

The Case for Using Policy Writing in Undergraduate Political Science Courses

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ABSTRACT Traditional writing assignments only teach students to write for academic settings. Assigning students policy briefs and policy memos gives them the opportunity to practice the type of writing they will perform both inside and outside of academia while still developing critical thinking skills and an understanding of the political world. Including policy-style writing assignments in the curriculum teaches undergraduates the skills demanded by their future employers, helps future academics learn how to write grant and conference proposals, offers students practice at the highest levels of Bloom's taxonomy of learning, hones synthesis and analysis, teaches students to be client-oriented, and makes students more effective citizens.

Each year, some 50,000 students graduate from political science and government departments nationwide (U.S. Department of Education 2007). Of this group, more than 98% of undergraduate majors will work in careers other than as professional political scientists.¹ This percentage is higher still for the nonmajors that pass through our classrooms. Yet, most of our writing assignments only teach students to write for academic audiences. Since an overwhelming majority of our students will write primarily for non-academic audiences in their careers, it is important to teach students other styles of writing. One way to teach students professional writing is to use policy-style writing assignments in our courses. Incorporating policy-style writing into political science classes prepares majors to write effective briefs and memos during their internships and future careers at the state capital; in Washington, DC; or within a federal agency. This approach also prepares the nonmajors enrolled in our courses who become engineers or biologists to write briefs and memos for policymakers.

WHAT IS POLICY WRITING?

Policy writing is the process by which government employees and non-governmental organizations create written documents for lawmakers and policy professionals to read.² Policy documents come in a variety of lengths, ranging from one-page briefings to hundred-page reports. Despite differences in length, all policy documents share common elements. After clearly identifying the intended audience, the date, and the author's identity, each begins with an executive summary that thoroughly previews the remainder of the document. The main text then begins with a statement of the

issue that helps to frame the particular problem that the document is written to address. A background section follows to provide context that policymakers may lack. In a briefing memo, these elements typically comprise one to two pages.

If the document is intended to aid policymakers in coming to a decision, it may take the form of a longer memo (three to four pages) or the even-longer position paper. These documents expand on the briefing memo by adding a stakeholder analysis that identifies various groups affected by the policy and several alternative actions, and concludes with a recommendation. The relative merits and drawbacks of each alternative, including the status quo, are described in detail. In longer reports, this section often includes a technical or economic analysis that is designed to help policymakers weigh the tradeoffs of one course of action compared to another. The recommendation section clearly states the criteria used to advocate one choice over another.

Policy documents are structured to inform both hurried readers who will only skim the executive summary and skeptical readers who will scrutinize the assumptions, argument, and recommendations. Policy writers face several constraints that require them to produce tight, front-loaded documents. First, they must consider the diverse audiences at which policy writing is directed and attempt to persuade or inform these audiences about a particular topic. Second, the intended audience often has limited background knowledge about the issue at hand and limited time to understand it. Parties involved in the legislative process make hundreds of important decisions a day and encounter enormous amounts of information. To make wise decisions, they require reports from their staff and interested parties that quickly and cleanly define problems and propose solutions. As a result, many policymakers want a single page presenting the background of an issue, options, and recommendations. Consumers of policy documents—legislators, staffers, and various interest groups—want to read a document and comprehend the situation quickly. To facilitate reader understanding under these difficult

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constraints, key information must be quickly accessible. Policy documents fill this need through the heavy use of visual cues: graphs, tables, bullet points, italics, and bolded text (Smith 2005). Policy writing forces writers to condense information into very strict page constraints, often of only one or two pages.

HOW TO INCLUDE POLICY-WRITING ASSIGNMENTS IN UNDERGRADUATE COURSES

The policy-oriented documents described previously are different from the documents produced by writing assignments in most undergraduate classes: book or article summaries, essays, literature reviews, and research papers. Policy-style writing assignments can either supplement or replace these traditional assignments (see table 1).

Including policy writing in a course can be as simple as assigning one briefing memo or as comprehensive as focusing all the writing in a given course on a policy-writing style.³ A course organized around policy writing includes assigning briefing memos at regular intervals. Each week’s memo provides students with practice writing in a policy style. These regular updates inform the professor on students’ progress, set shorter deadlines for the students, and create documents that can be used as examples for class discussion. At the end of the semester, the students have produced multiple documents that are appropriate writing samples for internships, and they have processed a large amount of information about their topic. They are well-prepared to write a final paper in either an academic or a policy-writing format.

