Modular Approaches to Teaching Writing and Reinforcing Academic Integrity in the Discipline

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Teaching discipline-specific writing skills and academic integrity as it pertains to the norms of a given academic field is a particularly important task, but not one that individual political science (or other) departments are usually able to devote a large amount of time to. Instead, these are often seen as skills that will be taught by freshman writing programs, English departments...or whoever else’s job it is at the university. In those cases where writing is seen as a focus for the disciplines, interventions can be costly and time-consuming for faculty, graduate students and administrators. In this paper, we discuss the ongoing attempts to develop a tool (GovWrites) for teaching writing in Harvard’s Department of Government as a way to use a modular approach to teaching tools that lower the cost and increase the flexibility of their implementation. As the initial project is completed, we look to ways to test the effectiveness of the interventions and improve them in future models.

GovWrites is a key component of a larger, multi-modal instructional initiative being developed by the Undergraduate Program Office of Harvard’s Government Department, one which also includes the GovTeaches project platform (the latter geared towards graduate teaching fellows and faculty and not available to students). The two together may be thought of as outward- and inward-facing sides of the same pedagogical implementation. The present paper, however, focuses exclusively on GovWrites, which represents the foundational, student-oriented element of this overall initiative.

While GovWrites achieves its most tangible form as a website (http://govwrites.fas.harvard.edu/), in its entirety it is a systematic and modular approach to
thinking about discipline-based writing conventions and how to effectively convey them, and their associated skill-sets, to undergraduates. The primary reason for teaching writing and academic integrity through a modular approach, which is central to the project’s vision, comes from a number of difficulties encountered in trying to teach these skills within a specific discipline. First, while effective models of teaching writing have been created in a number of universities through Writing Across the Curriculum programs, these programs are costly and require a high level of faculty involvement, which many departments cannot depend on due to their faculty’s already numerous time constraints. Second, teaching writing within a specific discipline requires the ability to teach that community’s norms at an early stage of a student’s writing development; without exposure to some form of political science argument, students often make incorrect or inappropriate skills transfers from other courses, even or perhaps especially when given expository writing instruction. Lastly, while more interventions to reduce plagiarism and academic dishonesty have been introduced in recent years, students are generally underexposed to the norms of academic integrity, especially in their field and especially after leaving their introductory writing courses.

Below we briefly review the dominant ways in which writing and academic integrity are taught in American colleges and universities, as well as the literature assessing these approaches. We then describe the origins of this specific project and the features which emerged. The final part of this paper describes the GovWrites tool in greater detail, along with addressing its modular implementation in practice. We conclude by reflecting on ways in which to refine the tool and how to measure its effectiveness, which represents the next stage of this ongoing project.

**Writing Across the Curriculum**

Most students in college encounter analytic writing in a general first-year composition or expository writing course, which they are usually taking simultaneously with those courses that first expose them to writing within specific disciplines. These programs exist at the vast majority of US colleges and universities; enough to support more than 70 PhD programs to train instructors (Consortium of Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition). However, while
few schools have as yet done away with the requirement, it has been criticized from a number of angles. The full range of critiques is beyond the scope of this project, but particularly relevant among these criticisms is the idea that courses emphasizing composition skills without teaching the way that source materials are used will tend to reify ideas of texts as authoritative or sources of “facts,” rather than as arguments or conversations into which students can enter (Wineburg 1991, Greene 1993). However, where introductory writing courses are made to carry significant disciplinary content, the opposite approach can lead to a similar outcome: courses which focus on content without emphasizing process often increase students’ feelings of being “accountable” to their sources, since they see writing assignments as more purely summative assessments rather than as ways to develop their own arguments or interpretations (Greene 1993, p. 60).¹ These courses end up risking either a strict focus on compositional skills that may not easily transfer to specific genres, or a focus on attached content that teaches some specific genre as a universal standard of writing which may lead to incorrect skills transfers or reify the idea of writing as a purely instrumental way to show off all the “facts” a student has acquired.

