The Action Memorandum: An Assignment with Infinite Possibilities

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The challenges of teaching political science at the university level have never been greater. Increases to class size have added significantly to faculty workload, causing many professors to adjust, or shorten, assignments to compensate. The combination of the increasing accessibility of the internet and ever-growing pressures on the student body to achieve superior grades appears to have led to a rise in findings of academic misconduct.[1] Not only has cheating damaged the reputation of the academy, it has also added yet again to faculty workloads by requiring professors to prosecute greater numbers of their students.

In today's challenging academic environment, teachers of political science need efficient assignments which nonetheless preserve academic standards. Through this paper, I therefore intend to offer an innovative, flexible, and efficient means of assessing student learning. I do not mean to suggest that it is a panacea, but I do maintain that, anecdotally at least, it is a profoundly underutilized method of facilitating and assessing student learning.

Before I begin, it is worth noting that my basic argument is hardly unique. Between the time that I first proposed this paper and the arrival of this conference, a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Andrew Pennock, published an article in *PS: Political Science and Politics* which made the case for integrating policy writing assignments into undergraduate political science courses.[2]

As a result, while I initially intended to do two things today – first (1) speak to the value of using a form of policy writing, what I call an action memorandum, in political science courses, and second (2) use my experience teaching public policy, public administration, defence studies, and history at the undergraduate and graduate levels to explore how such assignments might be adjusted to reflect a variety of expected learning outcomes – I now plan to spend relatively less time summarizing Pennock's entirely reasonable case and more time expanding on the possibilities that action memorandum assignments specifically can bring to the classroom.

On Policy Writing

To begin, then, what is policy writing? Pennock's definition, which is as good as any other, is as follows: "Policy writing is the process by which government employees and non-governmental organizations create written documents for lawmakers and policy professionals to read."[3] The most common policy writing activities are probably briefing notes, but variations such as action memoranda are not uncommon. Policy writing

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[1] See, for example, Julia Christensen Hughes and Donald McCabe, "Academic Misconduct within Higher Education in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 36,2 (2006): 1-21.
[2] Andrew Pennock, "The Case for Using Policy Writing in Undergraduate Political Science Courses, *PS: Political Science and Politics* 44,1 (January 2011): 141-146.
[3] *Ibid,* 141.

assignments are typically short – anywhere from a single page to perhaps six pages long; they generally follow a clear formula with particular section headings of relatively consistent lengths; and the good ones are written in clear and concise prose. Policy writing is largely free of theory and literature reviews; however, as I will suggest today, policy writing *assignments* do not have to be. And although policy writing is also typically focused on contemporary challenges, that need not be the case either.

Action memoranda typically include a cover page, outlining the issue in question in a single sentence; a background section of one to two pages that identifies the key events and ideas that will shape the policy recommendations; between two and four policy options; two to two-and-a-half pages of considerations; and a final page which makes a recommendation and outlines preliminary steps towards implementation.

Pennock lists five benefits to policy writing: (1) it is demanded in the real world; (2) it is relevant to academic careers – similar skills are needed to develop grant proposals, for example; (3) it serves a citizenship function by teaching students how advocacy works; (4) it teaches students how to write to a specific audience; and (5) it builds higher level learning skills like analysis, synthesis, and creativity. From an instructor's perspective, such writing – when it replaces a traditional essay – also reduces the quantity of marking in terms of the absolute number of pages of text. It can also curb plagiarism because of the uniqueness of the assignment.

Policy writing has its detractors. Pennock notes that some academics would prefer that it be relegated to public policy courses; some maintain that it is inconsistent with the liberal arts tradition; some are concerned that it requires instructors to teach students a new style of writing; some argue that it is too easy; and others claim that it is more difficult to grade. While I would be happy to discuss in detail why I disagree with all of these contentions, I will argue for now that the potential benefits generally outweigh the costs.

The key to my argument is appreciating the variety of options one has when asking students to write an action memorandum. I'd therefore like to describe how one might adjust the assignment to better reflect the learning needs of students at different academic levels and then in different types of courses.

Adjusting the Action Memorandum Assignment by Academic Level

Although every student can benefit from clear, explicit direction, typically, first and second year undergraduate students are most dependent on such guidance from their professors. Being new to the academic community, they are more likely to lack the experience necessary to know what questions to ask, and indeed how to ask them, when the objectives of an assignment are unclear. When it comes to writing their first action memorandum, students who are new to university tend to struggle to develop a convincing argument; too often, they give in to the temptation to draft a memorandum based on their preconceived beliefs. Put more simply, even if they claim to have

researched rigorously, they often lack familiarity with critical thinking strategies that might allow them to apply their research findings to their analysis.

At the first and second year level, I therefore recommend assigning an action memorandum as the culminating element of a two-part assignment. First, students would be asked to compile an annotated bibliography based on their research question, with that question having been devised either by or in consultation with the instructor. An effective annotated bibliography would require that students recognize, compare, and evaluate alternative points of view.