Example 1: Studying Free Trade Agreements Using Both Policy Writing and a Research Paper

An upper-level international political economy class provides a good opportunity to employ policy writing in a political science course. A traditional assignment might be an end-of-term research paper examining an international trade issue such as the U.S.–Colombia free trade agreement. Policy writing can supplement a research paper assignment by requiring students to regularly submit memos that are then made available to the class. These regular memos can help foster discussion in the classroom, as students have tangible examples with which to evaluate the theories presented in the textbook and lectures. For example, during week three of class, each student (or group of students) writing on the U.S.–Colombia free trade agreement submits a one-page memo on the history of the trade agreement. In week five, another one-page memo informs the class and the professor about the domestic politics of trade and development in Colombia. In week seven, a third memo presents U.S. domestic politics with respect to the agreement. These three assignments require students to research, process, and concisely present extensive background material. Equipped with a strong background in Colombian and U.S. politics and economics, students can then focus on testing the social science theories used in class to explain international economic policy in the research paper. Do we see the Stolper–Samuelson theorem at work here? Are Colombian trade politics best explained using a factors or sectors model?

Example 2: Choose Your Own System of Representation.

Constitutional design is a common theme in introductory comparative politics courses. A conventional assignment might ask students to compare and contrast Arendt Lijphart’s majoritarian

Table 1
Using Policy Writing in an Undergraduate Political Science Course

COURSE	BRIEFING MEMO OPTION	POLICY BRIEF OPTION	POSITION PAPER OPTION
International Political Economy	Assign students a signed but congressionally unapproved bilateral trade agreement between the U.S. and another country. Require a one-page memo briefing the class on the agreement	Have students continue with the topic and write a three-page memo for one of their senators explaining how the agreement would affect their state using theories from class to frame the argument	Have students continue with the topic and write a three-page brief for their senator on how the trade agreement would affect their state. Have the students analyze whether or not the senator should vote for or against the agreement using theories from class to frame the argument
Introduction to Comparative Politics	Require a one-page memo briefing the class on the current constitution of a given country	Using the same country on which the students briefed the class, have students write a three-page brief analyzing how changing the electoral systems would affect politics within this country using theories from class to frame the argument	Using the same country, have students make a recommendation to a specific politician in the country about whether or not he or she should support changing electoral systems
Interest Groups	Require a one-page memo briefing the class on a current interest group	Have students write a policy brief to their hometown congressional representative about the issue area on which they reported in their briefing memo using theories from class to frame the argument	Have students expand their policy brief to their hometown congressional representative and make explicit recommendations to the representative using theories from class to frame the argument

and parliamentary governments. In contrast, a policy assignment requires students to apply these theories to a real-world problem. One option is to have students write a briefing memo to a state legislator about the effects of changing the electoral process to proportional representation or instant run-off voting in their home state. Another option is to assign a policy memo written to a member of the Obama administration explaining the effects of choosing a particular election system in Iraq.

Example 3: Interest Groups

In an interest groups course, one might require students to submit one-page briefing memos on a particular issue area to the class. For example, students could be required to write a memo to their hometown congressional representative about a chosen issue area. This assignment forces students to think actively about the issue, their congressional representative, and the district in which they reside. Which constituent groups favor health care reform? Do these groups traditionally vote for the representative? What political consequences might the representative face if he or she were to support reform?

Table 1 fleshes out these examples and provides options for how policy-writing assignments can be incorporated into these common undergraduate political science courses. Each of the three assignments—a briefing memo, a policy brief, and a position paper—require students to know and apply the theories presented in class to a specific case.

CONTRASTING POLICY-WRITING ASSIGNMENTS AND ACADEMIC WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

The skills developed through policy writing and academic writing are not mutually exclusive. Both aim to persuade an audience. Both require students to understand relevant material sufficiently in order to prioritize information. The use of theory and much of the necessary background work required for both types of writing are similar, but differences also exist between the two types of assignments (see table 2).

First, the assignments themselves have different purposes. The research paper is social science, and its goal is therefore to test a hypothesis. In contrast, the goal of policy writing is to persuade a particular audience that they should take a specific course of action in the future. This type of writing is about informing stakeholders and drawing conclusions. One-page memos and briefs teach students how to use the theory they learn in class to analyze a particular policy or problem.