Writing across the curriculum (WAC) programs have arisen as a partial response to these problems. While writing assignments are common to many courses in many fields, whether or not there is any formally established WAC program, the movement has sought to make writing goals explicit in other aspects of undergraduate education beyond introductory courses. It has several goals in doing so; among these are increasing student proficiency in a wider range of genres and purposes, creating a campus-wide and interdisciplinary culture of writing, and breaking down separate silos of teaching and learning expertise so that instructional faculty can learn from others beyond their own academic field (2014 Statement of WAC Principles and Practices). WAC programs (and/or the related Writing in the Disciplines curriculum) have been implemented broadly, with at least 566 formal implementations as of 2008 (International WAC/WID Mapping Project; UC Davis).

The depth and commitment of WAC programs may be one of the keys to their success. Insofar as it requires the support and buy-in of faculty across multiple disciplines, it allows the curriculum design recommendations of WAC to be implemented not just in single courses, but

¹ Greene cites also Barnes 1976, Applebee 1981, 1984
over the course of a student’s progress in college and regardless of the academic concentration they pursue. WAC curricula encourage departments to “scaffold” their curriculum towards specific goals upon graduation, such as senior theses or capstone projects, with intermediate writing projects and genre-specific instruction in the meantime. This holistic approach to writing at a university is centered on getting a lasting dialogue set up among faculty, so that the model is seen as an ongoing philosophy rather than a “training program” (Walvoord 2000). As disciplinary models change and as new types of programs, such as service learning or interdisciplinary initiatives are introduced, the structure of any given WAC initiative needs to adapt with it. Barbara Walvoord (2000) points out that while a loosely organized model is resilient, the introduction of such a program can be difficult and spur faculty resistance. In order to sustain the WAC model, departments and universities alongside many individual faculty must invest a high level of resources, making it an effective but costly solution in the end.

**Writing to Learn or Learning to Write?**

Writing instruction is seen as a fundamental part of the higher education process, and it is usually seen as something complementary to the process of liberal education, rather than a specific skill valuable primarily in its own right. The importance of writing to developing high-level thinking skills, such as (per Bloom 1956) synthesis and evaluation of materials is often cited as a justification for writing instruction. Moreover, effective writing has to do double duty: it is a learning aid and a communication tool at the same time. As John Bean (2011) puts it, “Writing is a process of doing critical thinking and a product that communicates the results of critical thinking” (p.4).

What this means in practice is less clear, however intuitive the idea, and WAC curriculum developers have worked to maintain at least a theoretical distinction between the two goals. On the one hand, the use of writing as a tool for the learner should emphasize its value in “knowledge transformation,” (McLeod 2000, p.3) i.e., that it may not be helpful for fact retention but that has value in discovering new ways of applying or transferring knowledge from one task to another. This approach, focused on the benefits of writing to a students’
understanding, is often seen as the core principle animating WAC (McLeod and Miraglia 2001). The actual effectiveness of these “writing-to-learn” exercises seems to be mixed and may rely on interacting factors such as metacognitive tasks assigned alongside them (Bangert-Drowns, et al. 2004) or the receipt of sustained feedback on the assignments (Fry and Villagomez 2012), but it is at least a stepping-off point to conversations about ways of thinking.

On the other hand, writing tools can be used as a way of teaching how to write within a particular discipline. This process, described more broadly as entering a “discourse community,” is seen as useful both from the practical perspective of being able to effectively contribute to an academic field, but also as a way to teach “form[s] of social behavior in the academic community,” (McLeod 2000, p.3). The teaching of specific genres is not without controversy in composition studies,² as explicit modeling can be seen as a way of forcing conformity to any existing weaknesses or ideologies within a given discourse community (Freedman 1993). However, it is a way for instructors to address or to teach the eventual rhetorical purpose of any writing (Devitt 2004, p. 213), in a way that may be impossible to do without some explicit reference to the genre being used.

In any particular genre, students generally show a reluctance to use writing as a way of entering into academic conversations. One reason for this is that in any form of summative assessment, students will have incentives to think of their writing as a way to demonstrate the knowledge they’ve acquired, not as a way to engage further with the material (Greene 1993, p. 60; Beaufort 2007, p. 38). Unless the ability to engage with other readings as an academic peer is expressly made part of the course’s requirements, students will be more inclined to use writing assignments as a vessel to reflect the content knowledge they have acquired without drawing connections between ideas. Another problem that students encounter is the feeling that there is nothing left to say; the critics have already said it all (Gaipa 2004). As our students have put it, “who am I to criticize Theda Skocpol? She literally wrote the book on this.”

