

Addressing Research and Writing Gaps in Political Science Proposal to the Writing Development Initiative

POL 368 Women and Politics

POL 368, Women and Politics, is an elective that has not been offered for a number of years. It is based on 24 lecture hours. I hope to build on approaches I developed while offering POL 214 as a writing-intensive course in 2015-2016. Some of the benefits that were realized when POL 214 was offered as a writing-intensive course in 2015-2016 are:

- 79% of students reporting improvements in their research and writing skills;
- 88% reduction in the number of academic integrity cases on the final paper;¹
- 58% reduction in drop rate;²
- Development of pedagogical skills in research and writing for 3 TAs and the course instructor; and
- Forging of stronger linkages between the course instructor, the RGASC, and the UTM Library.

When asked what they would personally take away from POL 214, a number of students provided unprompted responses that focused on their research and writing skills. Some of the qualitative feedback included:

- “How to write more precisely on assignments”
- “I found [the sessions with the writing TAs] very helpful when I wanted to know how to write assignments.”
- “Better writing skills and time management”
- “The skills I have received while doing various assignments, such as paraphrasing, writing an op-ed, writing an annotated bibliography, etc.”

Normally, a third-year half course would be allocated a total of 35 TA hours. Of these hours, 20 hours would be devoted to grading the mid-term and final exam. Five hours would be allocated to email correspondence and administration (e.g., uploading grades, dealing with appeals, exam invigilation), and the remaining 10 hours would be allocated to the grading of a single written assignment. TAs would not complete the Writing TA training, nor would they provide any in-person writing support to students.

¹ In 2013-2014, when POL 214 was offered without a scaffolded, writing intensive structure, there were 8 academic integrity cases related to the final paper. All but one of those students ultimately failed the course. In 2015-2016 when POL 214 was offered as a writing-intensive course with a scaffolded structure, there was just 1 academic integrity case related to the final paper. This is undoubtedly a function of more frequent instruction and feedback on academic integrity, as well as the early assignments that allowed us to correct academic integrity issues prior to the final paper.

² In 2013-2014, when POL 214 was offered as a standard course, initial enrolment was 232 students with a final enrolment of 192 students (-40). In 2015-2016 when it was offered as a writing-intensive course, initial enrolment was 240 students with a final enrolment of 223 students (-17). Although the reasons are not entirely clear, it is plausible that the more frequent feedback on assignments provided students with increased confidence in their abilities. That they were developing practical skills might also be relevant.

This proposal thus requests support for an additional **45 hours of TA support**, with a total budget of **\$2,209.50** to support: TA training; the grading of three additional writing assignments (paraphrase, annotated bibliography, outline); and two hours of dedicated in-person TA support (6 hours total) prior to the deadline for each of the three major steps in the final research assignment (annotated bibliography, outline, op-ed). In the absence of WDI funds, I will reduce the number of writing assignments, forego TA training related to writing assignments, and eliminate dedicated TA office hours for the purposes of providing writing feedback and support.

1. Principles

Three principles underpin efforts to develop and strengthen research and writing skills in a writing intensive version of POL 368 These are: coherence, iteration and collaboration.

(a) Coherence

Students tend to see the lecture, tutorials, readings and assignments as separate siloes instead of connected components that together enhance learning and skills development. A writing intensive version of POL 368 will ensure research and writing skills are taught, emphasized and developed throughout the course. This will be accomplished through the incorporation of skills-building in lectures (e.g., special presentations on research and writing skills, academic integrity, and library skills), readings (e.g., application of critical reading and notetaking skills) and assignments (e.g., application of research and writing skills).

(b) Iteration

Learning is iterative, and skills are developed and perfected through trial and error, repetition and ongoing feedback. POL 368 will encourage this iterative process in several ways. This will include: skill-building lectures in which the principles and skills and academic research and writing are presented; scaffolded assignments that incorporate and build on research and writing skills; and a larger number of writing assignments to provide students with increased opportunities to apply and demonstrate their research and writing skills.

(c) Collaboration

Knowledge can be furthered and enhanced through peer learning and collaboration. WDI funds and additional support from the RGASC and the Library will facilitate the introduction of an increased emphasis on collaboration in a writing intensive version of POL 368. This will include additional opportunities for assistance and feedback from TAs and a more team-based approach to research and writing instruction with enhanced collaboration between the instructor and TAs.

