Techniques of Teaching: A Primer for Instructors in the Department of Social Sciences

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WRITING: THE KEY TO EFFECTIVE TEACHING

“A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus: 1. What am I trying to say? 2. What words will express it? 3. What image or idiom will make it clearer? 4. Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?”

--George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” 1946.

Overview

How can we best teach our course concepts to cadets? How can we best cultivate in cadets the intellectual skills of reading, thinking, and writing? One key aspect of the answer to both challenges lies in emphasizing writing in our teaching. We sharpen the effectiveness of our teaching by carefully integrating clearly focused writing requirements into our courses. Writing forces the cadet to carry the ball intellectually: to learn and to discriminate among ideas and facts, to take a stand, to reason independently, and to craft and support an argument. The cutting edge of good writing—and of learning—is independent reasoning. To write well, a cadet must think clearly, must focus the question, must sharpen the argument, and must support it with logical reasoning.

How do we promote good writing and, in the process, sharpen the intellectual vitality of our courses? Many obstacles impede this approach. Writing is as difficult as it is fruitful. Good writing is painfully hard work—requiring a concentrated mind, persistence, and patience. Good writing is time consuming—requiring brainstorming, analysis, craftsmanship, and repeated editing. Good writing is engaging, even consuming; therefore, writing is egoistic. As a result, we tend to write for ourselves and we resent others’ criticisms of our writing. How can we overcome these obstacles to the potent role of developing good writing as a key teaching vehicle (and as an objective in itself)?

The key to developing cadets’ intellectual skills is integration of writing into course design, analytical focus, cadet engagement, documentation, production skills, and evaluation and feedback. This chapter discusses the nature of each of these topics to help you figure out your

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approach to effective teaching in the Department of Social Sciences. Before we discuss these issues in detail, we need to consider the nature of our teaching and writing environment.

The Teaching Environment

*Impediments to Reading, Thinking, and Writing*

You will discover many barriers to your development of cadets as effective readers, thinkers, and writers. For example, cadets typically are stronger in quantitative than in verbal skills. Approximately half the USMA academic curriculum focuses on math, science, and engineering. Although some academic Departments, such as the Department of Mathematical Sciences, emphasize writing in their courses to some extent, cadet development in writing continues to be nurtured principally by the Departments of English and Philosophy, History, Social Sciences, and Law.

Cadets typically are inattentive and impatient in their writing. First, they write most often, in “mad-dash” fashion in time-constrained, in-class exams. Second, cadets perceive that different academic Departments (and USCC) want qualitatively different writing. For example, cadets believe that the Department of English and Philosophy demands persuasive writing, the Department of History values descriptive writing, and the Department of Social Sciences emphasizes analytical writing.

Cadets often misunderstand that good writing is good writing, and that the good writer always works to persuade the reader of the veracity of his or her argument through explicit focus, lucid analysis, and strong, concise prose. Too often, cadets miss the point that good writing is all about clear communication of an argument, whatever the specific nature of the requirement and the target audience.

Finally, because cadets are busy, they typically under-invest in writing. For instance, cadets generally procrastinate before undertaking the creative design of the structure of their papers, then hammer out a draft on the eve of the due date. Cadets spend too little time sculpting the ideas, reasoning, and choosing words in their initial draft, and submit their final paper at the last minute. A survey of cadets in SS307, International Relations, revealed that, on average, cadets seriously engaged themselves in their paper only in the last three weeks of a 14-week research and writing milestone process. In fact, most cadets printed their final paper within a few hours of the submission deadline. Many cadets have adopted the motto “Due tomorrow=do tomorrow” or think that they can write a “Dean’s Hour Special” immediately prior to class, and that this will generate a satisfactory product.

*Aids to Reading, Thinking, and Writing*

On the other hand, we have significant advantages that aid in our efforts to develop cadet reading, thinking, and writing skills. Those of us on the faculty are successful leaders and teachers who have attended superb universities. In that our primary duty is to teach and develop cadets in their reading, thinking, and writing skills, we enjoy unprecedented mission focus and freedom from distractions.
The quality of our clientele —cadets—and resource support are unparalleled in the Army. Cadets are bright and want to do well in our courses.

