Sequential Writing Assignments in International Relations and American Government Survey Courses

by Wayne A. Selcher and E. Fletcher McClellan
Elizabethtown College

Like many colleges and universities, Elizabethtown College has adopted a writing-across-the-curriculum program that attempts to establish writing as a principal means of communication and as a tool for the development of intellectual skills.[1] Set to begin in Fall 1990 as part of a new core curriculum, the program requires that each core course provide writing assignments that "emphasize the process of writing or rewriting in response to critical evaluation by faculty and/or peers." A major stimulus to the development of the program was an NEH Summer Seminar on Writing Across the Humanities, conducted on campus in 1985 by faculty in the College's Professional Writing Program.

The Department of Political Science, with four professors, has been an active promoter and participant in the campus writing program. Most of our own less formal conclusions about the role of writing in learning are congruent with those of the Harvard Assessment Seminars.[2] We, too, find that close faculty-student interaction in assignments spread out sequentially provides the writer with directive and suggestive comments in a less threatening and more encouraging way. Such consultation leads to a higher quality final product and student mastery of more skills in style, organization, and analysis of substance. Two assignments that have worked particularly well for us at the introductory level are the foreign policy issue brief in the international relations course and the issue analysis project in American national government.

The Foreign Policy Issue Brief

The foreign policy issue brief follows a logic easily adaptable to a wide range of social science topics amenable to an action-memo approach. In a number of its purposes, it is the "anti-term paper" and is elaborated gradually during the entire semester. Briefly, the student selects a current foreign policy issue early in the semester, ultimately to make policy recommendations to one of the involved parties. Open student choice in picking a topic, perhaps relevant to personal experiences or a major, heightens enthusiasm for the project. The instructor reviews the topics selected to avoid those few that might lead to dead ends or that are too broadly or narrowly defined to fit the assignment. Topics commonly include not only the major items in the current headlines—South African apartheid, U.S.-Japanese trade, global environment—but also more novel ones such as France's role in the EC, Canadian defense policy, and American education as a foreign policy issue.

Sources in Comparative Politics
concluded from page 13

In sum, opportunities provided by standard library reference sources in comparative politics await exploitation by the ingenuity of faculty mentors. A worthy project can transform some of the drudgery of learning about reference sources into an engaging intellectual activity. In my experience, introductory students need to be shown what reference sources have to offer. At another level of sophistication are new technologies and databases that pose additional challenges for instructors and students. Suffice it to say that advanced students in comparative politics do not just happen, any more than adults spring full-blown from the brow of Zeus.

The assignment is done in four drafts, with further ongoing refinement encouraged. The main purpose is to guide the student during the semester through a comprehensive and ordered reasoning process preparatory to reaching an action-oriented recommendation, all done concisely in only ten to twelve pages of final product. This task requires condensing a great deal of essential information and a broad perspective into a short and carefully reasoned evaluative essay. The sequential nature of the project's four parts provides for frequent instructor-student interaction on substance and style, to increase the students' integrative and critical skills as they work to produce the final complete and polished draft, which is the only one to be graded.

The sequence of the assignment follows these lines. The student first works on an *empirical* analysis of the issue in about three pages, emphasizing the nature, significance, causes, effects, dynamics, and trends of the current situation. Historical coverage itself must be kept quite limited, but knowledge of the historical dimensions of the matter must be incorporated as background to evaluation throughout the entire essay. This first section is due about two weeks after topic selection and is returned with comments by the instructor within one or two class periods. The most common observations tend to direct the students to use a more concise and smooth style, to favor interpretive trend analysis over details and descriptive chronology, to deepen and broaden the analysis, and to improve on the title in view of the ultimate policy purpose and target. Sources should be properly and fully cited from the start, preferably in endnotes because of deliberate space strictures in the assignment.