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² See Devitt (2004) for an overview of the arguments
Once students do write in a way that enters into a conversation, they are still dependent on an understanding of the discourse community they exist within. Because they may have prior exposure to different styles of conversation, they may incorrectly try to transfer writing skills learned from one context to another. Expository writing courses may frequently emphasize the exploratory essay as a way of writing (and particularly as a way of “writing to learn”). However, in most social sciences like political science, a more direct style of argumentation is expected. Students writing for the first time in a new genre will often be unaware that they have crossed into a new discourse community unless this is made explicit to them. The fact that they may also be simultaneously writing for another field, and will have classmates who carry the same expectations across classes, will make many students even more inclined to persist in the styles of discourse they have already learned (Beaufort 2007). Teachers can make the different styles clear through feedback on writing, but here too there are risks. Students who are penalized for applying the wrong writing styles may see criticisms as the whims or limitations of particular professors, if the concept of disciplinary norms or of specific audiences are not clearly explained, and may base their adaptive strategies on trying to read individual faculty’s preferences rather than developing a sense of a new discourse community (Beaufort 2007).

Faculty, too, often show reluctance to emphasize the use of disciplinary courses to teach writing. The perceived cost of adding another requirement to overworked, overcommitted faculty probably cannot be overemphasized, but there are more fundamental reasons for this. As Michael Carter (2007) points out, most professors and teaching faculty themselves learned how to write within the norms of their own field by a slow, gradual process of acculturation and discursive writing experiences in the genre, not by specific training in writing. “Writing” thus appears to them as either something transparent and beyond explanation or else as some set of generalizable skills, to be learned outside the discipline (p. 385, see also Russell 1995). It is true that departmental faculty are often ill-equipped to teach the technical aspects of writing that they perceive to be the purpose of writing instruction. In terms of teaching the cognitive

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3 See, for example, Franklin, et al. 2014’s efforts to adapt WAC principles to large, political science lecture courses
processes necessary for analysis a specific discipline or in teaching the norms of a discourse community, however, faculty are indeed uniquely well-placed to convey and model writing styles, and to identify the kind of cognitive analyses necessary to argue within a specific discipline (Hudd, et al. 2013, Dinitz and Harrington 2014)

Teaching About Plagiarism

One especially important aspect of teaching writing that is often left out of formal curricular design is plagiarism. Student plagiarism is seen as a serious offense, and one that can/should carry significant penalties. For example, at the authors’ university, the plagiarism policy reads:

All homework assignments, projects, lab reports, papers, and examinations submitted to a course are expected to be the student’s own work. Students should always take great care to distinguish their own ideas and knowledge from information derived from sources. The term “sources” includes not only primary and secondary material published in print or online, but also information and opinions gained directly from other people.

The responsibility for learning the proper forms of citation lies with the individual student. Quotations must be placed properly within quotation marks and must be cited fully. In addition, all paraphrased material must be acknowledged completely. Whenever ideas or facts are derived from a student’s reading and research or from a student’s own writings, the sources must be indicated...

Students who, for whatever reason, submit work either not their own or without clear attribution to its sources will be subject to disciplinary action, and ordinarily required to withdraw from the College.4

It is important to note that not only are there strict penalties for breach of the policy, but the responsibility for knowing how to avoid plagiarism is left entirely up to the student. Yet there is considerable evidence that students have difficulty understanding plagiarism policies at universities, and that large numbers of them may never have engaged directly with the policy beyond it being discussed at early orientation events (Nelson, et al. 2013, Gullifer and Tyson 2014). Not only do students have trouble understanding the policies, but it is not always clear that the faculty who have to apply and

4 http://static.fas.harvard.edu/registrar/ugrad_handbook/current/chapter2/plagiarism.html
judge plagiarism standards always fully understand them, either (Gullifer and Tyson 2014; see also below for the challenges the authors faced in their department). Faculty may also have understandings that are misaligned with a university’s goals, or may feel that a university’s policy is unsupportive of their own goals as academics (Sunderland-Smith 2008). Students may also feel that the university or administration views plagiarism more harshly or in more moral terms than students themselves perceive, leading to a sense of fear that keeps students far away from potential plagiarism by not engaging with the kind of synthesis expected in academic work (Gullifer and Tyson 2010). With increasing access to electronic resources, even those students who intend to abide by plagiarism and citation policies may have more trouble intuiting the way that electronic sources are supposed to be cited or may not see them as having the same authoritative weight as paper texts (Pecorari 2013). In general, students may perceive plagiarism as bad, but it is unclear that there is a mechanism by which simply having strict, unambiguous policies written down somewhere visible to students is sufficient.