Though cadets are hard-working, they are also terrifically pragmatic; correspondingly, they are impatient with ill-defined requirements and standards. Because they are personally over-achieving and operationally over-scheduled, they want you to show them a clear path to excellence. To be fair, however, showing your students a clear path to success does not mean giving them the “approved solution.” You will be amazed at how cadets will work for you when they understand what you want from them, and when you have shown them how to get there. On the other hand, you will be dismayed at how cadets will turn you off when they perceive that your requirements and standards are unclear or inconsistent.

**Writing in Our Courses Today**

What writing do we typically require of cadets in our courses? Cadets write chiefly for grades. The purpose of these graded writing requirements ranges from “write for your life dumping” on quizzes to research-based papers requiring thoughtful analysis. Specifically, cadets write for: (1) in-class quizzes or writs, (2) more comprehensive and analytical in-class exams (the WPR, Written Partial Review; or TEE, Term End Exam), (3) out-of-class short papers (book reports, book reviews, case studies, analytical “think pieces”; policy memoranda), (4) research designs, and (5) research term papers. The latter typically involve separate graded incremental efforts on outlines, research plans, bibliographies, and opening paragraphs.

Core courses tend to rely more on in-class graded writing requirements, plus a major paper. In SS201, Economics, cadets write a paper to interpret and analyze a spreadsheet simulation of economic policy. Cadets write a 10-page research paper in SS202, American Politics, in order to analyze the politics of a particular issue or institution. In SS307, International Relations, cadets write a 15-page research paper. Thus every cadet is required to write a major analytical paper (weighted, typically, 20 to 35 percent of the course grade) in each of our core courses.

Toolbox courses, electives, and capstone courses usually require fewer in-class writing requirements and tend more toward a series of papers written outside of class. Cadets who within their major have a “with honors” designation or who choose to write a thesis must take a one-year, two-course sequence, their major’s capstone and SS498, in which they read the literature and write a major paper on a topic of their interest.

The integration of writing into all our courses enables us to help cadets develop lifetime skills in reading, thinking, and writing. To this end, we must stretch them—make them work! How do we do it? What keys will help you engage cadets in good writing?
Keys to Effective Writing

“Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts.”

Course Design

Course design is crucially important. In addition to crafting course purpose and objectives, scope, readings, lecturers, and the lesson schedule, the course director decides how to integrate writing requirements into the course. This creative process reflects guidance from program directors and other senior civilian professors, previous course-end reports, and input from visiting professors, as well as the course director’s own intellectual perspective. The course director makes the fundamental decisions about the nature and roles of writing in the course during this design process.

We can improve our teaching by investing careful thought in how we use writing requirements to concentrate cadets’ intellectual efforts, and to develop in them skill in the intellectual discipline of crafting and selling an argument as the key to their good writing. This is an area where we have room for improvement. In general, we tend to give greater thought in our course designs to ideas and readings than to the specific thrust of writing requirements as vehicles for forcing cadets to grapple creatively and rigorously with the substantive material we select.

Writing can be divided into what Elbow and Sorcinelli call high stakes and low stakes writing. High stakes writing assignments ask students to articulate what they are studying and to demonstrate that they understand the topic about which they are writing. This type of writing demands a mastery of subject material that may not be adequately assessed by short-answer or multiple choice exams or assignments.

Low stakes writing can also increase students’ learning and understanding, but is usually more informal and can be accomplished as an in-class exercise (perhaps to summarize the previously assigned readings) or out-of-class homework (for example, a journal).