The second three-page draft considers the *normative* aspects and is due about two weeks after the empirical draft. The emphasis here is on eliciting the student's assessment of the scope of ethical concerns and multiple group interests at stake, through perception of the terms of the ongoing debate on the issues inherent in the topic. The most useful organization is often a pro-con format that frames the issues, the interest and value positions, or the alternatives briefly and clearly. At the end of the normative section, the student is to take a personal position on the question and to defend that policy preference. This section is again returned with instructor's comments as soon as possible. Observations about the normative draft usually request the student to frame the issues and options more completely and explicitly and to clarify the personal policy preferences (as a lead-in to the third section).

About three weeks later, the three-page *policy* analysis is due. The student uses the additional week to refine ideas in the empirical and normative stages in order to present the most realistic, specific, and applicable action plans possible, directed to the designated actor named from the start. Students usually find this culmination of the paper to be the most challenging, because it places them vicariously (probably for the first time) in the position of a responsible policymaker faced with limited options, limited resources, and limited control over the situation. The policy section also invites conjectural thinking. The instructor evaluates this action plan according to the degree to which the recommendations are spelled out clearly and seem to be broadly feasible, informed by what is actually occurring in the real-world situation, and in line with the flow and conclusions of the previous two sections. The most common suggestions at this point call for more explicitness in defining the preferred outcome and in elaboration of steps toward it. Again, prompt return is essential for most effective feedback.

About three weeks later, right before semester's end, the final ten- to twelve-page paper is due, to be given a grade. It is to be a blended synthesis of the earlier revisions, with transitions smoothly providing, in order, the logical sequence of (1) the stu-

continued on page 15

Writing Assignments
continued from page 14

dent's explanation of the nature, causes, and effects of the situation, (2) an assessment of the values and interests at stake, followed by his or her own preferred outcome, and (3) recommendations on what should be done and by whom to try to bring about that desired outcome.

The Issue Analysis Project in American Government

Another assignment used in our department is the issue analysis project, which is designed for an introductory course in American government. The project requires students to describe and analyze a political issue of national importance and what, if anything, the U.S. government is doing about it. Like the foreign policy issue brief, the assignment is developed section-by-section over the course of the semester. Drafts of each section are critiqued by peers and the instructor, and the final draft is the only one graded.

At the beginning of the semester, students choose a current issue in which the federal government is involved. The issue may have been the focus of federal activity for a considerable length of time, such as abortion, or it may be a relatively new item on the policy agenda, such as diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Baltic republics. To confine the topic to a manageable size, students are asked to focus on recent governmental activity on the issue. For example, students working on the gun control issue in 1989-90 focused on proposals to ban the purchase of submachine guns or to require a seven-day waiting period for the purchase of handguns, rather than the enactment of the Gun Control Act of 1968.

There are four major components of the analysis. In the first section, for which a three-page draft is submitted around the fourth week of the semester, students examine the substance of the issue itself. Various proposals for federal action or changes in federal policy are described, and the debate over the merits of the proposals is summarized. If the issue is one in which the U.S. government has been involved for some time, a brief history of federal efforts should be provided.

The second section requires an analysis of how public opinion is organized on the issue. By examining published public opinion polls, party platforms, and news reports, students assess the extent and character of participation by the general public, political parties, and interest groups. The instructor provides a list of questions which help frame the analysis. The questions direct students to consider the distribution, direction, and intensity of public opinion on the issue, the issue positions of the national political parties and candidates, how the results of national elections reflect public concern about the issue, the array of interest groups active on the issue, and the focus of interest group activity. Students research and write the three-page draft of this section at the same time that the unit on public opinion is presented in the course. The deadline for the draft, therefore, is midway through the semester, at the time that the unit on public opinion is concluded.

The actions which the Congress, presidency, federal bureaucracy and courts have taken on the issue are described in the third section of the assignment. As in the previous section, the due date for the three-page draft is congruent with the end of a course unit, the portion dealing with national governmental institutions (around the twelfth week of the semester). The questions provided for this unit attempt to get students to think in process terms. For example, students are asked to follow the steps by which Congress and its committees considered legislative proposals addressing the issue and how the substance of the proposals changed during the process. The extent of presidential involvement and influence on legislation is also to be addressed. Students are thus confronted with the notion of government as streams of activity in which the different institutions interact to make policy. For each issue, legislative, administrative, and judicial activities are described, but students are instructed to concentrate on a primary policy making process in the time period examined. In recent years, for instance, some issues were the subject of legislative action, such as child care, while other issues were handled primarily through the judicial process, or by administrative decisions, as with the case of the regulation of biotechnology.