A large number of college students will enter disciplinary courses without significant practice in proper citation skills, either because they have not had significant writing experiences or because they have received their training in genres of writing that do not require the same type of writing skills (Pecorari 2013, p.36). In order to have students understand the reasons for avoiding plagiarism, and to be able to transfer skills across disciplines, it is likely necessary that directly teaching about plagiarism is necessary. A number of interventions have been tested, and while the size of the effects vary there seems to be a consistent finding that direct teaching of why plagiarism matters and how to avoid it is correlated with reduced instances of plagiarized student submissions. This may be through increased conceptual understanding of what plagiarism is—or isn’t (Belter and du Pré 2009), through attitude change (Owens and White 2013), or simply by greater awareness of what the penalties for plagiarism are (Sims 2002, Burgess-Proctor, et al. 2014).

Another approach that has been advocated is the use of assignment design to prevent opportunities for plagiarism or make plagiarism more easily evident (Heckler, et al. 2013), or,

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5 Pecorari notes also that faculty may themselves have ambiguous views on the relative authority of web and/or multi-authored sources.
on the other hand, to design assignments that require more engagement with faculty in order to spur opportunities to discuss citing practices before assignments are turned in (Howard 2001). The Council of Writing Program Administrators (2003) has developed a list of best practices along these lines, encouraging course design on the part of faculty to achieve both goals. The difficulty in implementing these, however, is that they require a high level of commitment on the part of faculty in course development. For example, instructors are encouraged to introduce student projects early, give them a wide range of latitude in the specific topic, and check in frequently to work with students on individual topics. These suggestions, while helpful and grounded in the Council’s research and experience, may not be practical in large or introductory courses, and they still require individual faculty to choose to put serious effort into designing their course around plagiarism and academic integrity. As with WAC curricula, they might be an effective but high-cost solution.

Plagiarism may also be dependent on the particular discourse community in which a writer is contributing. Humanities courses such as English, where many students receive their initial writing instruction, may encourage attention to and adaptation of directly-quoted source texts, while this sort of citation may be inappropriate in the natural sciences. Social sciences like political science and sociology may have a particularly difficult time with this. The need to balance evidence-based argument with normative or conceptual arguments requires extensive use of quotation, synthesis, and also paraphrasing in ways that may not be obvious to writers simply trying to teach themselves the genre’s conventions by copying them. By using a discipline-specific and explicit approach to explaining source-use conventions, on the other hand, instructors have a chance to explain the larger goals of citation practices: that “they are not primarily empty formalities, they exist to help the text in which they appear achieve its purpose” (Pecorari 2013, p. 130). In political science, for example, this may involve explicitly teaching the fact that writers generally paraphrase others’ theoretical arguments or evidence-based claims, but directly quote others’ conceptual definitions because of the underlying logical structures these definitions need to make explicit (cf. Sartori 1970, Goertz 2006). This may be in stark contrast to the kind of deep, textual reading students have learned in expository writing courses or the purely evidence-based arguments required in some pure science courses, and
none is “correct” in a universal sense. But without explicit attention brought to this, students who are successful in applying one style of citation may incorrectly transfer these skills in ways that cause them to be overly cautious in their citation, or worse, may lead to unintentional plagiarism.

