

Writing in the Social Science Department

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The Social Science Department at Plymouth State College is a diverse department, but one of the threads which holds us together is our commitment to student growth, especially to the development of student writing skills. As I collected information from my colleagues, I found that the boring, assigned topic term paper of my college days seems to be a thing of the past. Each discipline addresses the challenge of teaching students to write like professionals within that discipline. Faculty are using writing to both “learn to write and write to learn.”

Anthropology/Sociology

Faculty in anthropology and sociology make extensive use of writing in their courses. They use free writes to focus students before discussions. One professor uses a “longitudinal free write.” Students at the beginning of the course are asked to identify a list of terms, geographical sites, people, and events. The professor adds to the list throughout the semester and then uses these free writes as a way of tying the course together at the end of the semester. Students see how much they have learned by reviewing early attempts at identifying these topics covered in the course.

Many courses also include the use of journals. Students respond to readings and lectures and create a dialogue with the professor. One professor has students write a paper based only

upon their journal entries.

Other assignments used include writing 15-18 page papers, with an emphasis on writing in the style of the discipline, especially in citations and other stylistic considerations. Faculty also require take-home essays as part of exams and do in-class peer review sessions on papers.

One faculty member took advantage of the new writing assistant program through the writing center. She chose a student who had taken her class last year, to work with her current students. Her writing assistant attended and participated in classes and joined the Writing Center staff. The writing assistant was available to the students from the class and also served as a regular Writing Center consultant. The same faculty member is encouraging students to write more creative papers in her upper-division courses. Plays, poetry and other forms of writing are encouraged in appropriate courses.

Geography

Geographers use a variety of writing assignments in their classes including short papers, and essay exams. One geographer has consulted with Roy Andrews, Director of the College Writing Center, on assignments and has had him come into classes to talk to students about the assignments. Papers are required to be written with attention to grammar, mechanics, length, sources, documentation, and citations in the form geographers use.

One particularly interesting assignment requires students to watch a video, take readings from assigned books and reserve readings and class lecture material and integrate them into a paper. The professor carefully reads the papers, makes comments and then the students may revise their papers for an improved grade. Results of writing assignments have not always met the expectations of the professor, and he finds himself frustrated by the poor quality of his students' writing.

History

History especially lends itself to using writing to evaluate student learning. Historians use a wide array of writing assignments to encourage student learning.

The research paper is a tried and true assignment. Students are asked by one professor in his United States History; 1928 to Vietnam course for a topic description on a Topic Decision Form. The form asks the student to list major ideas and resources which will be used. Then a month later, students turn in a Precis Statement, a concise summary statement of the essential ideas about their topic on a 3x5 card. Three weeks later, students turn in a Microtheme Statement, which is a one-page extended restatement of the precis. A rough draft is to be turned in after another three weeks. The draft must be at least three pages long and contain citations and bibliography. The completed paper is then due one month later. Students are required to use proper grammar, spelling and other mechanics, as these will be graded along with the content. Some professors require students to summarize their papers and then present them to the class for discussion.

Another historian explores the distinction between primary and secondary research with her students in her New Hampshire and New England History course. The class explores resources available at the Library, such as the *New Hampshire Provincial Papers*. Students are introduced to the idea of using primary documents in historical research. This professor also introduces students to the techniques of oral history and how interviews can supplement historical research. Students are required to use at least one interview in their research papers.

One historian uses very clever questions for quizzes. He asks students to write their answers for the "Switzer Historical Encyclopedia Company." This encourages brevity, thoroughness and professional style of writing. This professor has recently tried having students write weekly essays rather than research papers. Students are expected to integrate lecture material, required readings and reserve readings. Students then have a collection of

essays that reflect their particular interests in the historical period dealt with in the class at the end of the semester.

Students are further encouraged to write, not for a grade but to show their interest in the class, by turning in either “gut cards,” 3x5 cards with their reactions to course material or current events, or one-page reaction papers.

Another professor requires 8-10 page papers on assigned books, which may also require some outside research. Students are expected to integrate classroom learning into their critical examinations of these books. For instance, in *Shapers of the Western World*, they are to trace the ideas of Marx and Darwin in Emile Zola’s novel *Germinal* and then assess if Zola is more of a Marxist or a Darwinist.

