
Chapitre 11 | Chapter 11

A Writing Across the Curriculum Application in Introductory Political Science

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It is a truism of university teaching that «most students do not know how to write.» As David Palmer commented in a recent article, university teachers want their students to write well but many agree that «a disconcerting number of ... [them] cannot do so even when expressing relatively uncomplicated ideas» (56).

This longstanding complaint is heard in various forms; the two most common are (1) a lament for the golden age when university admission standards were higher and therefore would have excluded the «illiterati» who can now gain entrance, and (2) the more sympathetic assessment that tends not to criticize students but rather to view them as the unwitting victims of the decline of elementary and secondary schools. The difficulty with arguments like these—whatever their substantive merit—is that they put both the problem and the solution beyond the reach of the classroom instructor. The conclusion is that students may not be good writers, but there is nothing we can do about it.

As an instructor, I shared this view, largely because it fit in with my evaluation of student writing and offered support for my inability to address the problem in any effective way. Like many others, I continued to assign essays and uphold the view that writing was important, but I had no practical techniques to deliver on my philosophical commitment.

My introduction to WAC gave me a new perspective on the problem of student writing and showed me how to begin the process of helping my students to improve. There were two ideas that were essential

to my re-education in this area. First, and fundamental to the WAC philosophy, is the idea of writing as learning; that is, writing is not a skill separate from a particular discipline but is a vehicle for acquiring knowledge. The second point is that instructors need to explicate the norms and conventions that underlie «good writing» in their discipline.

Stephen Tchudi, a WAC theorist, makes the point that, while earlier theorizing about the importance of writing viewed it as the «proper expression of thought» or as «a service to the disciplines, the newer theory pledges something even better for content teachers: *improved learning*» (16). His position is an intuitively appealing one: «The student who struggles with ideas in history, philosophy, art, mathematics, music, psychology, or literature through essays will have a deeper understanding than the one who merely writes down notes on lectures and recites them in a quiz section or on a short answer exam» (16).

While this normative view encourages instructors to understand their commitment to good writing within a theoretical context, we need to go beyond it for practical guidance about how to accomplish such a goal. This brings us to the second point: instructors can use writing to improve learning if they approach writing exercises as a dialogue between instructor and student, with the «aim of this dialogue ... [being] to reveal and share the reader expectations or criteria which guide evaluation in specific contexts» (Schryer *Evaluation AIE-6*). This is not as easy as it seems, because most of us learned the necessary criteria through osmosis and therefore have only limited awareness of exactly what we have learned. Our first step is to make explicit for ourselves precisely what we are looking for in «good» writing and then, as Cathy Schryer puts it, «to explicate this code, explain its virtues and limitations, and tell students when they are approximating it» (*Evaluation AIE-8*).

This approach tells us what to do and, to a certain extent, what not to do. In terms of positive direction, we must identify some of the component skills involved in writing a good essay, engage the students in drafting and redrafting, and (at least in part) separate this learning process from the assignments that figure in their final marks. At the same time, when we focus on explicating the disciplinary code, we are not concentrating on spelling and grammar. This is an important point because some of those who oppose existing writing programmes do so

on the grounds that «neither correction of errors in completed essays nor 'grammar instruction' have much impact» on the quality of student writing (Palmer 55). There is a place for error correction, but it is not the central concern of a WAC approach to writing improvement.

Using this approach, I developed a set of assignments for an introductory course in political science. All of the exercises were drawn from the textbook for the course, partly to make it easy for students to have access to the readings and partly because I wanted to focus on writing, not on other skills like using the library. In each case, I provided a model of what a «good» answer to a similar assignment would look like, because many students have no idea of what the discipline views as good writing. Each assignment was evaluated on a Pass/Redo basis, and all the assignments had to be completed before the students could move on to writing assignments that counted toward their final mark. As one assignment was submitted, I would evaluate the work, return it to the students, and go over it with the class using overheads of their own work (anonymous and retyped) to illustrate successful assignments and to discuss common problems. Because students had to redo the assignment until they could produce a passable sentence or paragraph, they concentrated on improving their work; since no marks were involved, they were not concerned about the issue of evaluation.

The selection of assignments was based on my rough diagnosis of the writing problems of first-year students. There are many other exercises that could be included and next time I will probably add an assignment that involves organizing a group of sentences dealing with a certain topic, and one that involves having students rewrite statements to emphasize that the author is presenting an argument not a statement of fact.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT #1: GENERAL CONTENT

This assignment requires that you read certain material in your textbook, and then write a single sentence that describes the general content of what you have read.

EXAMPLE: Read the section entitled «Economic Imperatives» on pp. 17-19 of your textbook, and write a sentence that describes its general content.

ANSWER: The author discusses the economic factors in the mid-nineteenth century that led British North American colonies to favour Confederation.

Read the following sections. For each of them write a single sentence describing the general content of the section.

