Government

Introductory Summary:

The faculty of the Government Department was first approached by Julio Alves in Fall 2019 to serve as one of two pilot departments for the Writing Enriched Curriculum at Smith College. We agreed to participate largely because it seemed like a good opportunity to engage in better, more effective curricular planning at the department level, and to tackle recurrent writing difficulties many of us had noticed in our classrooms.

Through the process, we identified a set of core writing skills that cut across the varied and diverse writing styles of political science and public policy, and developed from these implementable criteria for assessing student writing. In addition, we began the process of developing a common glossary for use in Government courses, and procedures for using peer review and live conference feedback in our courses. We developed these specific implementation strategies for the following reasons, identified through the WEC process:

(1) The Government major is open design, so implementation of the writing plan cannot rely on students taking courses in sequence;
(2) Faculty are currently focusing too much energy and attention on teaching writing through written feedback on finished papers;
(3) Faculty felt they lacked a stable, shared vocabulary for teaching writing, and students shared the sense of uncertainty about how writing tasks and standards were operating across different courses.

We began the process in December 2019 and completed our last departmental meeting one year later, in December 2020. With the support of the Writing Enriched Curriculum program and despite numerous delays triggered by the COVID pandemic and the sudden and unexpected death of a dear colleague, the Government Department is completing its Writing Plan and setting the stage for the next phase of this process, which will be implementation and assessment.

Section #1: What characterizes writing in GOV fields (academic, professional, all levels)?

The following criteria emerged from a survey of the faculty and a series of conversations in the Department as a whole, and among the three Liaisons (Mlada Bukovansky, Alice Hearst, and Erin Pineda). More specific and precise articulations of some of these criteria, as well as rethinking of others, ensued as we workshopped them in a subsequent meeting and further consultations.

Strong, evidence-based arguments:

- Are grounded in clear presentation & analysis of evidence
    - When using data: Generate clear, readable tables and graphs
- Are capable of being falsified or disputed on the basis of evidence
- Present evidence & analysis in a logical sequence
- Evaluate claims based on well-developed criteria and methods of assessment

Clear stakes, scope & relevance:

- Attend to the actual impact of political phenomena on people's lives
- Provide clear account of stakes or importance of the topic
- Are upfront about the scope and limits of the argument
- Are addressed to a specific audience
- Are appropriate to goals of writing effort—could be persuasive, critical, descriptive, pre- or proscriptive

Diverse goals of writing about politics / within political science:

- Causal: Generates causal explanations; differentiates causation from correlation
- Descriptive: Provides textual description of quantitative/qualitative data
- Critical: Engages with different ideas and is prepared to challenge orthodoxy
- Persuasive: makes an argument and follows through on its analysis
- Pre- or proscriptive (i.e recommending a course of action or asking that something be stopped)

Clear, grammatically correct writing

Section #2: What writing abilities should GOV majors be able to demonstrate by the time they graduate?

As with the criteria above, these emerged in our initial meetings and surveys of faculty, and served to outline a range of skills, not all of which we expect to be taught in all classes.

The ability to analyze:

- To articulate specific, falsifiable (or debatable/arguable) theses
- To make clear arguments based on evidence and analysis
- To evaluate claims based on well-developed criteria and methods of assessment
- To scrutinize and evaluate evidence
- To marshal evidence in support of a thesis

The ability to organize an argument:

- To sequence paragraphs logically
- To focus each paragraph or section on a new idea (and supporting evidence)
- To use roadmaps and signposts:

  The *roadmap* is presented in an introductory paragraph (or section) and sets readers' expectations for what will follow by providing an overview of the argument's steps.

  Signposts are words and phrases that flag important parts of the argument, mark shifts between paraphrased evidence and an author's analysis/argument, and clarify the stakes of an argument (e.g. "Consequently,...", "In what follows, I will…").

- To write an introduction with a thesis and a roadmap, and a conclusion that (at minimum) returns to or revisits the thesis and the stakes of the argument ideally gesturing beyond the paper toward avenues for future research, new questions opened up by the analysis, other applications, etc.