A major consideration in deciding on the specific nature of a particular writing requirement is the demand imposed on cadet time. Cadets are busy, and cannot fence large chunks of time for sustained research and writing. You must estimate carefully the time demands of your course. For example, you can legitimately claim no more than 120 hours of cadet time for a three credit-hour course: 40 hours for class, and 80 hours for outside work. Compute the aggregate cost of your reading load, and trade that cost against the cost of the outside writing requirements you envision. Balance proportionally the cost of your writing requirements in total cadet time and the grade weight of these requirements. For example, incentives in SS307 fairly weight the research paper as one-third of the course grade because cadets average around fifty hours (of a total course claim of 141 hours) on their research paper. Think through whether and how you
allocate compensatory class drops for writing. You want to be fair, and you want to be realistic. However, you want to avoid subsidizing last-minute paper preparation.

**Analytical Focus**

The most important key to good thinking and writing is analytical focus. This key involves two simple questions.

**What is your purpose?**

**How do you advance your purpose?**

These questions highlight a number of imperatives to good thinking and writing. First, the writer (not the reader) carries the burden of action. “How do you advance your purpose?” Effective writing follows the rule that “hard writing makes for easy reading.” Second, good writing requires a clear sense of purpose. What are you trying to do? What do you want to communicate? What message do you want to sell to the reader? Third, what must you do to persuade the reader of your purpose? No matter how vivid or interesting, good writing is more than a bulletin board to which bits of thought and language are posted. Good writing is purposive—it argues the merits of a purpose. The good writer never loses sight of the task of selling that purpose, ruthlessly omitting interesting tidbits of fact or analysis that fail to advance the argument.

We can easily translate these keys into our course writing requirements by (1) making explicit the purpose of the writing requirement, and (2) by holding cadets accountable. We must ensure cadets clearly understand our purpose—to include how it is embedded in the course.

**Our Task — Define an Explicit Requirement**

Make writing requirements explicit. What is the question? What do you want your cadets to do? Why? How does this requirement fit in the course? How are you constraining their topic selection? Where do they find guidelines on how to do this requirement? How do they assess their progress? Be precise. Cadets will work harder and develop further to the degree they have a clear conception of the requirement confronting them. This approach does not mean that we should present “cook book” problems, or avoid asking cadets to analyze ambiguous problems and the interesting questions that have no answer. Rather, we should be explicit about what you want them to do, whatever it is.

The following are examples of poorly constructed writing requirements:

Select any topic involving international affairs that you find interesting. Write an analysis of this topic. See me if you have questions, or want further guidance.

Your paper should be a case study involving the interaction of public organizations and/or political executives on some issue. The key is political interaction. Look hard for a good topic and look everywhere you can. You have a lot of latitude in choosing a topic. You
must ensure your paper is analytical—you should compare or contrast your topic with the literature of political science, explain some facet of bureaucratic or organizational behavior, and suggest the implications of your conclusions.

The following are examples of properly constructed writing requirements:

Why did state A do... to state B? Use one of the theories we have studied in this course to guide your explanation of this case.

Select a foreign policy decision from the menu below. Use at least one of the theories we have studied to guide your explanation of “Why did A do xxx?” Use your theoretical perspective to organize and guide your efforts: what is important, what questions do you ask, how do you sort out and interpret facts, how do you discover relationships, how do you reason in order to explain the policy decision? Support your assertions.

You will write two comparative politics papers. In the first paper, apply two different theories we have studied to analyze an important political variable in one country. In the second paper, apply (at least) one theory we have studied to compare a significant political variable in two different countries.

The key to this paper is analysis, not description. By analysis, we mean the use of political science theory to explain why your case turned out the way it did, why the actors behaved as they did, and what implications followed.

You may choose as your topic any post-1945 political or policy decision, question, or event within the purview of the American federal government. Your analysis paper presents an analytical perspective, describes the facts of the case as they are relevant to that analytical perspective, and evaluates the fit of those facts to the expectations of the analytical framework. Use this perspective to guide your focus and analysis of “the why?” and “the so what?” of your case.

