Writing To Do Democracy: An Investigation of Political Science Undergraduate Writing Performance

Writing assignments and writing instruction are now common in the American political science classroom. Many political science departments, realizing the importance strong writing skills will play in their students' academic success and futures as professionals and citizens, have integrated writing-intensive courses into their curriculum. With this widespread commitment to integrating writing into political science instruction has come a corresponding mandate to specify the learning goals that writing is intended to serve and to find ways to assess its effectiveness in accomplishing those goals.

The skills required for democratic citizenship can provide a useful frame for prioritizing writing skills in writing-intensive political sciences courses. Dewey (1927) has noted that "to learn to be human is to develop through give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community; one who understands and appreciates its beliefs, desires and methods, and who contributes to a further conversion of the organic powers into human resources and values" (p. 154). McIntosh and Youniss have argued that "it is in the give-and-take of such discussions that ideas become political. They both affect and are affected by the ideas of others, and this very process is political. The political realm involves persuasion, argument, debate, defense, compromise, and the like" (McIntosh and Youniss 2010, 27)…an essential part of political engagement, therefore, involves learning to join into a collectivity of like-minded people who, together, generate sufficient resources to change public policy or practice" (p. 28). For the developing citizen-professionals enrolled in undergraduate political science classrooms, writing assignments provide a significant

opportunity for experiencing this communicative give and take, but only if instructors conceptualize and teach writing as participation in deliberation rather than merely as an exhibition of students' mastery of factual knowledge.

Notions of what assigning and teaching writing in disciplinary courses can accomplish have been informed by the writing-to-learn (WTL), writing-in-the-disciplines (WID), and writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) movements, all of which are based on the premise that writing promotes more effective learning of disciplinary content (Carter 2007; Emig 1977; Herrington 1981; Knoblauch 1983; Raimes 1980). Political scientists, too, have acknowledged the legitimacy of teaching writing in the disciplinary classroom (Baglione 2008; Bob 2001; London 1993; Pennock 2011; Sherman 2003), arguing that writing not only helps students understand political science theory and principles, but also promotes important generalized intellectual capacities among undergraduates, including critical reading and thinking, research skills, analysis, persuasion, synthesis, and evaluation (Pennock 2011).

However, from its inception WTL/WID/WAC theory has been threaded through with a tension between the idea of writing as a means to promote the conceptual development of the individual student versus writing as a means to help students learn to function effectively in a deliberative collective (Gentry 2010; Herrington 1981; Jones 1993; Lawrence 2010; Russell 1997). Early WTL approaches focused on personal writing assignments as a means to develop students' individual expression, to help them develop their "voice" and identity, and to entrench their understanding of concepts to which they were exposed in class (Herrington 1981; Jones 1993). Writing-to-learn approaches evolved into WID and WAC as faculty questioned whether writing for self-expression

and to consolidate individual learning was sufficient to prepare students to function effectively in academic, professional, and civic settings (Jones 1993; Kirscht 1994; Russell 1997; Yancey 2009). As early as 1980, Raimes called for a move away from personal writing as soon in a student's academic career as possible, arguing that "students need practice in objective, logical reasoning" (p. 799). Russell (1997) has argued that students must be helped to understand themselves as part of an intellectual community whose work requires participants to position their individual ideas against those of others and helped to "connect to others in powerful ways" (p. 6). Similarly, within political science, Gentry (2010) has noted that students must feel they are part of a disciplinary community, and Lawrence & Dion (2010) have noted that political science discourse requires students to be able to express their ideas in conversation with others (Lawrence 2010).

This tension between the isolated mind of the individual and the need to share ideas within a collective resonates with generations of political philosophers who have sought to articulate the skills necessary for the working of democracy. Vincent Ostrum (1988) cites Madison, Hamilton, and Tocqueville as claiming that "life in civic society is constituted by how individuals as persons and citizens relate to one another in multitudes of shared communities of understanding in the pursuit of innumerable opportunities. Among these innumerable opportunities are values that we characterize as learning, enlightenment, and scholarship" (p. 15). Eliasoph (1998) has noted that "what matters for democracy is not only what individuals privately hold inside their brains. What also matters are the ways that citizens mingle and interact" (p. 20). So, too, Dewey (1927) argued that "only continuous inquiry, continuous in the sense of being connected as well

as persistent, can provide the material of enduring opinion about public matters" (p. 178). Clearly, central to generations of influential political thought is the conviction that a functioning deliberative democracy—indeed, the existence of a democratic public—requires individual minds working collaboratively.