Traditional writing assignments such as literature reviews impart valuable skills by requiring students to reason as scientists and teaching them how to present evidence and draw conclusions through well-reasoned and extensive argumentation. These assignments indirectly prepare students for nonacademic employment by teaching research skills, critical thinking, and valuable content. Unfortunately, large lecture classes, class overloads, or overworked teaching assistants can lead to a situation in which the only writing that students do is during their exams. Under these circumstances, when there is time for an extended writing assignment, professors often assign research papers. Baglione defines the goals of a research paper as “identifying and understanding the debate within a field, designing a strategy for evaluating competing claims, finding appropriate information, engaging in analysis of that data, and communicating this process and its results to others” (2008). These goals hone the traditional liberal

Table 2

Comparison of Policy-Writing Assignments and Traditional Academic Writing Assignments

ASSIGNMENT	DESCRIPTION	STUDENT REQUIREMENTS	PEDAGOGICAL GOALS
<i>Policy writing assignments</i>			
Briefing memo	1–2 page document informing a specific audience about a particular topic. Provides a brief background and overview.	Sufficient understanding of an issue to narrow down to one page, as well as understanding of audience	(1) Demonstrate understanding of class material by using theories learned in the course to analyze material (2) Practice writing for specific audiences in various writing formats used in policymaking
Policy brief	Multi-page document outlining a policy problem related to a particular topic	In-depth understanding of an issue, including problem definition and stakeholder analysis	
Position paper	Multi-page document outlining a policy problem and proposing solution(s)	In-depth issue understanding, showing the proposed solution to be better than other alternatives	
<i>Traditional academic assignments</i>			
Exam	In-class or take-home exam	Answering a combination of short and long essays on class topics	Ensure that students understand materials
Book summary	Summary and analysis of book	Reading and reviewing an assigned or chosen book in view of class material	Place literature within a given research stream
Literature review	Multi-page investigation of academic literature on a given topic. Traces main authors and key theories	Extensive reading journal articles and books to understand the development of theories about a topic	Learn how to search for information on a given topic
Research paper	Multi-page paper in which student tests a hypothesis by conducting research	After completion of above, creation and testing of a hypothesis drawn from within a given research stream. Gathering and analyzing data.	Develop reasoning process based on evidence

Table 3

Comparison of Professional Writing Styles

	ACADEMIC WRITING	POLICY WRITING
Professional Setting	Professors and graduate students	Government employees, nonprofit employees, advocacy groups, think tanks, citizens
Formats	Conference papers, journal articles, books	Briefs, memos, petitions, white papers
Intended Audience	Other academics	Policymakers
Goals	Theory development, hypothesis testing	Persuading audiences, presenting information, investigating alternative policies
Emphases	Strong theoretical development, extensive use of evidence	Persuasive, short, compact, to the point

arts skills that result in the development of critical thinking. A research paper assignment asks students to communicate findings from the literature. A senior paper might ask students to develop and test hypotheses. Such techniques are excellent preparation for students bound for Ph.D. programs.

Our inclination toward assigning research papers is less helpful to students who will be entering professions such as business, government, and law that value brevity. This is not to say that long-form research papers lack value. On the contrary, they teach a variety of useful skills that are critical to the formation of a well-educated individual. Such papers do not, however, compose the bulk of professional work products, and therefore it may be appropriate for us to moderate the frequency of their assignment in upper-level courses and substitute policy-style writing in their place.

The second key difference is that policy papers use a format that is distinct from the format used in academic papers. This difference flows directly from the different goals of the two types of writing. Because of the constraints on the policy writer's audience, he or she must make frequent use of bolded text, bullet points, graphs, and headings to provide rushed readers easy access to the core concepts of the material.

WHY POLICY WRITING IS VALUABLE FOR STUDENTS TO LEARN

In my nonacademic professional career, I have worked as a non-partisan staff member for a state legislature and a consultant for federal agencies and corporate clients. In both jobs, I saw firsthand the contrast in the writing styles of the academy and other professional worlds (see table 2). Although my dissertation advisor expected a 25- to 50-page proposal, my nonacademic employers often demanded that I explain a topic and the associated options in less than a page. When staffing committees, I watched recent graduates and seasoned agency employees struggle to present information cleanly, clearly, and concisely to committee members. I returned to academia with the conviction that many undergraduates receive no explicit instruction about how to write for nonacademic settings.

Although teaching policy writing to our undergraduates would help with committee meetings, there are other reasons why policy writing is a valuable addition to an undergraduate education. Learning and practicing policy writing teaches students skills demanded by their future employers, helps students who become academics to write grant and conference proposals, teaches stu-

dents to be client-oriented, and makes our students more effective citizens.

1. Policy Writing Is What Is Demanded

Many of the careers that our students will enter demand that they employ policy-writing techniques (see table 3). Locating, crafting, and compressing arguments are crucial skills for employees in the business, nonprofit, and government worlds.