1. «What Did *Not* Happen in 1867» pp. 22-24.
2. «Anglo Quebec» pp. 72-74.
3. «Newfoundland» pp. 112-115.
4. «Party Tenure» pp. 288-289.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT #2: SUMMARIZING

This assignment goes beyond the single sentence describing the general content of a reading. It requires that you read certain material and write a summary of the main points. This means that you should write about a paragraph, giving your reader the central points of the material but leaving out the details.

EXAMPLE: Read the section entitled «Responsible Government» on pp. 30-32 and prepare a summary of it.

ANSWER: «Responsible Government» discusses the principle that the Cabinet is responsible to the House of Commons. In general, if the cabinet is defeated in an important vote in the House of Commons, the government will have to resign and a new election will be held. Although this is the general rule, the author gives a recent example of a government that did not resign following a defeat in the House. The section also discusses the various types of responsibility that apply to cabinet ministers, with particular attention to the issue of collective responsibility. It concludes with a brief summary of the limitations on the principle of responsible government.

Read the following sections and prepare a summary of each.

1. «Duplessis and the Union nationale» pp. 54-57.
2. «Border Disputes» pp. 194-197.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT #3: PARAPHRASING

In order to write effective papers, it is important that you learn how to present an author's point of view or argument. Many students have difficulty restating what they have read and, as a result, they too often quote at length or (in some unfortunate cases) plagiarize either deliberately or unintentionally.

This assignment requires that you read certain material and paraphrase it; that is, restate it in your own words. Your paraphrase will be about the same length as the original and will contain the same basic information.

EXAMPLE: Paraphrase the paragraph on p. 24 beginning «Confederation was not wrested from»

ANSWER: There was very little opposition in Britain to the idea of Confederation, partly because of the British view that colonies were an economic liability rather than an asset. The British government actually helped the cause of Confederation because it refused to get involved in alternative solutions to the economic problems of the Maritime colonies (i.e., it would not consider either reciprocity between the Maritimes and the United States or union of the Maritime colonies). Canadians favouring Confederation were therefore trying to solve problems that Britain did not want to deal with. While the British did not oppose Canadian efforts, they did not seem especially interested either. In a March 1867 editorial, the *Times* of London referred to Confederation as a means of sparing the British «much expense and much embarrassment.» Confederation was thus a complete contrast to the American revolution.

1. Paraphrase the first paragraph on p. 36 beginning «Evidence that the intent»
2. Paraphrase the paragraph at the bottom of p. 57 and the top of p. 58 that begins «The Quiet Revolution entailed»

WRITING ASSIGNMENT #4: USING QUOTATIONS

One of the common shortcomings of undergraduate essays is that quotations, though perhaps well chosen and apt, are not well integrated into the text of the essay. Students need to learn how to shape their own sentences around the quoted section and to pare the quotation so that it fits well into their text. It is essential, however, that the original author's meaning be properly conveyed.

In this assignment you must write a brief passage on a particular subject integrating some but not all of the quoted sentence given to you.

EXAMPLE: Explain why people in Canada West argued for representation by population in the 1850s and 1860s. In your explanation, quote from the following sentence: *Agitation grew for the introduction of representation by population in order to give Canada West the legislative clout that its numbers seemed to warrant.* (Gibbins 15)

ANSWER: The terms of the Act of Union that made Upper and Lower Canada a single colony gave each former colony equal representation in the new legislature, even though Lower Canada had a much larger population at the time of union. In the years following union, the population in Canada West (formerly Upper Canada) grew much more rapidly than in Canada East. As the imbalance between the two increased, people in Canada West grew increasingly dissatisfied with the equal-representation rule. In order to give their colony «the legislative clout that its numbers seemed to warrant» (Gibbins 15), they wanted the rule changed to representation by population.

1. Explain why Ontario is not considered a region. (See Gibbins, pp. 132-134.) In your explanation, quote from the following sentence: «Certainly the study of regionalism in Canada has been primarily the study of the regional peripheries, with the central Canadian linchpin placed aside.»

WRITING ASSIGNMENT #5: LISTING

It is sometimes difficult for students to distinguish between the points or factors listed by an author. Yet such a skill is essential to analytical thinking and is often the key to comparing and contrasting theories or arguments. It requires careful reading and accurate paraphrasing.

EXAMPLE: List and briefly describe the main criticisms of the First Ministers' Conference. Gibbins, pp. 241-244.

ANSWER: The main criticisms of the First Ministers' Conference are that

1. The record shows that it has not often been successful in coming to agreements or resolving federal-provincial problems.
2. It harms Canadian politics because it frequently gives Canadians a picture of federal-provincial conflict.
3. The First Ministers' Conference reduces the importance of Parliament in the government of Canada.
4. Because of the First Ministers' Conference, provincial premiers have become more important as spokespersons for regional interests than federal politicians from the regions (e.g. cabinet ministers).
5. Because only first ministers are involved, the conference does not include the point of view of opposition parties at either the federal or provincial level.

1. List and briefly describe factors that encouraged centralization in Canadian federalism. Gibbins, pp. 224-227.
2. List and briefly describe the main sources of western alienation in the 1970s and 1980s. Gibbins, pp. 124-132.