Blind Peer Review: A Departmental SoTL Project

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Our Intentions

Our Question

• “Can a blind peer review process improve student learning over both the short (an assignment) and long (a college career) term?”

• We believe students benefit from both...
  – receiving assignment feedback from a peer and...
  – giving assignment feedback to a peer.
Our Intentions

**Department Website**

- Departmental writing portfolio assignments.
  - 16 types of assignments
  - book review, literature review, op-ed piece, policy memo, etc.
- Uniform directions and grading rubrics.
- Google Docs for collection and distribution of materials.
e.g., Book Review

Directions

Book Review

Source: http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/review.html

What this handout is about

This handout will help you write a book review, a report or essay that offers a critical perspective on a text. It offers a process and suggests some strategies for writing book reviews.

What is a review?

A review is a critical evaluation of a text, event, object, or phenomenon. Reviews can consider books, articles, entire genres or fields of literature, architecture, art, fashion, restaurants, policies, exhibitions, performances, and many other forms. This handout will focus on book reviews.

Above all, a review makes an argument. The most important element of a review is that it is a commentary, not merely a summary. It allows you to enter into dialogue and discussion with the work’s creator and with other audiences. You can offer agreement or disagreement and identify where you find the work exemplary or deficient in its knowledge, judgments, or organization. You should clearly state your opinion of the work in question, and that statement will probably resemble other types of academic writing, with a thesis statement, supporting body paragraphs, and a conclusion.

Typically, reviews are brief. In newspapers and academic journals, they rarely exceed 1000 words, although you may encounter lengthier assignments and extended commentaries. In either case, reviews need to be succinct. While they vary in tone, subject, and style, they share some common features:

- First, a review gives the reader a concise summary of the content. This includes a relevant description of the topic as well as its overall perspective, argument, or purpose.

Rubric

Book Review Grading Rubric:

You should use the assignment description in conjunction with this rubric. Be sure to review it before beginning your peer review.

While using the grading rubric you should consider the thoroughness for each of the categories. For example, if a student thoroughly and completely describes the nature and scope of the book they may receive 4/4. If they only partially address or describe the nature they may receive an 0/4 and if a student does not address the nature or scope at all they should receive a 0/4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Points Possible</th>
<th>Points Earned</th>
<th>Not student can improve</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The student describes the nature and scope of the book</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student addresses the author’s treatment of the subject</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student discusses the types of sources used by the author</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student critiques the evidence provided by the author</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student discusses any biases or limitations</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student critiques the author’s methodology</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student discusses the organization of the book</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student provides a complete citation</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student uses clear and understandable language</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The writing is free of spelling and grammatical errors</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Total: 70/70
e.g., Literature Review

Directions

Literature Review

First, let's make the distinction between a literature review and a research project. The main focus of an academic research paper is to develop a new argument, and the research paper will contain a literature review as one of its parts. Hence, a research paper uses a literature review as foundational support for a new insight that you plan on contributing. The focus of a literature review, however, is to summarize and synthesize the arguments and ideas of others without adding new contributions.

What to do prior to writing a literature review:

- Seek clarification from your instructor
  - Roughly how many sources will you need to include?
  - What types of sources are acceptable (books, journal articles, websites, etc.)?
- Consider whether your sources are current
  - Sort through current bibliographies or literature reviews in the field political science and/or public administration to get a sense of what our discipline expects. You can also use this method to consider what is currently of interest to scholars in political science and/or public administration, as well as what is not.

Strategies for writing a literature review:

- Find a focus
  - A literature review is usually organized around ideas and not the sources themselves (as an annotated bibliography would be organized). As you read widely but selectively in your topic area, consider what themes or issues connect your sources together. Do they present one, many or different solutions? Is there an aspect of the field that is missing? How well do they present the material and do they portray it according to an appropriate theory within the field? Do they reveal a trend in the field? A raging debate?
  - Pick one of these themes to focus the organization of your review. You may want to review critically reviewing sources on the department writing page.