Our Task—Hold Cadets Accountable

Effective writing starts with a clear sense of purpose. Your first challenge is to help each cadet identify a central question. This step is the most difficult and important one in writing. Although time-consuming, your investment during this front-end architectural stage is critical. You must walk each cadet over all the normal hurdles: course context, purpose, topic selection, scope, interest, resources, and feasibility. Second, you must help each cadet think through how they will research the topic and analyze the data. What methodological steps are necessary? What ideas or theories in the course will enable them to evaluate their central question? What materials are available for elaborating on these theories or for providing evidence highlighted by these theories?

Third, you must encourage cadets to remain disciplined in their focus. This task is impossible if they have no clear central questions, or if they have not thought them through sufficiently. Talk with cadets constantly as they struggle with their writing requirement. “What is your central
question? Does this advance your analysis?” It is often appropriate for cadets to state their central questions at the outset of their papers.

**Cadets’ Task—Clearly Define their Purpose and Focus on Achieving It**

For a given requirement, focusing the scope, defining a purpose, and charting a methodological path to support this purpose are the most difficult and important tasks. Consistently force cadets to define and refine their central questions. “So what... what’s your point?” are as constructive as they are infuriating guides to disciplining analytically focused writing. Here are some useful suggestions for coaching cadets to sharpen the focus of their writing:

1. Write to make your paper easy to read and comprehend. Preview your writing in your introduction to answer the following questions.
   - What is the question?
   - Why is this question significant and interesting?
   - What is the answer?
   - What competing answers are rejected?
   - How is the answer supported?
   - How is this answer significant? What are its implications?
   - How is the paper organized to make this argument?

2. State your central question explicitly at the very outset in the introduction (perhaps in the opening paragraph; usually on the first page). A taut opening paragraph answers many of the questions posed above. The following passages are examples of how to make a potent argument:

   John Mearsheimer: “The distribution and character of military power among states are the root causes of war and peace. The peace in Europe flowed from the bipolar distribution of military power on the Continent; the rough equality between the polar powers, and the nuclear arsenal of the superpowers. The prospect of major crises, even wars, in Europe is likely to increase dramatically now that the Cold War is receding into history.”

   John Gaddis: “Containment was the product, not so much of what the Russians did, or of what happened elsewhere in the world, but of internal forces operating within the United States.”

3. Write the body of the paper with a ruthless eye to answering your central question. Every section, paragraph, sentence, and word should be focused on addressing the central question. Avoid distractions, no matter how interesting. Delete all ideas and words that do not directly advance your analysis. Each section and paragraph should fit into the larger context, and should maintain its own internal logic of (sub)argument, evidence, counter-arguments, conclusion, and transition.

4. Write to be “user-friendly.” Preview your answer to the paper’s central question in the introduction, and stake each paragraph to a main point that advances the argument. Close your argument in the conclusion. Restate your argument, and assess its implications and significance. In this way, the reader can easily consume the paper by reading your introduction, the first sentence of each paragraph, and your conclusion.
5. Assist the reader by sign-posting the major elements of your argument with subtitles that themselves state a piece of the argument. For example, John Mearsheimer’s provocative interpretation of post-Cold War European stability pulls the reader through his argument by using evocative subtitles such as “Back to the Future” and “the Cold War — Why We Will Miss It.” Use graphics and data tables to punctuate your argument or to present evidence.

**Cadet Engagement**

Cadets write good papers to the degree you get them engaged—in terms of pure sweat, as well as intellectually—in your requirement. Just as the strongest cadets do not necessarily write the best papers, the weakest cadets do not write the weakest papers. The discriminator is personal investment. There is no substitute for pride, craftsmanship, and persistence in good writing. Thus the core courses typically lead cadets through a highly structured regime of milestone requirements that leads to submission of a final paper. For example, we require cadets to read, conduct directed library research, and participate in methodology labs in lab periods. In addition, cadets submit incremental pieces of their paper over the first twelve weeks of the term. In addition to requiring cadets to pull their writing work forward in the course, these milestones punctuate the point that the course readings and writing requirement are organic complements in the overall course.