Political Science

My own discipline, political science, emphasizes writing as an essential communications tool. All of us were required to write extensively in college and graduate school, as well as now as professionals. We all require the same from our students.

We use a wide array of writing assignments to give students a taste of the different types of writing our discipline uses. Two of us have adopted essays which are peer reviewed and then compiled into a portfolio. This assignment encourages students to write as we do, doing multiple drafts which are reviewed by our peers. Several of my students have reported that they have used these essays as writing samples for internship, job, and graduate school selection processes. The students also review all of the course material throughout the semester, and see how others in the course write. I have found that not only has their writing improved, but they get to know one another, and there is more discussion about course material than in the past. There is more of a sense of camaraderie among our majors.

One of my favorite paper assignments follows course material closely. In my Public Policy Analysis class, students are required to write a paper about a problem they would like to see solved.

They define the problem, investigate alternatives and then advocate one or more solutions. The paper is to be addressed to whoever has the power to solve the problem. They then present their papers by “testifying” before the class. Their research becomes an integral part of the class.

My lower-division class writes essay exams and they do several take home essays for me. They also do an exercise to examine where their beliefs and opinions come from.

Another professor assigns in-class essays as well as longer (5-7 page) essays to be completed outside of class. The longer essays incorporate classroom lectures, assigned readings with outside research. He also gives students documents and then asks students to find similarities and contradictions from class lectures and assigned readings.

Other assignments ask students to use Political Scientist Robert Dahl’s framework to compare and contrast the strengths and challenges of democracy in Great Britain and France. Students then do the same analysis on an emerging Central or Eastern European country.

Two of us have students investigate organizations that our courses center on. For my Public Administration course, they pick an agency; in Political Activism, students pick advocacy organizations. In both, we ask students to look at structure, purpose, goals and strategies.

Group projects are another variation, as well as journals. Finally, a very challenging assignment requires students to put together an extensive Annotated Bibliography on a U. S. Foreign Policy. Students then have to do an oral presentation based upon information gained from this exercise.

Social Work

Social work is a practice-oriented discipline with a professional research orientation. Students must learn to integrate theories and research from the classroom with practice in the field. Assignments in Social Work classes place an emphasis on

the style expected of those in the field. Social Workers must extensively document their activities. Students then are trained to accomplish the requirements of their chosen careers.

Social work students are given extensive experience in the techniques used by social workers. A primary activity expected of social workers in the workplace is to keep extensive records of their interactions with clients. Writing skills are necessary to clearly convey what actions have been taken and any recommended care or follow up that may be required. Group therapy is a technique often used by social workers. Students in Theory and Practice of Social Work Intervention II observe a self-help community group and are asked to analyze the dynamics of the group and phase of development which the group exhibits. They watch videos on groups and again analyze what they have observed. Finally, they simulate a group. They critique their own participation, as well as that of the other members of the simulated group. These groups are often video taped so that students may observe themselves and then comment on their own behavior. Students are given extensive guidance on these processes through instruction sheets, checklists and questions they must answer in writing.

Research papers are also required. Students must become familiar with the literature of the discipline to become effective social workers. One professor spends a lot of time on how to conduct a literature review and how to analyze, and synthesize articles. She requires students to produce a “publishable” paper by the end of the semester.

Social work faculty use typical Writing Across the Curriculum techniques such as freewrites and peer review. Students are urged to make use of the College Writing Center.

I am struck by the explicit requirements of students to integrate course material, readings and research with their experiences. Students are expected to investigate their own values and responses. They are much more directly connected with the material they are learning than in other disciplines.

One of the social work professors included an article in the

information he gave me about writing used in his classes. It refers to the healing power of writing. The article encourages the use of freewriting in class to help students organize their thoughts. The author found that freewrites improved class attendance and performance on exams. The author feels in the article that “Writing can be an invaluable skill in learning about and coping with the world. Under the right circumstances, writing promotes mental and physical health. Although not a panacea, the judicious use of writing can improve the quality of life for many of us” (1). I couldn’t agree more!

1) James W. Pennebaker, *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*. (New York: The Guilford Press) 1997.p.191.