The ability to engage critically:

- To engage with different ideas that may challenge orthodoxy
- To remain open to various viewpoints and to have the ability to evaluate them
- To demonstrate an understanding of complexity by avoiding one-sided arguments and engaging with counter-arguments and objections

The ability to attend to relevance, stakes, and goals:

- To attend to the actual impact of political phenomena on people's lives
- To provide identifiable stakes for the argument or its real-world implications
- To understand the difference between persuasive, critical, descriptive, proscriptive, and other kinds of writing

The ability to understand the nature of sources and to use them effectively and responsibly:

- To have the ability to summarize a source and explain it in the context of making an argument
- To know how to introduce, cite, and explain sources
- To know how to paraphrase effectively

- To understand what plagiarism is, how to avoid it, and why it matters
- *For research assignments:* The ability to conduct independent research, gather data, and find sources
- *For research assignments:* The ability to critically assess the quality of sources and to differentiate between types of sources (academic, journalistic, etc.)
- *For course work assignments:* The ability to carefully review and engage with relevant course materials

The ability to write correctly and concisely:

- To proofread one's own work and that of others
- To use correct grammar and appropriate tone and word choice
- To express ideas with concision

Section #3: Integration of writing into the department's undergraduate curriculum

Departmental review and discussion of how writing instruction is currently positioned within our curriculum revealed that while a fair amount of writing instruction is happening within our courses, it is occurring in a decentralized and uncoordinated fashion. As a department, we are not currently operating with a consensus about what writing instruction entails, nor do we have a shared sense of how writing should be sequenced across the whole of our curriculum. More specifically:

- **Many of us are teaching elements of writing in all our courses; however, we lack a shared understanding of what qualifies as "writing instruction."** Many or most faculty are currently handling writing instruction chiefly through grading rubrics, written feedback, and one-on-one meetings with students about their writing; some courses incorporate peer review workshops. Thus, writing instruction in our department most often means: devising assignments that ask students to deploy particular skills; offering rubrics so students are aware how we are assessing their writing; and providing some form of feedback along with their grade to help them understand how they can improve.

- **As the department learned in M2, however, teaching writing through written feedback, especially on final drafts that are not revised, is not effective:** the scholarship on writing instruction indicates that this method does not substantially improve student writing. Instead, a curriculum-based approach is recommended. This mismatch between what experts identify as effective pedagogy and what we are currently doing might explain some faculty members' ongoing frustrations with student progress from one course to the next.

- **Our open curriculum, which prioritizes a students' ability to choose courses as they prefer over mandated sequencing, poses some challenges for such a curriculum-based approach.** Principally, an open curriculum makes it more difficult to identify which writing skills ought to be taught in particular courses, because students may take the courses in any order. GOV 100, as a required introductory course for all Government majors, is a natural place to introduce students to some of the basics; and many GOV 100 instructors build some core writing instruction into their approach to the course. Yet students may opt to defer taking this course until their last semester of college. The same problem emerges for our 200-level introductory subfield courses. Thus, many of us are duplicating efforts across our courses, but without the benefit of a shared vocabulary, shared rubrics, or a department-level plan for writing instruction.

- **Recurrent, central writing problems appear in our courses at all levels.** During M2 faculty members specifically discussed issues with students' *ability to analyze* (making clear arguments based on evidence; marshalling evidence in support of a thesis; articulating a specific, falsifiable/arguable thesis); *ability to engage critically* (engaging counter-arguments; avoiding one-sided arguments); *ability to organize an argument* (sequencing paragraphs logically; focusing each paragraph on a new idea); and *ability to understand sources* (introducing, citing, and explaining sources; carefully reviewing and engaging with relevant course materials). While the seminar format of our 300-level courses allow us to work one-one-one with students, often moving through drafts, to address problems as they appear, it is the general sense from M2 that there are significant core skills (analysis; critical engagement; organization key among them) that our students are struggling to master. Many faculty members do not see these issues diminish from 100- to 200- to 300-level courses.