While the importance of collective reasoning in the *polis* has been regularly articulated, this idea clashes with traditional notions within the academy regarding how "knowledge" should be defined and how undergraduate education practice should best promote students' mastery of it. Early on, conversations in the WTL literature questioned the traditional paradigm of knowledge as a "stable and bounded artifact, a collection of information, a set of facts and ideas to be delivered to students through lectures and course readings" (Knoblauch 1983, 467) and instead argued that knowledge should be regarded as a dynamic process of inquiry—of knowledge construction—in which students are participants and in which writing plays an integral role (Kirscht 1994; Knoblauch 1983; Russell 1997; Yancey 2009). With this view comes several logical corollaries: that writing is not merely a subsidiary activity within a discipline, but instead a constitutive one (Knoblauch 1983); that, consequently, writing instruction must focus on more substantial concerns than merely helping students to produce texts with acceptable surface features (grammar, etc.) (Knoblauch 1983); and that writing literacy is specific to and maintains situated discursive contexts that require we focus our writing instruction on a delivering a "pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity" (Carter 2006).

The realization that students will need to function not only in academic but also professional and civic settings has been widely noted by writing pedagogues and political scientists (Baglione 2008; Bob 2001; Jones 1993; Kirscht 1994; Lawrence 2010; Pennock

2011; Russell 1997; Sherman 2003; Stanford 1992; Yancey 2009; Zeiser 1999). These concerns have both mirrored and motivated an increasing concern with ensuring that universities develop not only the workplace skills students will need in their professions but also the sense of civic responsibility and civic empowerment that will ensure they can function effectively as citizens. Such concerns have been intensified by pedagogical research that provides evidence that civic engagement activity can promote undergraduate learning; the American Association of Colleges and Universities now names Civic Engagement as one of its "high impact" teaching practices (AAC&U 2008). Furthermore, the National Council of Teachers of English calls for a new writing curriculum that includes writing in the communities and newly imagines a role for writing that "fosters a new kind of citizenship" (Yancey 2009, 7). Thus has "writing to learn" evolved to become "writing to do" and, in the case of political science, writing to do deliberative democracy.[1]

Writing assignments in undergraduate political science courses can be usefully conceptualized as opportunities to intentionally develop the deliberation skills our students will need as professionals and citizens. Among other important learning outcomes, then, developing deliberators must learn to position their ideas against those of other writers and thinkers, appropriately integrating opinions, evidence, and interpretations of evidence they find in the published literature into their own work. Our study of undergraduate political science writing skills consequently focuses on citation performance—those "moments" in students' writing when their minds are most explicitly

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[1] This tradition of "writing to be politically engaged" is the direct result of the influence of the late Charles Merriam, founder of the "behavioral movement" of Political Science at the University of Chicago. Merriam (1934) developed his ideas about the discipline's commitment to activist pedagogy in his classic book: *Civic Education in the United States* (for a recent discussion, see Bernstein in Chick et al., eds. 2012).

in contact with those of other authors. These moments provide a window into students'

developing ability to make sense of their own ideas as well as their understanding of how

their own ideas are linked to thinking within the disciplinary and deliberative collective.

In this essay, we chronicle the details of a year-long study designed to evaluate

"collective reasoning" writing performances. Specifically, we gauge these performances

by exploring students' ability to reference published evidence to support the significance

of their topic and to bolster their own claims in formal writing assignments. Below, we

outline our research design and procedures, introduce a new rubric for assessing citation

performances, and explain how we collected and analyzed students' writing artifacts. We

follow with a summary of our major findings, and we conclude with a discussion of the

potential contributions of our study to the pedagogy of writing.

Methods

Our focus on citation practices is informed by theories that emphasize the importance of

contact between the individual mind of the student and the mind(s) of the authors of

manuscripts they're citing (Dewey 1927; Eliasoph 1998; Gerbil and Plakans 2009; Haller

2010; Haller 2011; Ostrum 2006). Our approach was also informed by Baglione's (2008)

claim that we need to develop students' skills in both focusing on a research question and

explaining why that question is important to political scientists. Thus, we also

investigated the instance of artifacts that included explicit arguments for the significance

of their research topic, while also noting whether those arguments integrated ideas

supported that argument with citations from others' writings. Consistent with recent

research by Rebecca Moore Howard and her colleagues (Howard, Serviss, and Rodrigue 2010) we evaluated the quality of these performances at the sentence level.