2. Strategies

(a) TA Training

In a writing intensive version of POL 368, TAs will be required to participate in the Writing TA Training Program offered through the RGASC.

(b) Lectures on Academic Research and Writing

A restructured POL 368 will allocate lecture time specifically to research and writing. This is a strategy that I implemented when teaching POL 214. Discussing research and writing during the lecture reinforces to students the importance of research and writing skills. The proposed lecture topics are: notetaking and paraphrasing; academic integrity and plagiarism; thesis statements; library skills; developing an outline; and writing an op-ed. These lectures will provide a foundation for tutorial exercises on research and writing, as well as for course assignments. No WDI funds are required for this component, although the input and expertise of the RGASC and UTM Library would be sought.

(c) Classroom Exercises on Academic Research and Writing

Because there are not separate tutorials in third-year courses, some lecture time will be devoted to hands-on activities that allow students to apply and practice skills for academic research and writing. These exercises will be adapted from similar tutorials that I delivered when teaching POL 214 and will mirror the lecture topics outlined above. These will give students hands-on opportunities to work on their research and writing skills, to benefit from TA input and to contribute to peer learning. No WDI funds are required for this component.

(d) Additional Writing Assignments

WDI funds will support increased TA hours for grading and providing feedback on additional writing assignments. The proposed writing tasks are outlined in section 3 of this proposal.

(e) Increased Feedback and Support for Academic Research and Writing

A writing intensive version of POL 368 will provide students with additional and more regular feedback to support for their academic research and writing. I propose to achieve this through three strategies. First, WDI funds will support additional TA office hours, which will be offered prior to the deadline for each writing assignment. This will give students an opportunity to seek one-on-one assistance with a “disciplinary insider.” Second, WDI funds will support an increase in the number of hours allocated to TA grading, and TAs will provide specific and targeted feedback to students on their writing. Training and consultation with the RGASC will help TAs develop the skills needed to provide this feedback.

3. Writing Tasks

A standard half-year course in political science would normally include one short research paper (2500 words) as the major assignment. A writing intensive version of POL 368 will replace the research essay with a series of scaffolded assignments so students can develop research and writing skills in a number of different formats. Students will write approximately 2800 words.

While this represents just a modest increase in the amount of words written, a singular focus on the writing quantity obscures some of the other benefits of the proposed interventions. In particular, the structure of the assignments will allow for more regular and frequent writing practice, contribute to the development of specific research and writing skills (e.g., paraphrasing, outlining, annotating), and expose students to a variety of writing formats.

My experience teaching POL 214 as a writing-intensive course has convinced me of the value of scaffolded writing assignments that focus on the development of specific research and writing skills. One clear benefit of a scaffolded structure is a reduction in the number of academic integrity cases. In addition, the development of specific research and writing skills is important because it teaches students the mechanics of academic inquiry. An assignment devoted to paraphrasing an academic article teaches students how to retrieve an article, how to read it efficiently and distill its contents and how to summarize in a way that does not constitute plagiarism. Writing tasks on thesis statements and outlines force students to get organized early on and also provides them with some initial feedback that they can use to strengthen their work. The proposed writing assignments in POL 368 are as follows:

(a) Reading and Paraphrasing Scholarly Literature

This assignment will require students to read a journal article and then prepare a short overview of the author's main arguments. This assignment builds skills related to retrieving and reading scholarly literature, summarizing and paraphrasing it concisely, and ensuring that they avoid plagiarism when drawing on the ideas of others.

Skills: library research, paraphrasing, writing

Total words: 750 words

Additional TA grading hours: 10 hours

(b) Preparing an Annotated Bibliography

This assignment will require students to identify scholarly sources that they can use to support the writing of their op-ed. Students will find and retrieve at least five scholarly sources relevant to the subject of their op-ed. They will then prepare an annotated bibliography that provides a summary and citation to each of these sources, as well as a brief overview demonstrating the connection of these sources to the subject of their op-ed.