The challenge for our department, then, is to devise a plan for sequencing some skill-building – thereby ensuring that everyone is not trying to do everything in individual courses – while continuing to prioritize an open curriculum and faculty autonomy in our courses. While there is no firm consensus within our department on how much focus should be on writing instruction, and there is some discomfort with removing choice from individual instructors (e.g., specifying at the department level which skills ought to be taught particular courses), a solution to the ongoing dissatisfaction faculty have with progress in student writing requires some department-level planning. Because Smith College approaches writing instruction through a "writing in the disciplines" model, moreover, deferring or displacing the work of teaching writing to composition courses in other courses is not an option.

Section #4: Assessment of Student Writing

Based on our desired writing abilities for our students (outlined in Section 2), we recommend that faculty use the below criteria to assess student writing. While not all skills will be taught in all courses–and different kinds of Government writing emphasize different skills–as a whole, use of these criteria will enable better transparency between faculty and students with regard to both expectations and assessment. Terms that are italicized and bolded are provided in the glossary of terms (see below in Appendix 1).

1. **The ability to analyze:** This is probably the broadest and most difficult category for which to lay out specific standards. But in general, good analysis means that the student does the following, *such that the reader can readily identify the author's core claims, and has the information they need to evaluate the merits and weaknesses of that claim:*

- Articulates a ***thesis*** and a ***line of argument*** which is debatable and/or falsifiable;
- Defines the central terms in use in the thesis and argument;
- Specifies the type of evidence–statistics, data, references to primary sources and work by other scholars, etc.--on which the argument is based;
- Presents appropriate evidence to support the thesis and argument;
- Considers evidence that would challenge the thesis and argument, and determines whether such challenges limit the argument or could be addressed with further evidence and argumentation.

2. **The ability to organize an argument:** A well-organized argument means that the student does the following, *such that the reader feels grounded in each section of the piece of writing, sure of how each section relates to the previous and following sections, and to the argument as a whole:*

- Provides an introduction with a thesis and a roadmap to guide the reader through the argument, set expectations for it;
- Focuses each ***paragraph*** (or section) on a new idea, using appropriate evidence and interpreting it in ways that clearly relate it to the thesis;
- Sequences each paragraph logically, so that they together form a coherent line of argument;
- Uses appropriate transitions between paragraphs and sections that alert the reader to the connection between one claim or piece of analysis and the next and mark shifts between claims/interpretation and evidence;
- Provides a ***conclusion*** that (at minimum) returns to or revisits the thesis.

3. **The ability to engage critically:** A critically-engaged writing assignment does the following, *such that the reader knows what is being challenged (a stable context, dominant narrative, or conventional wisdom being destabilized), and has reasons to believe in the author's authority (i.e., because claims are not only supported by evidence, but are evaluated in light of sound objections or from different perspectives):*

- Engages with different ideas that may challenge orthodoxy, which includes several steps: describing the dominant narrative, common assumptions, and conventional wisdom on a given topic; identifying the critiques of such orthodoxies, and marshalling arguments and facts counter to the dominant narrative;
- Remains open to various viewpoints and evaluates them;
- Demonstrates an understanding of complexity by avoiding one-sided arguments and engaging with counter-arguments and objections, recognizing the strongest arguments against one's own claims and utilizing logic and evidence to refute or limit those counterarguments.

4. The ability to articulate relevance, stakes, and goals: A paper that articulates relevance, stakes, and goals does the following, *such that the reader is left with a clear sense of why the argument matters (its stakes not just for "the literature" but for the world of politics), when and where the argument applies (its scope), and what the purpose of the paper is (to persuade, to describe, to proscribe):*

- Identifies the stakes by asking and answering the "so what" question, demonstrating why the material being discussed matters;
- Identifies the relevance by explaining the actual impact of the question and the thesis on people's lives, and by identifying the relevant audience and stakeholders. This may, where appropriate, include a discussion of how changes in policy/assumptions/decisions will affect the targeted populations or the issues being discussed;
- Communicates, either explicitly or implicitly, the goal of the paper (typically, as stipulated by the task outlined in the assignment)—to describe, to critique, to proscribe, to persuade, etc.