Rubric

Literature Review Grading Rubric

You should use the assignment description in conjunction with this rubric. Be sure to review it before beginning your peer review of the student's literature review.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Points Possible</th>
<th>Points Earned</th>
<th>The student can improve:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All three main elements (introduction, body, and conclusion/recommendations) were made clear</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student demonstrated focus and the review was organized around a clear and appropriate thesis statement</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student summarized each article.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student critiqued each article.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a clear and logical order to the argument that the student is making.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student drew out questions based on the literature.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student uses clear and understandable language</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The writing is free of spelling and grammatical errors</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
e.g., Op-Ed Piece

Directions

What makes a good piece?

Three basic kinds of items appear in opinion pages: editorials, written by newspaper staff; letters to the editor, written by readers; and op-eds (OPposite the EDitorials on the page), generally written by people with special expertise or credibility in a certain field.

Letters to the editor are the brief option. Generally, they comment on news of the last few days or weeks. Big papers may receive hundreds per day, and print only a dozen. Still, if you have special credentials—and can speak pointedly—you have a chance of getting in.

Op-eds get more space. They usually analyze current news too—but they need a whole lot more facts and structure to do the job. Beyond commenting on known news, they can also introduce readers to new ideas, or a perspective on the news that has not been evident until the writer brought it up. Op-eds are in fact sometimes readers’ introduction to an important issue. (They also sometimes generate a small fee for the author. They are very competitive; big papers may receive dozens, even hundreds, of submissions a day.

In general, editors want pieces that do not just display expertise; they want pieces that are well written, timely and provocative—all the hallmarks of any good nonfiction writing. A good op-ed or letter to the editor is concise. It hits hard. It marshals vivid images, analogies and arguments. It is informed and backed by facts—not just emotion or opinion. Most editors see this as a section for advocacy, denunciations, controversy and astonishment. In general, they want the opinion pages to stimulate community discussion and drive public debate. They want people to say “Wow! Did you see that op-ed (or letter to the editor) today?”

Credentials

Are you the right person to write an op-ed or letter? Passion and strong opinion are prerequisites; but they are not enough. Your credibility is far higher if you have true expertise, either through your training and work, or through a telling and powerful personal experience.

Rubric

Op-Ed Grading Rubric

You should use the assignment description in conjunction with this rubric. Be sure to review it before beginning your peer review of the student’s (i.e., the writer’s) Op-Ed piece.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Points Possible</th>
<th>Points Earned</th>
<th>The student/author can improve</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The author makes one clear argument</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The author uses specific details</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The author is brief and to the point but still persuasive</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The author cites appropriate facts and sources</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The author uses clear and understandable language</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The conclusion is free of spelling and grammatical errors</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 70
Policy Memo

Directions

Policy Memo

Source: http://faculty.maxwell.syr.edu/acbrooks/Pages/Courses/Documents/PPA730/Policy%20memo%20instructions.pdf

Policy memos address real situations in which a public or private decision-maker must make a decision. Usually, a decision-maker will have a variety of information at his/her disposal and, while the amount of information may be voluminous, it may be contradictory, incomplete, or simply confusing. Your job is to make an intelligent decision-maker into a “smart consumer” by culling information and facts, applying your expertise, and presenting alternatives.

While no single template is always effective, there are some basic ingredients to most successful policy memos. They include:
- a very succinct summary of the decision-maker’s problem showing you understand the issues;
- a synopsis of the analysis employed;
- clear, terse prose without technical jargon;
- a range of alternative solutions or strategies to deal with the problem; and
- a list of data or information that you would need to go into even greater depth.

Successful policy memos should be rigorous but creative. Practically speaking, this means that use of analytical tools from class are fundamental, but that supplemental information and approaches are welcome.

To structure an analysis, several questions are often convenient to ask yourself.

1. Who are the principal actors in the case at hand? What are the long run goals of each of these actors? What are the short run incentives of each? How is each rewarded?
2. What is the decision to be made? What are the options available? Are the apparent constraints really constraints or might some be loosened? Are the long run alternatives differing from those in the short run?

Rubric

Policy Memo Grading Rubric

You should use the assignment description in conjunction with this rubric. Be sure to review it before beginning your peer review.