Skills: library research, citations, paraphrasing, writing

Total words: 1000 words

Additional TA grading hours: 15 hours

Additional TA office hours: 2 hours

(c) Developing an Outline

This assignment will require students to prepare an outline of their op-ed, which will provide an overview of their thesis statement, their main arguments and the research sources they will use to support these arguments. A lecture on writing an op-ed as well as dedicated office hours with TAs will help students complete this assignment; this assignment will also build on the annotated bibliography that students previously prepared.

Skills: outlining and planning a written assignment, writing

Total words: 300 words

Additional TA grading hours: 10 hours

Additional TA office hours: 2 hours

(d) Writing an Op-Ed

This assignment will require students to prepare an op-ed on a topic related to women, gender and politics. They will use the outline they developed in the previous assignment as the basis for this piece of writing. The research component will draw on the sources they compiled for their annotated bibliography.

Skills: library research, developing a research outline, crafting an argument, writing

Total words: 700 words

TA grading hours: 10 hours (through existing allocation)

Additional TA office hours: 2 hours

4. Complementary Resources

A writing intensive version of POL 368 will leverage other resources and expertise to complement the funds requested through the WDI.

(a) Robert Gillespie Academic Skills Centre. It is hoped that the RGASC can support the development of research and writing skills in POL 368 through: TA training; and consultation on the development of skills-based tutorials and exercises. If possible I hope to arrange a dedicated drop-in period for students during the writing of the op-ed.

(b) UTM Library. I will be liaising with the UTM Library to support research and writing in POL 368 in two key ways: presentation of a guest lecture on using library resources; and development of a course specific library guide on research and writing in Political Science.

5. Impact

POL 368 has a capped enrolment of 60 students. This course is an elective, but it has not been offered for a number of years so it is anticipated that it will attract interest not just from Political Science students, but from students in cognate disciplines, including Sociology, Women and Gender Studies and History. Although the enrolment is modest, the course offers an opportunity to reach a large number of female students given that the course's subject tends to attract such a demographic. This is thus an opportunity to address gender gaps in students' confidence related to scholarly research and enquiry.

6. Role of Teaching Assistants

TAs will play an integral role in designing and delivering the writing intensive version of POL 368. They will develop and deliver skills-based tutorials and exercises, provide feedback to students through formal evaluation and office hours, aid them in the development of their academic writing through email correspondence and office hours, and assign grades to all written assignments. TAs will be trained through the Writing TA Training Program. TAs will participate in the delivery of the writing intensive components of POL 368; this will ensure that each benefits from the pedagogical training and development.

7. Budget

Normally, 35 TA hours would be allocated to a third-year half course. These hours would typically be allocated to: the grading of a midterm test, final exam, and one research paper; email correspondence and administration. A writing intensive version of POL 368 requires an additional 45 TA hours.³

Additional TA Hours Required for a Writing Intensive Version of POL 368

COMPONENT	TIME	COST
Writing TA Training Program	14 hours @ \$49.10/hour	\$687.40
Grading and feedback on three additional writing assignments (paraphrase, annotated bibliography, outline)	Additional 25 hours of grading and feedback (see section 3 for details) 25 hours @ \$49.10/hour	\$1,227.50
Additional office hours (2 hours prior to annotated bibliography, outline, op-ed)	Additional 6 hours of office hours (see section 3 for details) = 6 hours @ \$49.10/hour	\$294.60
TOTAL REQUESTED	Additional 45 TA hours	\$ 2,209.50

8. Measuring Results

The impact of the proposed interventions will be measured using both quantitative and qualitative indicators.

- The number of academic integrity cases will be tracked.
- Using a pre- and post-test model, students will complete a short survey at the beginning of the course to test their research and writing skills as well as to measure their self-assessed knowledge and confidence related to the principles of academic research and writing. An end of term survey will repeat the same questions and gather students' qualitative assessment of the research and writing instruction provided in POL 368.
- Students' performance on the scaffolded components of the course will be tracked and compared.
- The TAs and course instructor will participate in a mid-term review of POL 368 to make refinements as needed to the delivery and evaluation of the course's writing intensive components.
- In my final report, I will document the outcomes of the interventions and make recommendations.

³ I have estimated the required resources using a figure of \$49.10/hour, which includes the hourly wage of \$42.90, as well as vacation pay and benefits. I have assumed a course size of 60 students.