The fourth and final section has two elements. First, students discuss whether they believe the federal government is dealing effectively with the issue. In essence, this requires that students express a reasoned and informed opinion on what policy the government should or should not pursue. Second, and perhaps more important to the overall purpose of the project, students are to evaluate the politics of the issue according to competing theories of how the United States is governed. That is, they must judge who had the most influence in the policy making process they observed—popular majorities (democratic theory), organized interests (pluralist theory), or political, military, or economic elites removed from public view (elite theory).[3] This section is submitted as part of the final draft without prior feedback from the instructor. However, the last week of the class is devoted to small group discussion of the projects. Students are encouraged to make comparisons of the patterns of policy making activity they found in their respective issues. Based on this discussion with their peers, they can revise the fourth section. Such discussion leads to the inevitable conclusion that the American political process cannot be characterized as totally democratic, elitist, or pluralist—its character varies with the issue.

Pedagogical Purposes of the Assignments

These two assignments can serve many pedagogical purposes if those purposes are carefully and explicitly built into class time occasionally devoted to the assignment as the semester progresses and into the individual appointments with students that are crucial to maximum effectiveness. An instructor can incorporate as many of the following used at Elizabethtown as suits personal purposes, as well as develop other learning goals suitable to a specific course. Both tasks, for example, are appropriate for a small group assignment as well as for an individual one.

One of the main objectives of these concept and process-focused courses, taken by many non-majors, is to develop student ability to move more easily between general theory and real-world cases, to apply the concepts and principles of political analysis to the historical record or to the daily flow of events and issues. Conversely, the student is encouraged to see how concepts and theory are built up from careful analysis of a flow of events. These writing assignments provide occasion to examine a single issue in detail with that interconnection in mind. They also serve as a kind of laboratory exercise to place the student psychologically into the role of policy maker or political analyst, albeit in a somewhat academic and isolated way relative to real policy-making or analytical pressures.

The conciseness of these projects contrasts with the expansiveness of the traditional and verbose twenty-five-page academic term paper. Their purpose and style are more in consonance with the government, business, and journalism writing assignments our students are likely to face in future positions of responsibility. The exercises build evaluative, organizational, and integrative skills applicable to a wide range of decision making situations. The result is really a flow of evaluative conclusions. Students learn quickly that shorter is not really easier and that organization, integration, flow, and succinctness are crucial to a sound and con-

continued on page 16

Sequential Writing
continued from page 15

vincing presentation. They see the virtues of developing ideas over a longer time period with improvements produced by sequential drafts with feedback, not possible in a longer paper with less professor-student consultation. Assignments requiring subsequent revised versions are natural companions for the word processor equipment that most students already know how to use. Even the chronic procrastinators are forced to face four or five sequential cram sessions, if they so choose, rather than one big one.

Because one of the purposes of the assignments is to familiarize students with quality sources and the use of corresponding bibliographic materials, early in the semester some class time is devoted to sorting out periodicals in the field according to depth, breadth, and policy-relevance of coverage. The hierarchy delineated by examples moves from daily or weekly news sources (*Time, New York Times, Christian Science Monitor*) through opinion and commentary magazines (*Atlantic Monthly, Saturday Review*) and "inside" sources of political information (*Congressional Quarterly, National Journal*) to scholarly journals (*Foreign Affairs, Political Science Quarterly*). The student usually begins at the lower level in library research and moves upward, using appropriate bibliographic tools and observing the differences in style of coverage and sophistication. All students are expected to incorporate material from each of the major types of sources into their analysis. In addition, instructors at institutions where students have ready access to collections of government documents could incorporate these sources into the assignment.