To explore citation practices, writing artifacts (n = 43) were collected from two upper-level political science courses taught in the spring and fall of 2011 by one of the co-authors. Since source integration is the writing competency we wished to assess, we devised an instrument to score students' competence in integrating the literature into their writing along three dimensions. We scored the papers according to a three–item rubric (Figure 1). The total citation number for each artifact included not only all conventional in-text citations but also "gestures" toward other sources (i.e., any clear allusions to outside source material even if that allusion lacked a standard in-text citation), and we counted the number of sentences (relative to the number of sentences in the whole document or some meaningful part of it) met the criteria outlined in the rubric.

[Figure 1 Here]

This instrument was refined with three coders in an iterative norming procedure using a subset of four randomly selected artifacts (see final scheme in Figure 1). After blinding, three coders independently evaluated all 43 writing artifacts for these three writing competencies. Several artifacts were unusable because they did not meet the inclusion criteria. For example, five students turned in the equivalent of "proposals" rather than "final papers"; these papers were graded for class purposes, but none of them could be included in the current analysis. After eliminating these ineligible cases, our sample consisted of 38 writing artifacts.

The instructor prompted students to justify the significance of their work (Item 1A) and to use references (Item 1B) in the "introduction" portion of their papers. This

made finding evidence of Item 1 relatively easy: if it was not stated explicitly in the first few pages of an artifact, then these writing competencies were most likely not going to be observed. For item 2, we began by recording the ratio of the number of sentences that contained "purposive" citations (i.e., citations that were logically and coherently integrated into the students' own ideas) relative to the total number of sentences with citations overall. We measured this as a ratio because the number of total sentences varied significantly from one artifact to the next, and we converted that ratio into a percentage score for ease of comparison. Afterwards, we took the raw percentages and recoded them so that an artifact was given a score of "1" (yes) if at least 75% of the citations were "purposive" and "0" (no) otherwise. While arbitrary, we determined that a student whose citing performance was purposeful at least 75% of the time had clearly mastered the ability to integrate others' thoughts with her own.[2]

Then, each coder determined an overall writing competency score between 0 and 3 for each artifact by summing items 1A, 1B, and 2. The intercoder reliability of those additive scores was determined for each artifact (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$), and, having reached an acceptable level of cross-coder agreement, each coder's data file was merged into a single dataset. This merging process took place in two steps. First, we created three new variables and operationalized them so that artifacts that were scored as a "yes" by all three coders received a value of "1" while all other artifacts got a value of zero. Like before, these three new variables were added together to form a four-category (ranging from 0 to 3) index of overall writing performance.

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[2] Later in the analyses (see Figure 3), we evaluate purposive citation practices at alternative "cutoff points."

Results

As noted earlier, our goal was to assess the writing performance of political science students, paying particular attention to source integration as a skill not only important to a student's ability to argue effectively but also to her ability to participate in democratic deliberation. Accordingly, our plan of analysis has two major steps. First, we present descriptive results showing the extent to which students demonstrated each of the three writing competencies we assess in our scoring rubric. Next, we display summary indices of these competencies by writing genre ("argument papers" versus "literature reviews" versus "opinion pieces").

[Figure 2 Here]

Effective integration of information source material is a multifactorial, developing competence for many political science undergraduates. Roughly a quarter of students (in this case, 23.1%) included an explicit argument for the significance of their research topics; however, very few (only 2.6%) used external source materials to support these significance arguments. Furthermore, approximately a quarter of the students integrated source material coherently and logically into their own writing at least 75% of the time. On its face, it seems troubling that only 25.5 of the writing artifacts met this criterion. However, this does not mean that the other three-quarters of students demonstrated no ability whatsoever to make this move. More than 90% of the artifacts included at least one instance of logical source integration (Figure 3), suggesting that students are not always choosing to exercise a competence they do, in fact, possess.

[Figure 3 Here]

Students' ability to express coherent connections between their ideas and cited material was independent of their mastery of the conventions of scholarly attribution of sources. For example, some students whose papers entirely lacked in-text citations nonetheless crafted logically coherent connections between their own ideas and those of other authors 100% of the time—these were students who did not conventionally cite others but merely made gestures toward other writings (one student even admitted to reading a report that made a similar argument to the one s/he was making, but could not remember the name of the report or the authors).