To write successfully in non-academic settings, students

must produce tight, front-loaded documents that begin with a focus on important take-away points. This writing approach is a direct contrast to the common academic style of posing the puzzle, documenting previous attempts to explain it, and then discussing the contribution of this particular paper. Policymakers simply do not have the time to read documents that fail to quickly and cleanly define problems and propose solutions. Parties involved in the legislative process encounter enormous amounts of information throughout the workday. Consumers of policy documents—legislators, staffers, and various interest groups—want to read a document and comprehend the situation quickly.

Writing well for these environments takes practice and instruction. Because policy professionals write at a different pace than academics and must work under strict timelines (Zeiser 1999), students with legislative internships or graduates with jobs in government agencies or nonprofits will realize an immediate return from being able to clearly communicate with their bosses, their clients, and other target audiences.

2. Policy Writing Is Demanded, Even in Academia

Students who become academics will also benefit from acquiring policy-writing skills. Grant proposals and conference proposals require succinct and clear articulation of arguments and evidence. When applying to present at a conference, each scholar asks: Who is my audience? How can I effectively persuade them of the value of my scholarship in five hundred words? Grant proposals are no different. Like policymakers, applicants must write for an audience that is overwhelmed by information. Knowing how to communicate an idea in a one-page cover letter—the essence of policy writing—helps applicants compete effectively for scarce resources.

3. Policy Writing Helps Students Become Better Citizens

Understanding how to write policy documents and practicing doing so helps students effectively communicate with and appeal to the various facets of government (Smith 2005). Teaching students how to write clearly, concisely, and persuasively will benefit them when they must advocate for or against programs and policies that are important to them.

I recently sat down with a student who was writing the local school board about a proposal to cut the district's German language program. Her draft included lengthy quotes from Rousseau and passionate pleas comprising five pages of single-spaced prose. After speaking with the student, it became clear that she had compelling arguments that were buried in her document.

She was disappointed when I told her that the local school board was unlikely to wade through five pages to find these pearls. I spent 15 minutes helping her to think about the school board members she was trying to sway. Who were they? What did they want? What arguments would they find convincing? In what setting would she engage them? Given that the board would probably give her only three or four minutes to speak, how would she best communicate with them? Over the course of the week, she reworked her document into a one-page brief and organized her arguments under three bolded headings: “As the Daughter of a German Mother, Learning German is Important to Me”; “German Classes Improve Our Chances of Employment at German Companies in the Area”; and “German Classes Provide a Good Foundation for Study Abroad and University Classes.” In the end, she produced a document that the board members could quickly and easily skim as she spoke, because the paper was able to communicate her points directly and concisely in the midst of a very busy meeting.

Without specific instruction in policy writing, we leave student understanding of how to petition government effectively to chance. All of our undergraduates, both majors and nonmajors, live in a society in which they need to appeal to local, state, and national governments. Teaching policy-style writing through undergraduate assignments gives them the tools and practice to do so effectively.

4. Policy Writing Teaches Students to Be Client-Oriented

Professional writing is client-oriented (Musso, Biller, and Myrtle 2000). Most academic writing assignments require students to show the professor that they have learned the arguments and facts presented in class, the assigned readings, or external sources. Assigning policy-style projects alters the rules. Rather than ask students to write for a single audience of academics, professional writing requires students to write for multiple audiences (Sherman and Waismel-Manor 2004). Students must ask: Who is this argument designed to impress or to sway? What bias might these people have? Given these biases, what evidence do I need to present? Learning how to choose the content of a document and craft its structure based on the audience is a valuable skill. If policy writers can anticipate the assumptions and questions of their reader, they will do a better job of informing and persuading their audience.

5. Policy Writing Contributes to Higher-Level Learning Skills

From a pedagogical standpoint, policy-writing assignments are a particularly useful way to encourage synthesis and evaluation, the two highest levels of learning in Bloom’s taxonomy (Bloom 1956). As teachers, we often struggle to create assignments that require the use of these higher-level learning skills. It is difficult to write exams that require students to display more than knowledge and comprehension. Policy memos, however, force students to create original work that synthesizes their research into tightly worded documents designed for a targeted audience. The constrictive page limit requires critical thinking about what must be included and what information is unnecessary. The culmination of a policy memo—the recommendation—is the ultimate fruit of Bloom’s “evaluation” level of learning.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST USING POLICY-WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

While discussing the use of policy-style assignments with political science faculty from various universities, I have encountered

several objections to including this approach in our courses. Each objection contained a grain of truth, but I believe that there are still appropriate places in the political science curriculum to exercise this approach.