5. The ability to understand the nature of sources and use them effectively and responsibly: A well-evidenced and cited paper does the following, *such that the reader can identify the scholarly context of the paper and the kinds of evidence being used, and can easily locate the sources cited in order to independently assess the author's interpretations of evidence:*

- Introduces and cites sources using a consistent method (MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.);
- Summarizes and explains a source in the context of making an argument;
- Paraphrases effectively, conforming to standards for "fair paraphrase";
- Avoids plagiarism of all kinds (verbatim, "pattern," uncited or unfair paraphrase);
- *For research assignments:* Outlines the research process and explains the nature of the sources and evidence (how data was collected, methodologies used to analyze the data)

6. The ability to write correctly and concisely: A paper written with concision and attention to grammatical correctness does the following, *such that the reader can understand and focus on the author's claims and evidence without confusion or distraction (i.e., the main problem with grammar, word choice, and syntax issues is the ambiguity and lack of clarity introduced; and the main problem with extraneous details is that they bury the argument and muddy the author's meaning)*:

- Uses correct grammar and appropriate tone and word choice;
- Expresses ideas clearly and directly;
- Avoids extraneous details, description, or evidence (e.g., details irrelevant to the point; or excessive evidence speaking to the same point).

Section #5: Summary of Implementation Plans

Preliminary Concerns about Implementation

In M2, the department faculty did not yet attend to concrete changes we might make at the curricular level. However, within the context of M2, a follow-up survey of faculty, and through the work of M3, some suggestions and potential directions emerged. In particular, we found the work of refining our vocabulary so as to better communicate our expectations to students a challenging and constructive task, one detailed further in the Appendices and outlined below, in addition to some other possibilities.

The task remains to prioritize and sequence aspects of this shared vocabulary which articulates the range of writing goals we are asking students to master, and decide where and how to implement our other strategies. The challenge of sequencing is exacerbated by our relatively open curriculum within the major. We only have a single 100-level course, and within 200-level courses there are some which ought to be taken in sequence (for example, Gov 241 International Politics is a prerequisite for Gov 252, International Organizations) but others that need not be taken in sequence. Also, it is not uncommon for instructors to waive prerequisites if they determine that the student has adequate preparation due to other coursework.

What also remains unsettled is the degree to which any changes should be voluntary or mandatory within our courses. Through the follow-up survey to M2 and in M3, some faculty members expressed specific discomfort with the idea of making any curricular-based writing instruction a mandatory part of individual courses, and felt we ought to leave it up to each faculty member to decide. Exacerbating our uncertainty about voluntary vs. mandatory implementation of our shared vocabulary is our awareness of the diversity of approaches to the study of government, and of the more generalized anxiety about our ability to protect academic freedom during a time when speech itself has become highly politicized.

Implementation Initiatives:

- Better utilize GOV 100 and 200-level subfield introductory courses to teach core writing skills;

- Develop a prototype department model of teaching some basic types of essays.”That is: Rather than specifying which level courses” ought to teach particular skills, perhaps the department could start off by asking “instructors of specific courses to voluntarily deploy a sub-curricular routine that we develop as a department;

- Implement a faculty training within the Government Department, since not all of us were trained to teach writing intensive courses;

- Name the specific skills identified through M1 and the first section of the writing plan in individual course syllabi and assignments, so that we can more clearly communicate with students about our expectations, while working from a shared vocabulary.

- Develop and implement a set of shared vocabulary for elements of a paper and parts of the writing process, in order to more clearly and effectively communicate with students about the writing tasks and outcomes we want to see. This shared vocabulary will be put into a core document (see Appendix 1) which will serve as a guide to all Government faculty when designing writing assignments, but we will think of it as a "living document" subject to periodic modification as we move forward;

- Develop and implement guidelines for peer review and live conferences in order to reduce the amount of faculty time spent on commenting on papers that will not be revised, and to better engage students in the entirety of the writing process (drafting, revision, editing, commenting, reading). Drafts of these guidelines are provided in Appendices 2 and 3, and will be made available for Government faculty for comment/revision.