[Figure 4 Here]

Students in this study interpreted the "research paper" assignment in various ways. Students produced papers that fit into three academic writing genres: original research papers (which sought to evaluate empirically a student's research question, hypothesis, or both), literature reviews (which organized thematically scholarship on a specific topic), and argument papers (which attempted to persuade readers rather than create new knowledge [research paper] or summarize the contours of a research field [literature review]). As illustrated in Figure 4, genre was a significant factor in the degree to which students logically integrated source materials into their own writing. Although the proportion of sentences containing citations did not vary by genre (F = .45, $p = 0.64$), overall "source integration" scores were significantly higher in literature reviews than in original research reports or argument papers (F = 2.72; $p < 0.05$).

Discussion

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Overall, our study suggests that integrating evidence logically and effectively from other sources continues to be a challenging literacy for developing undergraduate writers. Our study also suggests that the scoring scheme we devised can be useful in diagnosing the various elements of a competent citation performance, and thus can help instructors both diagnose those aspects of students' citation performance that require further refinement and, more importantly, devise and test focused instruction by which to accomplish that development.

Our findings have several implications for the pedagogy of teaching: For example, the fact that the ability to integrate source material logically develops independently of knowledge of how to cite sources according to citing convention suggests that instructors will need to spend time on both citation conventions and idea integration. Teaching proper citation use will not automatically help students learn to integrate those sources coherently, and vice versa. While it is natural for some students to see their writing as part of a collective discussion, others pick up the technical aspects of making in-text the bibliographic citations with nearly no effort (or they recall what they were taught to do in their K-12 years). Whatever the case, instructors in writing-intensive political science courses would do well to ensure that writing instruction includes a focus on both of these citation competencies.

Our results indicate that most students are capable of logically integrating source material into their own arguments, insofar as nearly all students included at least one instance of logical source citation in their papers. However, the relatively low proportion of students who routinely included these logically integrated citations strongly suggests that most students tend not to see the importance of this writing competence. In their

essay on the political socialization of youth, McIntosh & Youniss (2010) share their vision of a citizen as one who "operates in public, recognizes his or her own interests, can promote them in the face of competing interests, knows his or her place within a larger sphere of ideologies, and identifies with the democratic political system, which allows diverse views to interact according to agreed-upon rules" (p. 24). As they argue, "…taking a public stance…necessarily involves meeting and dealing with contending positions taken by other persons. The public nature of political thought expressed in action sets in motion a new dynamic that has no parallel in private ideas…versions of the individual are inadequate to advance understanding of the engaged democratic citizen" (p. 25). Our data strongly suggest that many political science students do not yet understand or fully appreciate the value of collaboratively integrating ideas, and still see writing assignments as exhibitions of the state of their private, individual minds.

Our rating scheme does not permit us to determine the cause of this lack of understanding, but certainly it seems feasible that many undergraduates remain enmeshed in the traditional "knowledge as facts" paradigm of academic discourse that has probably dominated their formal education from its inception. Indeed, such traditional paradigms clearly also continue to inform prominent "how to write political science" manuals, such as *The Style Manual for Political Science* (APSA 2006) which, instead of helping students understand the importance of positioning their ideas against those of others, urges them to resist the temptation to get distracted from the analysis of their results by attending to what other experts and scholars have written on a subject. Likewise, while Edwards (2001) does include a section in her book, *Writing to Learn in Political Science*, that discusses ways students can juxtapose their own ideas to those of an author they are

citing, she does not extend her conception of this skill as constitutive of an ability to deliberate as a citizen. Clearly, such paradigms directly contradicts McIntosh & Youniss's (2010) conception of the skills needed by citizens in a democracy, in which "the private and isolated individual, no matter how mature his or her reasoning, often falls short of being able to participate in the political domain. This is because that domain is, by definition, public and social, or collective" (p. 26). Likewise, in his essay on citizen-sovereigns, Ostrum (2008) argues that "civic enlightenment requires citizens to achieve sufficient intellectual competence to draw upon the competence of others to take advantage of a variety of opportunities that are available as citizens acquire knowledgeable grounds to work with colleagues in self-governing societies" (p. 16).

That students may not see the rhetorical importance of integrating their arguments with those of others is also supported by our observation that citation practices varied significantly by genre. Clearly, these students were more comfortable with the idea that a literature review should include routine use of logically integrated citations; this genre, after all, exists to synthesize the ideas of others. That students did not equally value this rhetorical move in their persuasive opinion essays suggests that they may not understand the role other authors' ideas play in the legitimizing procedures of the collective in deliberation. Perhaps the central question is: can students who do not see persuasion as a deliberative activity fully understand the functioning of democracy?