1. Students Should Learn Policy Writing Somewhere Else

Including policy-writing assignments in a course is a specific choice made in the broader context of a departmental and university-wide education. Some departments fold public policy classes into their curricula (Ishiyama and Hartlaub 2003). Other universities have separate public policy departments in which students learn to write like policy professionals. But for many small- to medium-sized schools, neither of these options exists. Even in large schools with stand-alone public policy departments, many majors will never take a class in the public policy department. In the end, most of our undergraduates will not encounter public policy courses. Our classrooms are often the best place for students to learn these skills.

2. Policy Writing Goes against the Liberal Arts Tradition

Shifting to a policy-writing format is not out of line with traditional liberal arts ideals. Critical thinking and writing are the most important skills that our students take from our classrooms. The wager of the liberal arts education is that students armed with a broad base of knowledge and critical thinking skills will be able to engage in any number of pursuits with a high degree of success. Assigning policy briefs and policy memos still requires students to think critically, and this approach gives them an opportunity to practice a form of writing that is useful inside and outside of academia.

3. Policy Writing Requires Instruction on How to Write

Assigning policy writing does require explicit discussion of how to write for a professional setting. Students do not intuitively know how to create policy-style documents. It is important to provide detailed and carefully worded instructions. While this extra emphasis may seem like more work, undergraduate students often do not know how to write for academic-style assignments either (Zeiser 1999). Since the inclusion of any writing assignment in the curriculum necessitates instruction about how to write, we should decide to use one style versus another based on other criteria.

4. Policy Writing Does Not Require Students to Work as Hard

Pascal wrote, “I made this letter longer than usual because I lack the time to make it shorter” (Pascal 2004). Presenting one page for a week of class material or 10 pages for a semester’s worth of work may seem like students are doing less work than if they are asked to complete a 25-page paper, but paring an argument down to a defined word limit is very difficult, as writers of conference proposals well know. Although students hand in less material to be graded under this system, they still must journey through many drafts to arrive at their final product.

5. Policy Writing Will Be Harder to Grade

The presentation style of a policy document makes these papers easier to grade than a lengthy research paper, because the outline of the argument should be apparent through visual clues of indentation, headings, or bolded text. Grading policy papers does require

imagination on the part of the professor as well as the student. Grading briefing memos written to hometown congressional representatives requires some knowledge of each district about which our students write. Second, visual presentation matters more in a policy brief than in a normal writing assignment. Creating a well-crafted grading rubric concerning presentation will take an hour or two the first time we adopt this system, but using policy documents will require little marginal effort once we pay the start-up costs.

My rubric for policy writing has two sections: one for content and one for effective communication. I evaluate how well a paper communicates with the intended audience using the following criteria: the clear identification of the date, author, recipient, and subject; the inclusion of an executive summary that provides a succinct and thorough preview of the argument; the use of visual cues (indentation, headings, bolded text, etc.) to direct the reader quickly to the main points; placement of the most important information first in each stage of the document; and the absence of errors.

6. Too Much Time Will Be Spent Grading

Focusing on a central research paper may force us to grade for several days at the end of the semester, but this reorganization has the advantage of creating space during the semester for class preparation and research. Policy memos, by virtue of their length, can be assigned and graded at different points throughout the semester. Reducing the end of the semester grading load allows for more time to be spent working with research papers in senior-level classes.

CONCLUSION

Our students will be better prepared for their futures if we include professional-style writing assignments alongside the current academic writing assignments in our classrooms. Assigning policy briefs and policy memos to cover material taught in standard political science classes gives students the opportunity to practice the writing they will perform as they pursue careers both inside and outside of academia. As a profession, we already serve students well when we give them an analytical toolkit and teach them theories that explain the political phenomena we see. In our classes, students learn research, writing, and speaking skills, all of which they will use in their new professions. However, the type of writ-

ing most of the students will be asked to perform in their careers is different from the type we currently emphasize. Incorporating policy-style writing assignments in our undergraduate curricula will better prepare students for life after graduation, both as future professionals and as effective citizens. ■

NOTES

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1. Each year, approximately nine hundred political science Ph.D.s are awarded (Welch 2008).
2. Smith (2005) provides an excellent book-length introduction to policy writing.
3. Wiley (1991) presents an excellent example of integrating policy writing as the dominant assignment theme throughout the semester in a policy course for engineers and scientists.

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