Teaching Writing about International Relations

MATTHEW EVANGELISTA

Government

My fellow political scientists sometimes joke that our field is not a coherent or legitimate discipline. Political science (called "government" at Cornell and a few other tradition-bound institutions) is made up of people who act very much like economists or sociologists, statisticians or historians. They sometimes seem to hold more in common with members of those fields than with each other. The same is true of international relations, one of the subfields of political science. The approaches to the subject are myriad. The extensive range of writing styles reflects that diversity. Game theorists and statisticians often use words only to introduce and summarize the most important material: the mathematical model, the equations, or the data. For some postmodern scholars of international affairs, the word, or "discourse," is everything—but that doesn't make it easy to understand what they write.

In my teaching on international relations, we chart a middle course, but still manage to cover a wide range of writing styles. Students attempt to do one of the few things that do seem to unite many political scientists: to account for some political behavior (international, in our case) by developing competing explanations and evaluating the evidence supporting or undermining each one. We approach that task step by step, beginning with exercises that develop the students' abilities to make consistent arguments and relate them to evidence. Students try their hand at writing short opinion pieces on topical issues, or even letters to the editor. We emphasize writing and rewriting drafts. We try to unlearn what many of us learned in high school: that you can't write something

until you have a complete outline, that you have to avoid the first person at all costs, including tortuous passive constructions. Ultimately, if we are successful, the students learn to present even the most difficult theoretical ideas (mainly associated these days with the "social constructivist" school of international relations) with clarity and style. The skill of writing clearly is one that students will use throughout their careers, long after they have forgotten the difference between "globalization" and "internationalization," or how the Cold War began or ended.

Much work in political science is historical in nature. We draw on sources including archives, memoirs, interviews, and contemporary newspaper and journal reports. There is often so much material that we cannot keep it all in our heads at once. We need to begin writing before we have gathered all the information we will need, lest we forget what we had earlier discovered. As we work on a particular argument, we refer back to our sources (and discover new ones), and revise the argument as we go along, in an iterative process. This sort of writing, characteristic of much of political science, does not lend itself easily to an outline-based strategy.

Much of my students' writing seems better suited to the write-and-revise strategy than to the outline-first strategy. In my course on comparative foreign policy, for example, I pose questions for student essays that require them to use multiple sources and to integrate evidence into their arguments that the original authors (of the required course readings) might have used for very different purposes. The task is similar to historical research. On a more mundane level, students who write take-home essay exams, and perhaps haven't done all of the required course reading ahead of time, can benefit from a strategy that emphasizes writing and revising as new information becomes available (or as they recognize that they lack adequate evidence and need to read more). Here is sample paper topic in comparative foreign policy.

> In order to sort out the most important factors and explanations for a particular phenomenon, political scientists often employ "counterfactual history." To take a simple example, one might argue that if Roosevelt had lived longer or Stalin had died sooner, the Cold War would never have happened. Try to find from among the readings an explicit or implicit counterfactual argument and analyze it. Consider, for example, the assumptions it makes about the most important level of analysis (in the case above, it would be the individual level—the "great person theory of history"), and about the most important explanations for the Cold War. The goal of the paper is to think critically about alternative courses that postwar

Soviet-American relations might have taken as a way to understand the main factors that influenced the Cold War.

My approach to teaching an alternative to the outline-first strategy is to propose in effect an outline-second strategy. The emphasis is on writing a draft and then analyzing the draft to perceive the structure of the essay and how it should be revised for clarity, consistency, and organization.

In sorting through evidence and deciding how it relates to her arguments, a student will typically confront evidence that does not support the case she wants to make. I encourage each student to consider this a potential opportunity rather than a defect of her argument. If a student can address possible problems with her argument head on, she can often make a more persuasive case for her position. A student usually does this by laying out an alternative argument that is consistent with the evidence that she finds anomalous for her own argument. The alternative explanation might account for the anomaly, but it might not do so well in explaining the rest of the evidence. If the student's original explanation accounts for more of what she seeks to explain, despite some anomalies, by conventional social-science criteria it is considered the stronger explanation. The task of formulating rival explanations for some political behavior, and testing them in this fashion against evidence, lies at the heart of political science. Most journal editors and reviewers will explicitly look for a section of a manuscript submission that addresses alternatives to the author's preferred explanation. Recognizing and weighing alternative explanations against evidence is undoubtedly a skill worth teaching, even to the majority of students who have no intention of becoming professional political scientists.

After reconciling redundancies and contradictions within the body of the paper draft, and dealing with problematic evidence and alternative explanations, a student still might face an important task to address in a final revision. I always remind each student that if he writes without an outline first, he might find that his conclusion does not always agree with his introduction. In an introduction, one makes a guess about where the argument is going, but it might end up going somewhere else. Students seem to find very helpful the apparently obvious admonishment: "Make sure your conclusion does not contradict your introduction." The solution, as I teach it, is a straightforward one. Replace your introductory paragraph with your concluding one, and rewrite your conclusion to paraphrase your new introduction.