Appendices: Templates for Implementation Initiatives

Given the diversity of approaches and large array of courses offered in the Government major, we agreed our main task in assessment was developing and deploying a shared vocabulary which specified what we want students to do in their writing assignments. Equipping our instructors with some common ways of articulating our goals should begin to limit the problem of vagueness and mixed messages that sometimes emerge in a diverse department.

We also plan to encourage the use of peer review and live conferencing as modes of assessment, and to lay out some templates instructors may use in their own courses.

All these assessment modes will be voluntary but we expect that many of them will actually be labor-saving. We plan to keep them actively circulating (for example among new hires and visiting faculty, and in the Jacobson Center) so as to keep memory fresh. This could include maintaining an easily accessible Google Drive or other shared source documenting the shared vocabulary and some of the assessment techniques.

The below appendices contain resources and strategies for Government faculty to experiment with and implement in their classrooms, including a set of shared writing vocabulary and procedures for peer review and live conferencing.

Appendix 1: Shared Vocabulary around Specific Goals

Topic Selection

When selecting a topic, be sure to pick an area about which there are unanswered questions or where there are a number of disputed issues, so that you can imagine a number of different arguments that might arise concerning that topic. The topic needs to be specific, but may shift as the background information is gathered and the thesis takes shape.

Literature Review

A literature review is typically done after selecting a topic but before fully formulating a thesis. The object is to determine **what others have said about that topic** and provide guidance for writers to situate themselves in a conversation. Having canvassed the work that others have done, writers can determine which points they agree with, disagree with, or feel are not fully developed. Having found that sweet spot, writers can then develop a thesis statement that pulls them into the scholarly work that has already been done. Typically, the literature review will be incorporated into the body of a paper or text as the argument takes shape.

Thesis

A thesis statement makes a **claim** or **argument** that will clue the reader into what the paper is about. It is not merely a statement of a topic; it offers an interpretation of the topic. It typically states a claim that is debatable and/or is **falsifiable,** which means that another writer could potentially disprove the thesis with evidence or by offering an alternative explanation.

Line of Argument & Evidence

Social science papers must have a clear **line of argument**: the position expressed in the thesis must be developed in a consistent manner. The line of reasoning refers to a series of steps that flow logically from one point to the next, **supported by data** or other evidence. A good paper should demonstrate that the writer has evaluated counterarguments. A counter-argument presents a direct challenge to the argument, either by challenging the logic or presenting evidence that runs counter to the claims being made in the argument.

Conclusion

Good social science writing, whether formal or informal, has a thesis, an argument and a conclusion. Occasionally when we write, we write our way into an argument or position that differs from the one we started with. Make sure your conclusion is tied to your thesis.

Paragraphs

In any writing, it is best to put only one idea into a paragraph; in fact, that initial paragraph may be followed by several paragraphs supporting or elaborating on that point. Just be sure not to cram too many ideas into a single paragraph.

Grammar

Papers with numerous grammatical errors--spelling, syntax, word usage--are difficult to read, no matter how good the basic idea is. Every time a reader has to stop to figure out what a sentence means, or has to unconsciously make subjects and verbs agree (or correct some other error), the flow is lost and it is easy to lose the thread of an argument. Avoid jargon where possible. It sometimes helps to read a paper aloud to pinpoint errors.

References/Bibliography

While the need to formally cite sources may vary according to the nature of an assignment (a blog post v. a research paper), be sure to keep track of the sources you reference and keep track of where your data comes from.

Appendix 2: Peer Reviewing

For those dreading the work involved in providing detailed feedback on writing assignments, especially in larger classes, we might consider more systematic adoption of peer reviewing for our students.

One possible technique: Have students work in groups of 3. Each student posts a draft in a shared google drive folder that the instructor and their group members have access to. They then are required to make a certain number of comments on their peers' papers, usually averaged to 3 per page. They are also required to reply to some of the comments on their paper. One option is to avoid comments on mechanics, grammar, etc. Instead, comments must be content based, focusing on higher order issues, such as organization, cohesion, etc.

This can be easily adapted to an online in-class setting. Instructors could treat the rubric as a guide to the minimum required of them in peer review and provide a list of the properties they want students to look for in the essay. If students are working in pairs, the instructor could increase the requirements.