As long as valorization of the isolated individual mind is codified in political science writing manuals and (we suspect) in countless undergraduate writing assignments, it will be difficult to help political science students see their citation practice as a vital move in deliberative argumentation and to help them fully understand and

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develop this important citizenship skill. Instead, we recommend that instructors deliberately and explicitly frame writing assignments in general, and citation practices in particular, as exercises in positioning the ideas of the individual student against those of other minds (available to them through the published literature), and that they try to help students view logical integration of citations as a skill that is vital to their development as deliberatively functional citizens.

The use of our rating scheme with actual student writing artifacts did reveal some limitations with our instrument. Our scheme required that students make an *explicit* connection between their ideas and a source text they were citing, which did not allow us to differentiate incoherent/illogical citation from source integration that relied on readers' logical inference for logical coherence. Yet, writing theorists have noted that coherence paradigms often rely on unstated background knowledge that is logically integrated by virtue of the inference skills of knowledgeable insiders (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995). All three raters experienced some of the writing artifacts that scored low by this explicit measure as coherent, suggesting that some students with low-rated papers have nevertheless mastered relatively sophisticated skills of building coherence through unstated yet logical implication.

Nor did our instrument allow us to diagnose whether illogical source integration was due to a student's inadequate research or to insufficient reading comprehension skills. Baglione (2008) has suggested that many undergraduates may lack both the critical reading skills that would enable them to understand articles from the political science literature and adequate library searching skills. In those cases where instructors find a source to be illogical or incoherently integrated, it is important to be able to determine

whether the student has found a logically relevant source but doesn't understand how its ideas relate to her own work or whether she has simply fallen back on the lazy student's habit of grabbing the first five articles she can put her hands on and trying to "force fit" those ideas into her argument, regardless of their true relevance. An instrument that would enable us to differentiate between integration of source information relying on logical inference and citation of logically unrelated material could be devised; however, the reliability of such an instrument would need to be tested.

Although our rating scheme did not include an item for source credibility, our sentence-level examination of citation practices did permit us to note, and to some extent evaluate, students' understanding of the credibility of sources. Some students cited no publications and instead supported their claims entirely with evidence from individual interviews they had conducted. Other students supported claims not with published evidence but with opinions from political pundits. While a systematic evaluation of students' sense of source credibility was beyond the scope of this study, we note that it would be fairly easy to add an item to our scoring scheme that would enable future investigators to evaluate this aspect of students' citation performance.

The baseline data we have collected in this study can inform writing-intensive political science curricula that can help students master important academic and citizenship deliberation skills. We urge political science instructors to explicitly frame writing assignments in their classrooms as experiences in democracy as well as in professional argumentation. Specifically, we suggest that they help students understand the logical integration of source material as a skill vital not only to the rhetorical

effectiveness of their arguments, but to the practice in the deliberative skills required of

citizens in democracies. Thus, students can understand their writing as doing democracy.

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Figure 1. Final scoring scheme to rate student papers

Scoring scheme FINAL

Item 1:
Student mentions explicitly importance of research topic
(i.e., explicitly answers the "so what" question)   Y   N

Student explicitly supports argument for significance
with directly logically relevant citations from published research   Y   N

Item 2:
Sentences within the same paragraph that include citations make
claims explicitly directly logically related to that citation
                                                            _____ of _____ citations

