

**Writing Development Initiative – Final Report**  
ENV/POL 250Y; Environmental Policy in Canada  
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In the 2014-2015 calendar year my course was granted \$8,850.00 in support for student writing. This report will briefly summarize the kind of instruction provided, the writing activities undertaken by students, and an evaluation of the initiative in my course.

Writing Instruction Provided

Two teaching assistants for the course attended the RGASC's Writing TA Training Program and benefited greatly from this experience. During the yearlong course the TAs spent about 25% to 50% of tutorial time each week discussing writing and research. This included specific focus on writing thesis statements and developing arguments to support the thesis statement.

One tutorial was spent (the full hour) on peer review of writing where students read each other's papers and provided feedback. I led that tutorial on February 12<sup>th</sup>.

While not instruction per se, the course also implemented ENV/POL 250Y drop-in hours at the RGASC for each paper assignment (4 total).

About 15% of class time over the course of the year was spent on writing specific instruction where I focused on the importance of peer-reviewed research, proper citations, and constructing arguments supported by evidence.

Less Informal Writing Instruction Provided

Writing is difficult for everyone. It is especially difficult for individuals that do not read and do not enjoy reading. In my courses I try to assign a variety of material to be read and evaluated. This ranges from websites and blogs to scholarly books to collections of essays to historical narratives. Exposing students to different styles of writing is important to build and inform their writing.

I also try to talk about the writing process. Early in the semester I have a 30-minute "vent" session during class time to allow students to complain about writing in college. I essentially write up on the board all things they tell me they hate about writing essays or assignments. We then go through the list and I try to explain why professors assign writing and what some strategies are for making the process less painful. Related to this, I also talk a lot about my own writing process. I assign my own book in the course and I take the opportunity to explain to students what it is like to collect data (evidence) and construct an argument. But I also talk more generally about the fear and the anxiety involved in writing. I think students understand what I am saying and connect on this issue. I have had a dozen or so students tell me later – often in my 4<sup>th</sup> year seminar – what an impact I have had on their writing process and their written work.

## Writing Activities

The course was writing intensive. Over the yearlong semester, the students completed 8 writing assignments and wrote 2 writing based exams (a midterm and a final).

The 8 writing assignments included:

1. A draft of a Wikipedia entry (the student was assigned a word/concept/place/person that did not have an entry)
2. A final Wikipedia entry
3. A second Wikipedia entry (winter semester)
4. A five page argumentative essay (prior to writing instruction. This paper serves as a baseline essay)
5. A five page argumentative essay
6. A draft of a five page argumentative essay to be peer-reviewed
7. A revised five page essay after peer-review and TA feedback
8. A five page essay (at the end of the course to serve as an exit evaluation)

The two exams were written assessments (no multiple choice, matching etc). The exams included 4 key terms, 2 short answers, and 1 argumentative essay.

## Evaluation of Writing Activities

The class average and median grade for the paper assignments were as follows:

Paper 1 (pre-treatment evaluation): 59% average; 65% median score

Paper 2: 52% average; 65% median

Paper 3 (after revisions from peer review): 65% average; 70% median score

Paper 4 (exit evaluation): 66% average; 70% median score

The average from paper 1 to paper 4 increased from 59% to 66%. This can be attributed to writing instruction as well as other factors, such as students “learning what the instructor wants.” It is difficult to say with certainty (and I do not have the empirical data) how much improvement can be attributed solely to writing instruction. That said, I do strongly believe that student writing improved vastly over the course of the semester. A few students wrote absolutely outstanding 4<sup>th</sup> essays – nearly flawless.

In terms of the Wikipedia Assignments, the first assignment had an average of 70% (it was due January 6<sup>th</sup>) and the second assignment had an average of 70% (it was due March 24<sup>th</sup>). While there was no change in student performance, the second set of Wikipedia assignments were done with less anxiety and fuss. The initial assignment was met with resistance because students had no idea where to start doing research (seeing as they could not just Wikipedia the word). Students were resistant to going to the library. And those students who left the assignment until the last night found it very difficult to find source material on the Internet. Thus, the students were more prepared for the task by the second assignment. While the average did not improve, numerous students did write a second entry with greater ease. At least two students had their

entries published on Wikipedia. The links to the students work is below. This was not part of the assignment, but I did encourage students to submit their work (it is a rather lengthy process).

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northwest\\_Territories\\_Oil\\_and\\_Gas\\_Operations\\_Act,\\_2014](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northwest_Territories_Oil_and_Gas_Operations_Act,_2014)  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nunavut\\_Land\\_Claims\\_Agreement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nunavut_Land_Claims_Agreement)

In terms of formal feedback provided by students, there was surprisingly little said on course evaluations about the amount or type of writing assignments. Here are ALL the comments about writing provided by students in my formal evaluation for the course.

“I like how there were designated time slots at the RGWC to help use with our papers and wikis”

“I did enjoy working on the wiki assignment since it allowed students to explore and find information on notable environment subjects pertaining to Canada that the general public knows little about. In addition, it gave students insight to improving writing skills by learning to write concise, clearly inform, and organize their research so that it cover the significance of the subject. Lastly, I felt that it was good that there was lots of assignments so students always had a chance to improve their grade, but I do find that the exams is too much writing (little chance to mess up) for such a short period of time.”

“There was a lot of opportunities to get assistance in the course from office hours to professor booking writing center hours for the class. Furthermore, the tutorials were helpful in providing insight and ask questions regarding the reading materials the assignments were based on.”

### Course Reflection

Was it worth it? Did it make a difference? Would I do it again?

I cannot think of a more important skill to learn in university than writing. This is especially true if you consider critical reading and thinking to be the foundation of good writing.

So yes I think it was worth it (the money and time), I think it made a difference (to at least 25% of the students), and I will continue to emphasize good writing for the rest of my teaching career.

Higher education is facing a crisis that has a lot to do with the neoliberalization of education and market forces. This WDI final report is not the appropriate place to launch into a rant. However, I do think that students are adopting a consumer mentality and see themselves “buying” classes. Students are already working part or full-time jobs – so they are not looking to “work” in college as well. They want easy classes where reading is minimal to non-existent and where writing is not evaluated. I know that some students dropped my course after seeing the syllabus (because of the amount of writing). I heard some students complain all year about the essays. I had countless frantic emails asking for extensions because a student had not yet started the essay due the next day. I know that students did not want to read the books and often tried to skim them looking for the “answers.” (This is really obvious when students only pull quotations from the first 20 pages

and last 20 pages of a book). Finally, I also know that asking students to read and write will not make me a popular professor.

This is not going to stop me from assigning books and crafting essay assignments. Why? It is because my 4<sup>th</sup> year seniors cannot write an email without grammatical errors, let alone construct an argumentative essay. This is a problem for democracy. This is a problem for Canada. This is a problem for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Universities are producing consumers, not thinkers. It is dangerous and I won't be complacent in the process.

That said I did not apply for WDI funding next year. Instead I have talked to Erin Tolley, who is teaching the introduction to Canadian politics and she applied for funding. I think our first year courses at UTM should all be writing intensive. Or, at the minimum, I think every required course (at the first year level) in any given discipline should be writing intensive. That is the appropriate time and place for WDI funding. I have also advised Erin to not mention to her students that the course is writing intensive or part of the WDI program. The fact that so few students even thought to comment on the amount of writing in my course (on course evaluations) suggests that we might be able to normalize writing in college classrooms.