Each model, on the other hand, has certain unique features. The logic and sequence of the foreign policy brief assignment cautions students not to jump to give advice or opinions (policy recommendations) without first considering the actual dynamics (empirical reality) of the situation and all of the interests and values (normative factors), each promoting a certain outcome. They also learn that empirical realities preclude near-term attainment of certain normative values, while sound policy advice must rest upon sound appraisal of both empirical and normative considerations. The interaction and interdependence of these three modes of political analysis appear simple enough when first explained in class by the instructor, but successful application in the essay and in cases covered through the flow of coursework requires ongoing reinforcement and explanation by the instructor. Clarification of expectations by section several periods before each section is due is particularly helpful. So is a selection of "tips" given in class after each first draft is returned, providing hints directed to the points needing improvement in the class as a whole.

There are several distinctive features of the issue analysis project in American government. It facilitates the learning of course content by furnishing an opportunity to apply concepts and theories of political analysis at the same time that the concepts are discussed in the course. Furthermore, although part of the final section requires students to evaluate the effectiveness of U.S. government policy, the emphasis of the project is on uncovering the political dynamics of an issue. Rather than focus on what policy solutions should be applied to a problem, as does the foreign policy brief, the issue analysis project addresses how the political process shapes the substance of proposed and actual public policies. Moreover, when students compare the politics of each other's issues at different points in the semester, they can better understand that the "policy process differs significantly among issues."[4]

Evaluation

The approaches outlined here work best if the instructor has a broad familiarity with many subtopics students may choose, personal experience in writing of this type, and the willingness to meet frequently with students. Proper procedure will require a lot of time and patience, along with clarity of expectations in a diverse range of topics. It is important to offer specific and directive comments in a constructive style appropriate to each student's levels of development in (1) writing skills, (2) analytical sophistication, and (3) subject matter mastery. With such a personal approach, the instructor can justly apply more rigorous standards in judging the final product than if the student worked entirely alone. (Close interaction also reduces chances for deliberate or inadvertent plagiarism or use of a paper from a previous semester.)

Our experience has been that at least half of the students take advantage of the opportunities for frequent consultation with the instructor to develop and improve their work. Some choose to visit the Tutoring Center for sessions designed to improve writing skills at all levels. Student evaluations of the assignments have been overwhelmingly positive. Their suggestions have provided the instructors with reactions valuable to improving the learning process in both the essay and the course itself.

Effective use of these assignments requires the full commitment of both instructors and students. Regardless of how the project spreads the burden of writing and evaluation over fourteen weeks, the fact remains that at the end of the semester, many ten- to twelve-page papers will need to be graded. The instructor must be committed to the use of writing as a means of cognitive development and prepared to devote the necessary time and care to its service. The results are well worth the effort.

Notes

1. Elizabethtown College in Elizabethtown, Pa., is a four-year private comprehensive college of 1500 students and 105 full-time faculty members, with about ninety percent of the student body in Bachelor of Science programs. Admissions standards are highly competitive. About forty percent of the student's graduation requirements are taken in the liberal arts core curriculum.

2. Edward B. Fiske, "How to Learn in College: Little Groups, Many Tests," *New York Times*, March 5, 1990, p. 1.

3. This follows the approach used in Robert L. Lineberry, *Government in America: People, Politics, and Policies*, 4th ed. (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1989). Other texts provide somewhat different answers to the question of who governs. James Q. Wilson, for instance, describes four kinds of politics: majoritarian, interest-group, entrepreneurial, and client [*American Government: Institutions and Policies*, 4th ed. (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1989)]. Theodore Lowi and Benjamin Ginsberg, in *American Government: Freedom and Power* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), explain American public policy making in terms of patronage, pluralist, power elite, and bureaucratic elite politics. Any of these explanatory schemes can be applied in the fourth section.

4. Charles O. Jones, *An Introduction to the Study of Public Policy*, 3rd ed. (Monterey, Calif.: Brooks/Cole, 1984), p. 245.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank Dana Mead of the English Department at Elizabethtown College for her helpful comments. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Lancaster-Lebanon Writing Council Conference on the Reading-Writing Connection, Elizabethtown College, March 31, 1990.