

**Writing Development Initiative
Final Report
POL 368
Women and Politics**

Overview of POL 368 Writing Development Initiative

POL 368 is a half-year upper-year elective, which had a final enrolment of 59 students. In Fall 2016, most of the students were in the social sciences, and a large number (maybe 90%) were female identifying.

I integrated several writing development aspects into the course, some of which were funded by the WDI, while others were cost-neutral. They included:

1. Participation in the Writing TA Training Program
2. Lecture time allocated specifically to research and writing (e.g., academic integrity; reading and paraphrasing scholarly articles; annotated bibliographies; thesis statements)
3. Short hands-on in-class activities related to research and writing (e.g., craft a working thesis statement)
4. Three scaffolded writing assignments (article paraphrase; annotated bibliography and outline; op-ed)
5. Dedicated Writing TA office hours (offered before the due date of the last two assignments)
6. Detailed rubrics and substantive feedback on first two writing assignments

These components were outlined in my initial application, and I proceeded largely as I had planned. I did not include a formal “peer feedback” component as was outlined in the initial application, largely because of time constraints in class, but this was not a component for which I requested resources, however.

Objective Outcomes

To test the efficacy of the writing interventions, I used student grades on the first assignment (a paraphrase and response to a scholarly article) as the baseline. This assignment came early in the term. Although I discussed the assignment in class and gave a brief lecture on reading and paraphrasing scholarly articles, we did not offer dedicated Writing TA office hours prior to the due date. This is the “untreated” condition in as much as one can import experimental principles into this type of assessment.

Table 1. Student Outcomes on Three Writing Assignments

	Assignment #1	Assignment #2	Assignment #3
Average grade	71%	72%	71%
Median grade	75%	75%	75%
Std. deviation	2.33	15.86	17.58
Highest grade	90%	88%	87%
Lowest grade*	58%	45%	50%

*Excludes unsubmitted assignments

As is shown in Table 1, there is little difference in the average and median grades across the three assignments, which could be taken as evidence of the ineffectiveness of the writing interventions. However, it is worth noting that the first assignment asked students primarily to paraphrase something they had read and provide a short response / reflection. The original argumentation needed to do well on this assignment was not significant, and most would be familiar with this type of assignment. Moreover, it was due early on in the term, at a time when most students would have few other competing assignments. The last assignment, an op-ed, demanded significant original and critical thought and was in a format that would have been new to most students. These factors are intervening variables that are difficult to control for.

It's also instructive to take a look at the performance of the 10 students with the lowest grades on the first assignment. As is shown in Table 2, the students who received the lowest grades on the first assignment improved their performance by an average of nearly 10 percentage points by the last assignment. This suggests that the writing interventions targeted and assisted the students who struggled the most prior to the interventions.

Table 2. Outcomes of 10 Lowest-Scoring Students

Student	Assignment #1	Assignment #2	Assignment #3
1	58	58	68
2	63	45	74
3	65	74	78
4	65	71	81
5	65	78	72
6	66	86	78
7	66	74	78
8	67	74	75
9	67	78	75
10	67	64	68
Mean	64.9	70.2	74.7

In addition to the improvement of student grades, particularly among the lowest performing students, there are three other objective outcomes worth mentioning. First, there was almost no drop-off in enrolment in this course. This suggests that students were interested and engaged in the course and/or felt supported in their learning. Second, there were no cases of plagiarism, which I think is a product of the scaffolded assignment structure. Third, students seemed to be less stressed out about the assignments, and there were very few requests for extensions.

Subjective Outcomes

I was initially disappointed with the outcome of the writing interventions. As noted above, the overall average on the three writing assignments hardly budged, which at a surface level left me with the impression that we hadn't achieved much in the way of objective results. Looking at the performance of the lowest ranked students, however, did give me considerable pause. It's clear that those students saw marked success in their writing over the course of the year. I am also pleased with how engaged students seemed in the writing of their op-eds, and I think that might have been a function of talking about writing and argumentation throughout the year.

Students who attended the dedicated office hours largely told me these were useful, but only 7-10 students took advantage of this opportunity prior to each assignment. That said, the Teaching Assistant thought the one-on-one sessions were effective, and she felt, in particular, that they improved students' ability to (a) articulate a thesis statement and (b) follow the assignment instructions.

When I taught POL 214 as a writing-intensive course in 2015-2016, I conducted a survey (outside the bounds of the course evaluation), which asked students questions about the writing instruction. Some of the most positive responses came from that, and it was clear that students really benefited from the writing instruction. I didn't conduct a similar survey in POL 368, and I think that was an oversight, as I don't have similar subjective data from the students. When I offer POL 368 again, I will include a survey component so the students could offer their insights on what worked and what didn't.

Lessons Learned

I learned the following lessons teaching POL 368 as a writing intensive course:

1. Think broadly about how you define the "success" of the intervention; if you focus only on the class average, you might miss some of the more focused and targeted outcomes even though these are important. At the same time, don't try to tackle too much. I can't address all writing issues; my priority should be thesis statements and the construction of arguments. I should orient assessment around these two goals.

2. Students can better manage scaffolded assignments; these help them build skills and manage their time. This tends to reduce requests for extensions as well as panic-stricken cases of plagiarism.
3. Talking about writing in lectures, and integrating this throughout the curriculum helps students better understand the links between the different components of the course.
4. The standard course evaluation doesn't provide adequate space for students to reflect on some of the skills you have helped them develop; for instructors who work to develop those skills, this can be demoralizing. You need to create specific evaluation tools to help you assess the efficacy of innovative interventions.

Proposed Changes

Overall, I am pleased with the writing outcomes that were achieved in POL 368. I would, however, propose the following changes when I offer the course in a writing intensive format in Fall 2017.

1. Because the assignments help develop different types of writing skills (e.g., reading and paraphrasing; gathering sources and developing an outline; writing an op-ed), it is difficult to test the effects of the intervention. I would therefore include a better pre- and post-test measure of writing outcomes. I would very much welcome input from the RGASC on how best to achieve this.
2. Although I was happy with the assignments, I might experiment in 2017 by removing the paraphrase assignment and replacing it with an infographic assignment that would help students assessment evidence and concisely structure it into an argument. I would also like to try once again to integrate a peer feedback component.
3. My main objective is to improve students' ability to (a) write a thesis statement and (b) structure an argument. I would better emphasize these objectives in the assignment descriptions and in my lectures and hands-on activities. I would use the pre- and post-test to evaluate student outcomes on these measures, and I would like to improve my rubrics to give students more guidance on how these components are being evaluated.
4. In addition, I would ask students to complete a pre- and post-assessment of their own writing skills and efficacy. This would include questions about their perceived writing skills and ability to construct arguments, as well as an activity where they have to identify and assess a thesis statement. This would help me evaluate the more subjective outcomes that have been achieved through the interventions.