**Origins of the GovWrites Project**

The GovWrites project eventually uncovered or ran into many of these pitfalls of earlier attempts to look at writing in the disciplines, but it was originally developed as an immediate intervention to a specific problem. The genesis of this project dates to the fall of 2013 and conversations that took place between the Department’s Director and Assistant Director of Undergraduate Studies. The impetus for them was the well-publicized cheating scandal that shook Harvard College beginning in May 2012. Initially, the Undergraduate Program Office sought to be proactive specifically in addressing issues of academic integrity, it having become obvious that many students were ill-equipped to cogently articulate the underlying principles of ethical scholarly behavior (and the reasons for them), or to effectively differentiate between permissible and impermissible conduct in real-life examples. The latter realization was particularly vexing; while blatant plagiarism (e.g., copying entire sentences or paragraphs from a published source without attribution) is better understood, cases of alleged misconduct referred to the Honor Council for adjudication are typically not so cut-and-dried.

Instead, after conducting a preliminary review, we discovered that most violations of academic integrity on written assignments resulted not from overt dishonesty, but rather poor work practices and time management. Among these were “cryptomnesia” (see Pecorari 2013): cutting and pasting a quote into a paper without immediately citing it and later not being able to determine where it originated from), as well as genuine confusion over how to deal with more complicated issues and various “gray” areas (e.g., what constitutes effective paraphrasing; is it possible to self-plagiarize?). The latter was abetted by the absence of clear

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6 Our Honor Council representative recently estimated that in the last several years, of all the academic dishonesty cases brought against students involving essays or research papers, around 60-70% would fall into the category of “unintentional” dishonesty, meaning the student either did not realize what she was doing was wrong, or was not sure how to proceed and found ways to self-justify taking the “easier” route.
departmental guidelines beyond a simple reiteration of generic University-wide injunctions against dishonesty. Without concrete illustrations and examples, as well as differing expectations concerning collaboration across various disciplines, these were of little practical effect, with many of our students uncritically importing accepted practices from the natural sciences (where group projects are the norm) and applying them to their social science courses.

Finally, even tenured faculty in our department, to say nothing of the less experienced teaching fellows, were frequently signaling unclear or contradictory expectations to undergraduates regarding issues such as sharing reading notes, discussing assignments with others, and using outside editors (be they a family member or a professional service). In short, we found our students were often ill-equipped not only to navigate the sometimes admittedly perplexing terrain of academic integrity, but also to determine when they had strayed beyond its boundaries in the first place.

As in our department the evaluative component of virtually every course involves substantive writing, whether in the form of in-class bluebook exams, take-home response essays, or longer research papers, it soon became clear to us that it was impossible to divorce any discipline-specific discussion of academic integrity from wider conversations about the conventions and expectations of writing in the social sciences. Indeed, the more we examined the issue, the more it became apparent that a synthetic, cross-disciplinary approach was warranted. Not only did we come to the conclusion that promoting academic integrity is part and parcel of teaching effective discipline-based writing, but we also came to strongly suspect, as the literature at least partially bears out, that becoming an effective writer makes you a better reader, and vice versa, there existing an innate connection between the consumption and production of knowledge. But if learning to write effectively (e.g., by understanding what evidence is central to making an argument versus what is peripheral) also makes one better able to quickly determine the main points underpinning an assigned text, the promotion of such “virtuous cognitive cycles” would suggest that incorporating the teaching of writing directly into introductory-level political science courses (rather than teaching it as a stand-alone topic, often
not even focusing on disciplinary standards for the conveyance of information) represents the pedagogically preferred option.7

More specifically, the co-authors both have extensive experience teaching (and grading) in what are traditionally the Harvard Government Department’s two largest lower-level courses (Gov 20: Foundations of Comparative Politics; Gov 97: Sophomore Tutorial on Democracy), and have come to realize that there are several additional roadblocks students face when trying to “self-teach” effective writing in the discipline while enrolled in reading-intensive courses. First, many students taking Gov 20 or other introductory sub-field courses (e.g., Gov 30: Intro to American Politics; Gov 40: Intro to IR) will be first-year students who either have not yet taken a required expository writing course or will be taking it concurrently, delaying students’ ability to transfer skills from these courses. Consequently, a significant percentage of them will still be in a high-school mindset, utilizing the stereotypical “five-paragraph” essay and similar writing conventions which are often inadequate for college-level work. Second, even if they have already taken an expository writing class in college (as they would have by the time they enroll in Gov 97), students often fail to understand which of the skills they were taught are directly transferable to discipline-specific courses versus which require subsequent refinement. Further exacerbating the issue: despite being very capable educators, most of the instructors teaching in our expository writing program are not social scientists, nor are the assignments generally similar to the evidence-based interpretive papers students are often required to produce in political science classes. Third, there is a component of acculturation to the discipline that initially eludes many students; in particular, students are frequently loath to challenge arguments made by published authors, particularly if such behavior is not modeled for them directly. All this further bolsters the case for incorporating writing instruction more directly into political science coursework.

