

TO: Government 350 Students
FR: Larry Evans
RE: Policy Paper Assignment
DT: June 1, 2020

As mentioned on the syllabus, the course requirements for GOVT 350 include the writing of a “policy paper,” along with an executive summary.

Please select a domestic policy matter of interest to you and prepare and write a paper (10-15 pages, double spaced) that addresses how politics affects and perhaps distorts policy making in that area. As part of the final product (but not counting toward the 10-15 page target), I also expect students to provide a short, 1-2 page executive summary of the contents. Please place the summary up front and immediately after the title page. Between the two elements of the project, you should leave this course with first-rate writing samples (one short, and one of medium length) for use in applying for internships and jobs down the line. The paper and executive summary are due as an email attachment to me sometime on Friday, July 3.

As mentioned, the paper should be a political analysis of a major domestic policy issue that you care about. That said, I ask that you stay away from the COVID-19 response because this particular topic will be featured in the readings and discussions throughout our course. Viable topics might include aspects of K-12 education, unemployment, health insurance policy, carbon reduction, immigration issues, housing policy, or policing in America’s cities, among others. Although your issue certainly can pertain to policy making at the state and local level, I do ask that there be at least some federal involvement to reflect the emphasis of our class.

More Specific Questions to Address

The overarching question that I want you to address in your paper concerns how political forces and considerations shape the formulation and contents of public policy in the targeted issue area.

In addressing such matters, however, I also expect you to apply the concepts we are covering in as precisely and comprehensively as possible. So, depending on your topic, I hope that you will explore the process of problem definition, the division of responsibility across levels and branches of government, public attitudes and group mobilization, relevant institutional arrangements within the Congress and executive branch, the role of the courts, and so on. The relative importance of such themes will vary by issue, so in researching and writing your paper, please focus on the course concepts that are most relevant to what you are analyzing. Depending on the topic, the following are examples of more specific questions/themes that you may want to emphasize.

A. Problems and Agendas

- What is the nature of the underlying problem in this area, and to what extent has problem definition been political?
- How has this policy area risen and fallen on the political agenda over time, and why?
- Has governmental action been fairly constant, or has it occurred via rapid bursts of change?

B. *Federalism*

- What is the division of responsibility in this issue area across the national, state, or local levels of government, and is this division consistent with the theories of federalism discussed by Peterson?
- Are there problems of intergovernmental relations (e.g. coordination, different interests) in this issue area?

C. *Public Opinion*

- What poll data do we have about this policy area—that is, what relevant questions have been asked in mass opinion polls over the past few years?
- In general terms, how much does the public appear to know and what do people think in this issue area?
- What are some interesting facets, trends, or inconsistencies in the public’s views?

D. *Advocacy Groups*

- What are the main organized constituencies in this policy area and what interests do they purport to represent?
- Are all the relevant “sides” to the issue represented by advocacy groups or are distortions likely to arise from differential group pressures?
- Which organizational sides tend to win and why?

E. *Parties*

- To what extent does your policy area divide the two main political parties and why?
- Are there divisions within the parties over this issue, and if so, what and why?
- Does one party generally have an advantage in this issue area with the general public?

F. *Congress*

- Which are the main arenas for influence within this issue area (e.g., party versus committee versus individual members)?
- Is the congressional politics of this policy area primarily driven by constituency, partisan, or other considerations?

G. *Presidents*

- How has the Trump administration approached this policy area and why?
- What has been the policy impact of the Trump administration in this issue area?

H. *Bureaucracy*

- Which executive branch entities have implementation responsibilities here and what is the nature of the implementation process?
- Have observers pointed to any problems of implementation in this area (e.g. the agency tilts toward one interest, certain regulations have proven ineffective, waste or inefficiency)?

I. *Courts*

- Has the Judicial Branch been involved in this issue area? Why or why not?
- What has been the nature and impact of this involvement?

As part of the preparation of this paper, I ask that you schedule a personal Zoom meeting with me during the second week of the class (beginning June 8) to discuss your topic and how you might proceed, and also during week 4 (beginning on June 22) to talk about your progress. If you could have an outline (or even a rough draft) for me to review during this second individual meeting, that would be ideal.

Finally, to help with the paper writing process, here are some general guidelines that you may want to consider in completing this assignment.

Ten Writing Rules

1. Grammar, punctuation, and spelling are for middle school

W&M students are generally very well prepared for college and highly intelligent. And especially now that all word processing packages include tools for checking grammar, punctuation, and spelling, there is absolutely no excuse for deficiencies in any of these areas. Students need to be sure that their papers are polished and grammatically correct before submitting them. If there are any significant problems of this sort, I generally return the paper without a grade and invite a resubmission. Fortunately, this does not happen very often.

2. Papers are arguments

Too often, there is a tendency for college students to view papers – especially longer research paper assignments – kind of like edifices or monuments to be constructed. Their inclination is to ask, “How long does this thing have to be? Is the professor looking for a lot of references or footnotes? Does the paper have to include original analysis? How the heck am I going to complete this before the deadline?” But writing, it should be emphasized, primarily is a mode of communication. The author should be trying to influence in some way the views or attitudes of the reader. All papers – and I mean ALL papers – first and foremost should be viewed as arguments.

3. Arguments drive structure

Along those lines, the argumentation in a paper will be more effective and convincing if it is fully reflected in and reinforced by the basic structure of the paper. The internal construction of each paragraph, the order of the paragraphs, the way that points are bundled and reinforced across paragraphs – All of these structural features of the paper should be based on the structure of the underlying argument. So before writing your paper, I urge you to understand and think carefully about the essential logical underpinnings of the analysis.

