they discover in their readings and relevant current events, or they may be asked to write about questions raised in class. The instructor can pose a specific question, or students may be permitted to write about anything they choose so long as it is related in some way to the course. A recent variation I have employed is the “journal/scrapbook” in which students include articles from magazines and newspapers that relate to the course and then respond to those articles in their journals.

The number of journal entries may be varied to suit any particular course requirement, and entries could be required daily or several times per week. Assignments may be completed entirely outside of class, or a few minutes of a class may be set aside for journal writing. Experience proves that loose-leaf notebooks are best because they aid in the periodic and unannounced collection and review of journal entries. Students should therefore bring their journals to each class.

Précis

The précis is a summary or abstract; there, students report on an outside reading (Barry, 1984). Restricting the précis to exactly thirty words forces students to be focused and succinct in their analysis. Because students are examining an outside reading, they are also coping with an overtly scholarly activity, and the format allows them to develop skills useful for doing the formal term papers they will eventually confront. It may be useful to give students a sample précis as a guide.

The primary concern here is accurate summary; composition, grammar, and punctuation are not overt concerns of mine. However, it becomes obvious to students rather quickly that to do the assignment well in precisely thirty words requires much composing! Thus, students learn to care about how they write and must necessarily write and rewrite their précis to pare their words to the required number.

Memoranda

The memorandum allows students to think and write more formally about an issue and to engage in role-playing. Recently, for example, my introductory class examined the decision by President Clinton to send U.S. troops to Haiti. At the end of class, I distributed an assignment in which each student assumed the role of the President's national security advisor. The assignment required students to furnish the President with a detailed memorandum that: 1) reviewed the rationale for the policy; (2) reassessed the decision considering recent intelligence that renewed chaos is likely over the transition in leadership; (3) reviewed alternative options for achieving our national goals; (4) discussed the potential consequences of those options; and (5) recommended a course of action.

Students were free to consult outside sources and to use peer review. Memos could not exceed 5 pages (typed, double-spaced). Of course, the specific issue/role can be varied to fit any particular concern or focus of the course instructor. Such assignments require students to analyze and synthesize concepts discussed in class and apply them to concrete events of contemporary significance.

I have also used "issue position essays," and "candidate or leader profiles." Issue position essays require students to write persuasively (pro/con) about topics of contemporary concern. These essays help increase student interest and generate discussion, and also encourage students to make connections between some of the concepts examined in class and contemporary issues. Candidate and leader "profiles" require students to write a brief biography/profile of a candidate or political official, outlining his or her background, issue positions, sources of political and financial support, etc. This may also be used to understand better leaders in various other institutions such as business corporations and non-profits.

Conclusion

Writing can be an excellent device through which we can teach students substantive course material. Using some of the assignments outlined above, the quantity, and ultimately the quality, of writing in undergraduate courses may be increased without overburdening students and faculty alike. Furthermore, these strategies allow instructors to create a new measure of enthusiasm for writing and learning. Write on!

(Portions of this column are from my article, "Write On! Strategies for the Overburdened Instructor," *News for Teachers of Political Science*, American Political Science Association, Summer 1989, 5-6. Reprinted by permission.)