Some readers, not social scientists I hope, might be shocked at the cookbook quality of these writing guidelines. Must the conclusion simply repeat the thesis of the introduction? For most purposes—for example, publication in mainstream professional journals—the answer is yes. A good expository essay

on politics begins with an introduction that sets out clearly what the author intends to argue, including a summary of the main conclusion or "findings." Each paragraph follows in an order that the reader will have anticipated from the introduction. The conclusion typically sums up the overall argument and often proposes suggestions for further research.

This form of organization, which leaves so little to the imagination, is very different from how students seem to prefer to write. Many favor the mystery-story approach. The writer gradually leads the reader toward her conclusions, saving the punch line—to mix metaphors—until the very end. Most readers do not have the patience, however, to follow the argument to the end unless they know in advance where it is going. Professional journal editors and reviewers are quite explicit on that point. In addition, many journals require an abstract. To write an abstract one must be able to summarize the main points of an article concisely, without repeating all the steps that led to the conclusion. Happily, if an article is well organized, the abstract can consist mainly of part of the introductory paragraph and the first sentence ("topic sentence") of several of the paragraphs.

When I first began teaching writing, I got the impression that most of my students had learned yet another of the key lessons I had learned about writing in high school: except when writing explicit autobiography, always avoid the first person. Recently students' hesitations about using the first person have given way to the opposite tendency—an overly conversational or colloquial style of writing. We might attribute this tendency in part to the culture of the Internet, where communication often consists of battles of personal opinion on a range of topics, including politics. There is a place for opinion in the field of political science. Even if some scholars seem motivated more by "science" than politics, others are eager to express their political views and offer policy-relevant (as our jargon puts it) advice. Many professional political scientists publish their views in the opinion pages of newspapers or, in more extended form, in journals such as *The Nation* or *The Atlantic Monthly*. The writing style for op-ed pieces differs from conventional academic writing and not every scholar (or student) can do it well.

In several of my courses, students learn to write op-ed pieces. Beyond the basics of clear presentation and coherent argumentation, what makes for a good op-ed is partly a matter of taste. I suggest three criteria: First, although an opinion-page writer presents her own opinion, she should avoid making herself the most important political figure in the article. Unless you are Dave Barry or Russell Baker, your op-ed should not consist of a string of your personal political pet peeves.

Second, an op-ed should provide some new information as well as opinion.

The reader should learn something that she has not already read in the news section of the same newspaper. For a writer, starting with that new information is a good way to draw the reader into an op-ed. For professional writers, the new information is often garnered from interviews ("As Yasser Arafat told me last week . . ."), but it can also come from scholarly sources or government reports that are not otherwise widely known. I tell my students who want to write about the wars in former Yugoslavia, for example, that they can find a good "hook" without looking very far. They might start with the scholarly works I have assigned in the course syllabus. There they would find, for instance, that on the eve of the breakup of Yugoslavia, one-fifth of the country's working population was unemployed. In Serbia, about half of young men in their twenties were without jobs, providing ready recruits for the militias that ravaged first Croatia, then Bosnia, then Kosovo, then Macedonia. The connection between economic conditions and political and military outcomes could form the basis for an opinion-page article that would provide both underappreciated information as well as a point of view.

Finally, I encourage the students, as they do in their longer papers, to entertain alternative points of view or interpretations of the evidence. In an essay of seven hundred or eight hundred words, a thorough presentation and refutation of alternatives is impossible, but an acknowledgment of the other sides of an argument adds, rather than detracts, from the credibility of one's own position.

A key purpose of the Writing in the Majors program is to integrate the teaching of writing with the substantive study of an academic discipline. The study of international relations for students consists mainly of reading—primary sources, such as newspapers; secondary historical accounts; and theoretical discussions. Learning to read critically is an important way to improve one's writing skills.

In fields as varied as political science or international relations, what qualifies as good writing may be a matter of dispute. I always ask my students at the end of the semester to give their evaluations of the course readings, so that I can consider whether to reassign the same texts next time I teach the course. I often find that students assert that a particular author "writes well," when they really mean, "I liked what she had to say." They sometimes describe as "a terrible writer" someone whose ideas they found offensive, or perhaps just hard to understand.

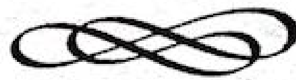
Many students seem allergic to political scientists' pretensions to "theory," so that any author who makes abstract arguments is dismissed as a poor writer. Most teachers of international relations would respond that theories always drive real-world politics, but policy makers are not always aware of their theo-

retical assumptions. Or, as Keynes famously put it, "Mad men in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back." By developing the ability to identify the assumptions underlying politicians' rationales for their foreign policies, students enhance their analytic skills. By studying the work of "academic scribblers" and assessing the validity of their arguments and the quality of their writing, students ultimately improve their own writing skills as well.

The basic skills I seek to teach in my writing courses include clear organization and exposition, relating evidence to arguments, and evaluating competing explanations. Despite the diversity of approaches to the study of international relations, most scholars would agree that these skills constitute the necessary core of good writing practices in the discipline. They are also skills that every college student should learn. So even if my students' futures in international relations are limited to foreign travel and reading about current world events, I will have done my job if they leave my courses with improved abilities to write.

Local Knowledges, Local Practices

Writing in the Disciplines at Cornell



EDITED BY

Jonathan Monroe

University of Pittsburgh Press

2003