4. Transitions, transitions, transitions

Many of the first drafts that college students produce read like a collection of discrete points, or a string of disparate arguments. After a brief introduction, the author splays the helpless reader with point after seemingly unrelated point. Proper transitions are central to good writing. Well-crafted transition sentences or phrases can help the reader keep track of the overarching analytical structure to the argument. Transitions help the reader comprehend the argument and follow the logical trajectory of the paper. One easy way to improve the quality of the transitions in a paper, I think, is to make careful use of headings and subheadings. For some reason, simply

including these items forces students to think harder about how effectively they are transitioning from point to point.

5. Write down

A lot of college students tend to pitch their papers as if the only audience is the professor. For the purposes of that particular assignment, the instructor probably will be the only reader. But the goal of course writing assignments is to build skills at communicating through the written word. As a result, course papers should be drafted as though there is a broader audience beyond the instructor. And the student needs to provide sufficient background and context in the paper for this hypothetical audience to make sense of the contents. When a student writes a paper for me, I expect that student to aim the paper at a lay audience of informed readers, not just me or another instructor. Thus, I suggest that you essentially “write down,” that is, draft your paper as if they are trying to reach an audience of smart high school seniors with an interest in politics.

6. Listen to the beat

Some students write beautifully from the day they arrive at W&M. Their phrases and sentences seem to flow effortlessly across the page and I can follow the train of thought without effort. Unfortunately, other students have writing styles that seem more stilted or awkward or difficult to follow. Beyond the standard rules of grammar and sentence construction, good writing is probably more an art than it is a science. I think I know excellent writing when I see it, but occasionally have real difficulties describing the necessary ingredients comprehensively or with precision. Still, for what it is worth, my sense is that students who did a lot of reading when they were very young or who had substantial musical training are especially likely to become highly effective writers. I think this may have something to do with the rhythm and even melody that seems to be at the heart of a beautifully written manuscript. For those of us without natural abilities in this area, sometimes it can help to read our draft sentences aloud, gauging whether the underlying rhythm is interesting and pleasing to the ear.

7. Don't write like an academic

A lot of academic writing is really pretentious and vague, effectively obfuscating the obvious via jargon and stilted language. Consider the following sentences, which are from a book by a distinguished academic: “In this way the order-shattering and order-affirming impulses of the presidency in politics became mutually reinforcing. As the president’s initial political warrants dovetailed with the inherently disruptive exercise of presidential powers, the interplay of power and authority generated its own supports for independent action.” Huh? I guess that sounds really insightful, but what the heck does it mean? The purpose of the written word, it should be emphasized, is to communicate with other people. Personally, I have a strong preference for writing that is simple, clear, and direct.

8. End where you begin

In my view, the best course papers are generally structured like an hourglass and finish up basically where they start. I generally advise students to begin their papers with brief introductions that state the purpose or goal behind the paper, the main ingredients of the argument, and the basic structure of the pages to follow (e.g., the contents of the different sections). In the conclusion, I expect them to restate what they have argued or demonstrated, fleshing out the broader implications of their work. That’s where the “hourglass” analogy comes

in. Ideally, I think students should begin their papers by addressing broad goals and important questions, then go narrow in the main body of the paper, exploring these goals and questions via concrete evidence or examples, and then conclude by summarizing the implications of the analysis for the larger goals or questions that are motivating the exercise. Just because students usually are time constrained in their research and writing, or may lack the background and skills necessary to do important original work, does not mean that they can't at least address issues and questions that matter and have broader importance.

9. Good writing is rewriting

This is absolutely critical. Over the years, I've written three books, around forty scholarly articles and chapters in edited volumes, and dozens of conference papers. But even as a relatively senior scholar, my first drafts are still awkward and sloppy. I would be deeply embarrassed if they ever saw the light of day. My sentences and paragraphs don't begin to resemble the work of an adult until at least the third or fourth draft, as I scrub away the bad writing and incrementally craft a manuscript that looks halfway professional. The central ingredient to good writing, in other words, is rewriting. When I was a college student back in the day, we actually wrote term papers on electric typewriters. It was possible to erase and retype on these antiquated machines, but there still were a lot of constraints on revising term papers once the typing process began. There never seemed to be enough time and the retyping process was really cumbersome and inconvenient. The advent of word processing transformed the production of good writing, greatly facilitating the process of rewriting and revision. These days, there is simply no excuse for students not to engage in extensive revisions of their written work. The purpose of the first draft should be to slop your thoughts down on paper. Draft two makes the exposition readable. Draft three begins to make it precise.

10. There are no hard and fast rules for writing class papers

Although I have my aforementioned "writing rules," and other instructors doubtlessly have their own thoughts about crafting good essays and research papers, in the end students need to follow the beat of their own drummer. For the most part, W&M students are creative, hardworking, and a lot smarter than I am. To some extent, then, they really do need to let their own interests and intuition guide their research and writing. During my time at the College, I've read superb student papers that broke most of the rules mentioned in this blog post and still received solid "A's." So, my instructions about proper writing should be viewed as suggestions rather than rigid requirements or constraints.

In the end, all authors, including students at W&M, should write papers aimed at pleasing themselves. Consider for a few moments the insightful comments of Ian Kerwin, the preeminent historian of Nazi Germany, who once remarked that, "The principal reason for writing for me has always been to explain something to myself.... Of course, that others have taken an interest in what I have written, and that it is adjudged to have contributed a little to the wider field of research, is extremely gratifying. But these were not the main reasons for writing in the first place. Every book or essay I have undertaken has taught me a great deal more about one of the most crucial periods in the whole of human history. And that has made it worthwhile."