Later, once they had come to a basic appreciation of the state of the literature, the students would draft an action memorandum. To promote academic integrity, they would include endnotes in their document. Considering the need of newer students for explicit direction, I might place specific word limits on each section of the memorandum. Particularly ambitious instructors might add a third component to the assignment: a multi-paragraph reflection on the editorial decisions that affected the way that the student framed the issue in question.

If the course sought to encourage group work, and the sharing and comparing of student papers, I might assign different students the same topic but ask each one to write the memorandum from a different point of view. For example, a Canadian memorandum on gun control might be drafted by representatives from the Privy Council Office, the Prime Minister's Office, the Department of Justice, and the Department of Finance. One on Canadian environmental regulations might include Natural Resources Canada, Environment Canada, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, etc.

At the senior undergraduate level, I recommend increasing the students' freedom significantly and replacing the annotated bibliography with a paper proposal. The proposal would require the students to suggest their own topics. It would include a preliminary bibliography, a brief summary of the literature, and an explanation as to why the question that they planned to use as the crux of their memorandum was worth asking. In the memo itself, rather than focussing on word limits, I would make things more realistic by emphasizing space on the page. In other words, former Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien was known to demand that memos for his office be limited to a single, double-sided page. He never said anything about word counts.

The graduate level allows for the most creative, and demanding, assignments. Here I might call for up to three memos, each from either a different point of view, a different point in time, or even from different government or political actors. In addition to the three memoranda, I might demand a brief paper explaining the differences between each perspective.

To provide an example, I might challenge my students to draft an action memorandum for the Canadian government about policy towards failed and failing states from the perspectives of the Canadian International Development Agency, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, and the Department of National

Defence. Or a memo on Canadian policy towards the Arctic from the perspectives of Indian Affairs, the Privy Council Office, and the Prime Minister's Office.

The assignment can also be adjusted based on the type of course being taught. In a joint political science / history course, for example, the memo could be set in the past, or students could be asked to construct the same memo before and after a particular event, say 9/11. In a comparative politics course, the same memo might be drafted from the perspectives of similar representatives from different countries. In a course on how government works, different actors from different departments might be used. In a course on non-state actors, the memo could be based around a submission to a parliamentary committee.

I have used this assignment in undergraduate contemporary history courses, in graduate courses in Canadian foreign policy, and I now use it extensively in a graduate-level course on Canadian governance and decision-making in a strategic context. In the latter, I have turned the assignment into a 20-25 page exercise.

This past year, I asked my students to draft three memos: one from Canada, one from the United States, and one from an additional Canadian ally. The scenario was that a week earlier, without warning, the three relevant heads of government had announced, independently, that they planned to pursue a new national strategy for Asia. The job of the drafters of the memos was not to propose an Asia policy. Rather, it was to propose a process by which the government might determine that policy. In the Canadian context, for example, the drafter might have considered options like a royal commission, the establishment of a special cabinet level committee, a Foreign Affairs-led strategy, a whole of government initiative coordinated by the Privy Council Office, etc. In each case, the students were allowed to choose their own identity within each state's governmental apparatus and to identify who would be receiving the memo. Having completed all three memos, they were to add a five to ten page reflection which justified the decisions that informed each memo (author, recipient, etc); considered the similarities and differences among the memos; and assessed the strategic implications of the exercise as a whole.

I cannot say that my students have absolutely loved the exercise (how many students truly love any assignment that is over twenty pages long?), but few have suggested that they would have preferred a formal paper, and virtually all have – if at times grudgingly – agreed that this process gave them no choice but to understand the intricacies of the strategic decision-making processes in their three countries.

In another graduate-level course in a professional masters of defence studies program, I use the memorandum assignment much differently. Defence Studies 800: Canadian Foreign Policy – Analysis and Evaluation is a 6-week mini-interdisciplinary course that spends two-thirds of its time on historical cases from Canada's diplomatic past and one-third of its time on contemporary affairs. Students in this course are given a week to produce an action memorandum set in the past for distribution to their peers. They are encouraged to provide me with a draft of their document no fewer than two days

before the class which it will be discussed. In class, fellow students are given no more than fifteen minutes to read the memorandum and to come up with questions or concerns about it. We then 'go around the table,' offering advice, critiques, and questions. The author is given, literally, a minute to gather his or her thoughts, after which point s/he provides a five to ten minute oral defence of the document. When the process is over, we debrief, and the author is given seven additional days to revise the memorandum and submit it for assessment.

To summarize, policy writing assignments, and action memorandums in particular, have tremendous potential as learning and assessment tools in political science courses. From an instructor's perspective, their relative brevity and reliance on accessible prose makes them less time consuming to mark than traditional research papers. Their uniqueness makes them more difficult to plagiarize. And, given what I've suggested here today, there are plenty of ways to demand academic rigour and to challenge students completing such assignments to develop higher level critical thinking skills. From a student's perspective, the assignment is attractive because it feels real and meaningful, without being overwhelming in terms of length.

I am not suggesting that this assignment should be used in every course every year, but for those instructors who are looking for a change, I'd strongly recommend giving action memorandums a try.