Appendix 3: Live Conference

Live writing conferences present an alternative to written feedback on student work. Rather than providing students with written comments on the draft version or final product of their writing--comments that students may not read, may not be able to process, or may not understand how to respond to--the idea of live conferences is to work one-on-one with students to focus on and improve some core aspect(s) of their writing. The purpose of the meeting is not to address each and every writing issue that may be present in a student's paper, but to prioritize by focusing on one or two central ones. The model below works best for draft writing where students will have an opportunity to revise their work before turning it in.

While scheduling these conferences requires a time investment for faculty, they can be more effective and more satisfying than written feedback; and in fact they may require no more time than producing written feedback (already a time-intensive activity). Indeed, it is often the case that we devote immense time and energy to producing detailed written feedback, *and also* end up meeting with students one-on-one in order to explain or rehearse that same feedback and discuss their grade. Even so, the investment in time for conferences may be prohibitive for large classes.

This model works most efficiently when faculty do not read/review student work in advance, but instead work collaboratively with students within the space of the conference. This helps to limit faculty time spent on reviewing student writing (a live conference *plus* the time it takes to read and mark up a paper in advance may well be too much), while also serving as a check against our instincts to exhaustively catalogue and comment on *all the writing issues* we identify, no matter how important--from missing commas to absent thesis statements. As such, live conferences of this sort may be most appropriate for shorter assignments (under 10 pages), as the allotted time may be insufficient to read and work on longer seminar papers. Conference formats could be modified, however, for these longer assignments.

Procedures for Live Conferences:

- Schedule 30-45 minute meetings with each student to discuss their drafts (depending on the length of the draft). Even for long work, however, meetings should never be more than 45 minutes (there are diminishing returns after that point).

- Ask students to print out two copies of their paper and bring them to the meeting. (For remote teaching, of course, a digital copy submitted by the deadline is sufficient, as the entire conference will take place on zoom.)

- In the first couple minutes of the meeting, talk to the student about their work:

    - How would they summarize their argument?
    - What, in their view, did they struggle most with? What did they do well?

    - What 1-2 things would they like to focus on improving during the conference?

  These questions help establish the goals of the conference session, and give you a sense of the student's view of their work and their process.

- Both you and the student should then read the student's draft, with attention to the issues discussed, marking it up as you go. Don't worry about correcting each grammatical mistake, or tinkering with individual sentences. Instead, focus on the 1-2 writing goals that you and the student have discussed, and/or the highest order issues that you find in the paper (e.g., thesis statement, argument structure, use of evidence). Set a timer for no more than 10 minutes for this process (with less time allotted for shorter essays). If time runs out before you and the student are able to read the paper in its entirety, move on anyway; you likely have plenty of material to work on, and a clear idea of the core problems in the paper, even without reaching the end.

- After you have both read the essay, you may need to reassess the conference goals. It may be the case that you and the student disagree about the biggest weaknesses in their writing: perhaps the student does not yet have a sense of what isn't working, or thinks that the thesis statement is fine when it really needs work.

  e.g., "You indicated that you wanted to work on transition sentences, and we can definitely talk about those. But I think the biggest issue in your paper is that the claims you make in the body paragraphs don't relate to your thesis statement in a clear way. Let me show you what I mean…"

- The rest of the conference should be spent working with the student to address the 1-2 issues identified. Review specific examples of how/why something is not working. If there are long block quotes dropped into a paragraph without explanation or analysis, review them closely: Why is it a problem? What isn't happening that should be? What changes could the student make to address the issue? If the thesis is weak because it is non-argumentative or non-falsifiable, what specific interventions would make it argumentative and falsifiable?

- If possible, after walking through the specific spots in the paper where these issues occur, ask the student to try revising one instance of the writing problem in real time. This will give the student a clear idea of what successful revisions look like; they will leave the conference with a meaningful sense of what kind of work they need to do to improve the paper.

- Close the meeting by agreeing on goals for the student's revision: what are the things they are committing to revising before submission?