It is amazing that, despite the milestone schedule, cadets backload their writing work. Although they satisfy the incremental requirements, cadets begin work in earnest, on average, only in the last three weeks of a 14-week process. For example, cadets have long perceived the research paper in SS307, International Relations, as an intimidating minefield in the path of each cadet toward graduation. Yet this long and storied reputation apparently fails to override the cadet “just-in-time” management approach. Cadets typically write this paper in the last two weeks before submission.

Part of the burden to get cadets seriously engaged in their writing falls on you. You earn your money by coaching, counseling, and inspiring cadets to invest themselves in their writing. In addition to offering general writing tips in class, talk to cadets individually about their writing. Use e-mail to point out good materials or to critique their work. Spend the time to mark-up their writing with your feedback. Teach them to write iteratively. Return marked-up drafts, exams, or papers quickly. Give cadets useful feedback on what they did well and poorly. No one respects an instructor who delays returning graded papers, or who returns a paper with a grade, but no comments.

Being able to write well and communicate effectively is a necessary component of being an officer. Many cadets lack the broader context that we as professionals can provide. Each officer’s ability to write can influence whether a valued subordinate receives the appropriate award, or receives a promotion. This should matter to cadets as future officers.

Writing is a “forcing function”—it forces the student to say what he or she means. While comments in class may meander, writing will force a student to say exactly what they mean.
Lastly, it is worth emphasizing to cadets that commanders depend on subordinates and staff officers to produce clearly written products, advice, and courses of action. Subordinates rely on clearly communicated orders, with focused intent and mission. Reminding your students of this goes back to one of the central questions in writing, i.e. what is my purpose?

**Documentation**

Reinforce the importance and many values of documentation: e.g., to credit the ideas or words of others, to signpost excellent sources for the reader, to add credence to claims and arguments. Hold up the standard references (their *Little, Brown Handbook* and the Dean’s *Documentation of Academic Work*) as well as guidelines unique to your course. Cadets now have access to a variety of written and online tools that can assist them in citing their sources properly. Be explicit. At the end of the day, cadets remain responsible for their own performance. However, you will want to know that you have done everything in your power to prevent any cadet documentation problems that could stem from a lack of clear course requirements or a failure to articulate expectations.

**Evaluation and Feedback**

Grading standards for written work, especially graded homework of various types, obviously will vary by course, the nature of the requirement, and the time allowed. In any case, demand hard work and set high standards. Give cadets feedback on the mechanics as well as the substance of their work. Cadets will adjust their writing standards to the level you demand.

It can be difficult to assign a “fair” grade to a writing assignment due to the inherent subjectivity in evaluating your students’ writing. For some, grading rubrics mitigate this problem by spelling out criteria the instructor deems important. Others may wish to consider a holistic approach to grading each writing assignment.

While it is now common for some assignments to be submitted digitally, we must avoid the temptation to treat the paper as though we are editors—commenting on every individual grammatical or spelling mistake or even fixing errors. We must remain focused on the skill of addressing writing assignments from a “global perspective”—focusing only on those weaknesses that will bear the most fruit in terms of improvement.

**Conclusion**

Stretch cadets intellectually. Good writing is both our goal and our most effective means for enhancing our teaching effectiveness. Our goal is to develop in each cadet the ability to synthesize ideas and facts logically, make a cogent argument, and persuade a reader of the validity of the conclusions. Good writing is the natural product of skillful reading and thinking. By the same token, we teach our course concepts more effectively by requiring cadets to integrate and employ these ideas in well-designed writing requirements in our courses.

There are two keys to success on these counts. First, we must teach cadets to focus their work. What is their purpose? What must they do to sell this purpose to the reader? Second, we must
inspire and cajole cadets to labor and sweat when they write. Good writing requires hard work in reading, thinking, and writing.

Effective writing provides the best tool for, as well as the best test of, effective teaching. We raise the quality of cadets’ reading, thinking, and writing skills by emphasizing these two keys of analytical focus and hard work. The measure of successful teachers is the degree to which they stretch cadets intellectually. The path to such success lies in integrating demanding writing requirements into our courses.
Bibliography


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iii Ibid, 214.

iv Ibid, 227.

v Ibid, 226.