By the fall of 2013, therefore, the Undergraduate Program Office had determined that there were to be three “legs” to this evolving project: evidentiary, presentational, and ethical.

7 Of course, this raises the question of how to accomplish this objective organically, with both minimal disruption to the existing structure of a course and faculty buy-in. We believe that a modular approach, with its ability to accommodate a wide array of implementation models, overcomes many of the potential obstacles that would otherwise face directly incorporating the teaching of writing into content-driven coursework. This will be discussed below.
By evidentiary, we mean teaching students how to appropriately acquire and analyze evidence in making an argument, including the need to adequately consider counterfactuals and disconfirming cases, when appropriate. By presentational, we mean how their thinking is presented, both logically and stylistically. No matter how strong an argument is overall, if the thesis is buried or obscured by mountains of tangential points, it will not be as effective as a more succinct, focused effort. Similarly, if a paper is marred by awkward phrasing and grammatical issues, it will not be as capable of conveying information as one that is not. Unclear writing will often, if not always, be a symptom of unclear thinking or understanding of the course content. And finally, the ethical component is exactly what it sounds like: we put a stress on academic integrity, which means not just caring that words, once they appear on a page, are properly attributed, but also caring about the overall process students go through as they research and write their papers. This means also focusing on subjects such as good study habits and effective note-taking, and learning to approach the adaptation of ideas as a member of an academic discourse community.

Yet once the conceptual basis for this project was refined, we were still faced with the task of somehow implementing it. In a series of conversations with people from the Harvard College Writing Program.8 We learned that they had recently constructed a website called HarvardWrites (used in Harvard’s expository writing classes), and decided that while we would significantly adapt the content, we would explicitly model our efforts visually after the earlier site. The reasons for doing so are several. First, both sides felt very strongly that it was important to think of teaching student writing as an iterative, multi-stage process. Therefore, we felt replicating the look of HarvardWrites in GovWrites innately conveyed the idea that we were directly building on what students had earlier learned. We have since explicitly communicated to students: “the expository writing classes teach you how to write at a college level; we take the next step and refine those skills to discipline-specific writing.” Second, we were also eager to franchise the idea to other departments in the College9 and believed that

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8 In particular, we are indebted to Dr. Tom Jehn, the Sosland Director of the Harvard College Writing Program, and Dr. Jonah Johnson, then a preceptor in it.
9 Both in a more practical effort to secure support from the University administration and a more pedagogical effort to increase the types of writing assignment we were aware of and could address.
keeping a similar look across resulting sites would not only make sense intuitively, but also create economies of scale by allowing a basic web template, once designed, to be affordably cloned and customized (there is already an AnthroWrites, and other departments are currently developing analogues). Finally, we felt that the HarvardWrites site, which features curated videos, sample pieces of writing, and interactive, step-by-step writing guides for students, nicely encompassed our vision of a modular, multi-modal tool. This would allow it to be both selectively implemented (e.g., faculty could choose to project videos of departmental faculty speaking about academic integrity during a class meeting in a lecture hall, but not necessarily require students to work through the online writing assignments, depending on their needs) and selectively expanded (e.g., we are in the process of incorporating interviews we conducted with freshman concerning how their writing developed over the course of completing two papers for Gov 20, which will be available on the website and used as a real-world example to model in-person writing workshops).

Consequently, GovWrites was launched in the fall of 2015, concurrent with the co-authors of this paper teaching Gov 20. The website was initially used in TF-led sections, in our associated in-person writing workshops, and by students individually. It has since been rolled out throughout the department to a highly positive response.