Figure 2. Percentage of Writing Artifacts that Demonstrated Source Integration
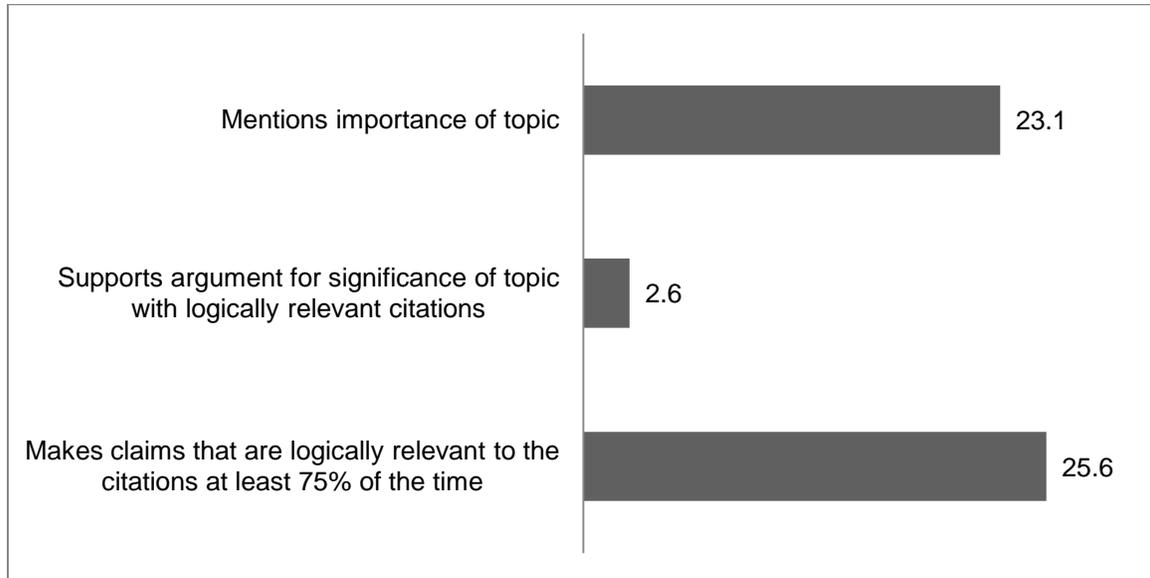
Competencies

Figure 3. Percentage of Times that Students Integrate Sources Logically into Their
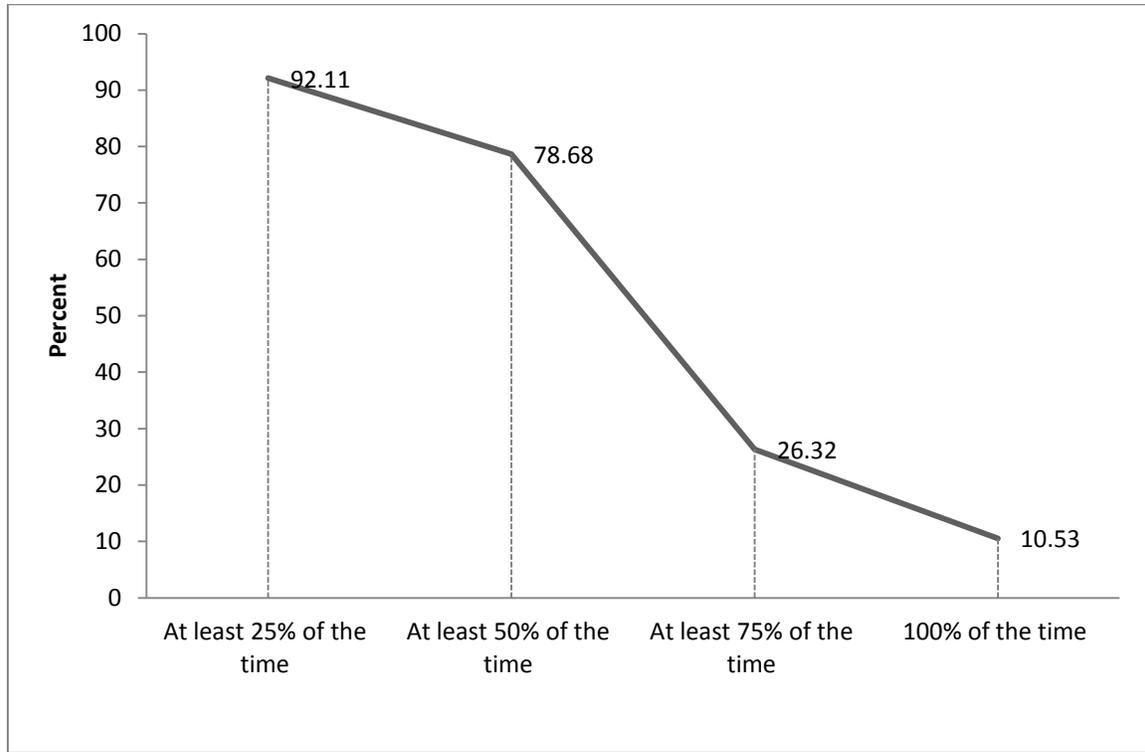
Writing

Figure 4. Comparison of the Prevalence of Source Use (Across Writing Genres)

- Summary of Overall Additive Index (Across Coders)
- Summary of Overall Proportion of Sentences with Citations (Relative to Total Sentence Count)

Argument paper
- 0.6
- 0.2

Literature review
- 1.3
- 0.2

Original research
- 1.0
- 0.2