

Within Political Science, the sophomore/junior seminar is a class designed to prepare students to take their senior seminar or write a senior thesis. Each year I teach either “Theories and Politics of African Decolonization” (POLS 343) or “Theories of International Political Economy” (POLS 390), both of which require students to complete a significant research paper as preparation for their senior seminar. The sophomore/junior seminars require students write a final research paper that draws upon concepts and theories discussed during the semester, applying them to topics, regions, or contexts of the student’s choosing. I evaluate final research papers using the six-part rubric our department developed for grading final papers in the senior seminar: (1) Does the paper include a researchable question? (2) Does the student use evidence to support his/her main points? Does it offer a clear thesis statement? (3) Is the structure of the paper coherent and well organized? Does the structure of the paper follow from the argument being advanced? (4) Has the student been able to integrate political science theories and research in the paper? (5) Does the paper demonstrate incorporation of counter arguments? (6) Is the paper coherent, clearly organized, and well written?

While some students have embraced the writing of a research paper, I have found that many students still struggle. One problem I have faced is not successfully finding ways to incorporate research strategies into the class, and balancing content with teaching how to write within the discipline. As part of the Writing Fellows Program offered through the Allen K. Smith Center during the 2017-18 academic year I had the opportunity to think through a number of ways to better prepare students to do large research assignments.

The Writing Fellows program was particularly helpful in thinking about a number of ways to structure in-class writing exercises and other assignments that can give students more structure in completing a research paper. One idea I developed during the semester was an assignment “reverse engineering” an academic article. For the first part of this assignment, student would read a journal

article for class and come expecting to discuss the content in class. Based on seminar conversations about organizing in-class writing exercises, I have decided instead to hand out a worksheet asking students to reflect on how the article is organized, what elements they find most accessible and compelling, where they were most confused, etc. We can then use this in-class writing exercise to examine the article's structure, folding into a discussion of content. The second in-class write would have students to look at the citations used by the author, asking them to reflect on the kinds of citations, their relative "quality," and what the citations tell us about who the author's perceived audience is. These two in-class writing exercises would help students focus their thinking on *how* a piece writing, including how it is structured, organized, and sourced and what the elements mean for the argument itself.

This in-class exercise could be followed by an assignment in which students write a paper using only the references in the article's bibliography. This would require students acquaint themselves with the library and figure out how to retrieve specific sources. The quality of these papers would then be shaped by the number of the different sources they could access. On the day students turn in this assignment I will provide another in-class free write asking students to explain the various problems they had finding sources, questions about how to use the library, and any obstacles that came up. We can use this exercise as an opportunity to talk about strategies to refine research and library skills, reflecting on the assignment they just completed.

As an undergraduate student research papers were one of the most thrilling and frustrating assignments. I'm excited about the prospect of designing an assignment (or set of assignments) that accentuates the thrill of writing a research paper, mitigates unnecessary frustration, and ultimately positions the student to excel in her senior seminar.

Thanks for a great year of thinking about writing. Many of the topics we have discussed are profoundly reshaping how I think about teach writing.