While using the grading rubric, you should consider the thoroughness for each of the categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Points Possible</th>
<th>Points Earned</th>
<th>Notes to Student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The student makes a clear argument/thesis statement</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student goes specific details with sources</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student has chosen a timely and important issue</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student asks relevant question</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student cites appropriate and credible sources</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student chooses understandable language</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The writing is free of spelling and grammatical errors</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Process

Original (i.e., Fall 2011)

• Assign 3-6 peer-reviewed assignments in each upper-level POL/PA course.
  – Model the peer-review process.
  – Collect and redistribute rough drafts of each assignment.
  – Collect and redistribute peer-review feedback of each assignment.
  – Collect and grade final drafts of each assignment.

• Evaluate the grades for improvement, assess the peer-review process itself, listen to student feedback on experience.

At-a-glance
The Process

At-a-glance

- Model Process
- Draft of Paper, External Review
- Peer Review, External Review
- Final Draft

Revised (i.e., Spring 2012)

- Assign only 1 peer-review assignment in each upper-level POL/PA course.
  - Model the peer-review process.
  - Collect “rough drafts” and submit it for external review… and then redistribute for peer review.
  - Collect peer-review feedback and submit it for external review… and then redistribute feedback.
  - Collect and grade final drafts assignments.
- Evaluate the grades for improvement, assess the peer-review process itself, listen to student feedback on experience.
Assessment

From the Students

• I believe the peer review process improved the overall quality of my work.
  – 75% Strongly Agree or Agree
• I believe the peer review process improved the quality of the work for those I reviewed.
  – 82% Strongly Agree or Agree
• Engaging in the review process caused me to think about the structure of my own paper.
  – 89% Strongly Agree or Agree
• Overall, I found the peer review process to be helpful.
  – 80% Strongly Agree or Agree

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strong Agree, Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree, Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improved my work</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved other’s work</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think about my paper</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process was helpful</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Assessment

Instructor Rubric

Rubric for Rating Student Writing assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>5 Excellent</th>
<th>4 Good</th>
<th>3 Adequate</th>
<th>2 Underdeveloped</th>
<th>1 Poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mechanics</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper is free from errors related to spelling and grammar.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper is structured according to the syllabus with appropriate sections, introductions, conclusions, etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper contains appropriate content based on requirements and cites appropriate sources as evidence.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The paper is clear and easy to read. It follows a coherent line of argument or explanation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Each reviewer should assign a code (number) for each of the categories on the rubric. The total of the scores would be averaged. The scores of the rough draft will then be compared to the scores of the final. We can measure improvement in each of these categories (as well as in total). Remember, we will calculate inter-rated reliability on the three scores.**

And the Faculty

- Double-blind review of 110 rough and final drafts.
  - Lower scores and greater variance between faculty scores on rough drafts.
  - Higher scores and less variance between faculty scores on final drafts.
- Score increases from experience, process, or both?
  - e.g., seeing and giving peer feedback vs. repeated process across POL/PA courses.
Assessment

Fall 2011

Spring 2012
Assessment

**Overall**

A Breakdown of Student Writing Performance (Combined Results for All Political Science Courses)

- **Density**
- **Students' Writing Scores (Out of 20 Possible Points)**

![Graph](graph1.png)

**By Class**

A Breakdown of Student Writing Performance (Sorted by Political Science Course)

- **POL307**
- **POL313-01**
- **POL313-02**
- **POL318**
- **POL333**

- **POL336**
- **POL335**
- **POL340**
- **POL361**
- **POL400**

- **POL416**
- **POL420-01**
- **POL420-02**

![Graphs by Political Science Course](graph2.png)
Next Steps

Inside the Classroom

• Continued use of the blind peer-review process in the classroom.
  – At the instructor’s discretion.
• Basis for improved writing portfolios by department majors.

And Outside the Classroom

• Used in department assessment and academic program review.
• Basis for coauthored article (s) about improving student learning through a blind peer-review system.
  – *Teaching and Learning Inquiry*