The GovWrites Tool

Below is a screenshot of the landing page for GovWrites (govwrites.fas.harvard.edu).
The website itself is purposely designed to only be two pages deep, to eliminate outside links, and to conform to a minimalist aesthetic. This format was chosen because both the HarvardWrites design team, and our own subsequent in-house student focus group, revealed this is what students preferred in terms of ease-of-navigation. In addition, we chose to eliminate outside links because we wanted to emphasize the dynamic, focused nature of the site, not to simply be a repository for outside resources or a “link farm”.10 The main navigation occurs, as can be seen in the above screenshot, through four thematic interfaces: “Defining the Discipline,” “Writing in Government,” “Collaborating with Others,” and “Working with Integrity.” Each of these four interfaces has a video associated with it wherein a well-known faculty member discusses the underlying theme. We recorded the videos in the spring of 2014 utilizing a semi-structured interview format, which resulted in around one to one-and-a-half

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10 Part of the reason for this was also pragmatic; we neither wanted to police links continually to make sure they were still working, nor to rely on other sites for the availability of our content. As our focus group revealed, leaving our site to go to other sites is also something students told us they preferred to avoid.
hours of video shot for each of the four faculty members depicted. Once edited, 3-4 minute videos on each topic were available.

The videos themselves may be used as stand-alone presentations to introduce concepts and spur discussion, as in a classroom setting. They also introduce the written information and practice exercises that follow them. Our goal is eventually to be able to annotate examples of writing both asynchronously via the GovWrites site and in real-time, using dynamic input from students via an app or Learning Management System (LMS), which would allow the workshop instructor to adapt to the ways in which students are perceiving information with almost no delay. Initial implementation of these tools using Learning Catalytics has allowed workshop instructors to allow students to respond in real-time to sample writing prompts, display the data, and have students critique and improve their responses via paired learning or in group-wide discussion. The point, however, is that GovWrites can be used in a number of settings, whether as part of a lecture (where the “defining the discipline” video may be shown to introduce freshmen to what political science is and the topics it covers), in a writing workshop, or on a student’s own in a dorm room (if a student wants to refresh their memory about a particular concept).

Below the video are various written exercises, tips, and samples of writing. A critical component of this is that we teach by utilizing concrete examples. For instance, under “Writing in Government” we discuss how to “decode” professors’ prompts (i.e., questions students are asked to answer in an essay) and lead them through several exercises in doing so, which can either be completed independently or in a workshop setting. We eventually will have videos of students discussing their iterative attempts at this process, filmed before the first paper was due for Gov 20 and then after the second was submitted (the reported differences thus far have been impressive, and we believe this information will serve as an important “short-cut” through which to instruct future students). However, it is also worth noting that “teaching teaches the teacher.” Before we embarked on this exercise, we did not adequately appreciate the difficulty many students had in “decoding” complicated or vague prompts, particularly if they were “nested” (e.g., had multiple sub-questions within them that had to be prioritized or
sorted in compiling a response). Similarly, under the heading “working with integrity” we do not just admonish students not to plagiarize, but walk them through some more complicated examples of what plagiarism may look like. We eventually plan on having an interactive “academic integrity quiz” here as well, where students will be presented with real-life scenarios in which they will have to decide what is appropriate behavior and what is not. The quiz will adapt to the level of the student in question (those who get answers right will be presented with progressively more difficult scenarios, while those that flounder will have concepts repeated in various guises). The critical benefits here are that reinforcement will be immediate and specific—students will be given instant feedback on their choices so that they can understand why certain scenarios violate the College Honor Code while others do not, and will do so using examples that let them practice the norms of a specific discipline.

Finally, the thematic headers were chosen to work in unison with one another, to create a dynamic “narrative arc” tying together disciplinary expectations, translating these to expectations for writing, stressing proper and improper forms of collaboration and finally ending by emphasizing that integrity underlies all scholarly endeavor. Again, it does this by noting concrete reasons why integrity is needed in the discipline’s academic endeavors—for example, stressing the ability to reproduce published results. These factors all tie back to specific project goals identified in the introduction to this paper.

Implementing Modularity

What exactly do we mean by the term “modularity”? At the most basic level we mean that it is possible to take specific aspects of the GovWrites platform and use them independently in teaching as needed for a specific course or as desired by a specific instructor. For example, the same exercises may be used in both large-group and one-on-one formats, and tools and exercises can easily be populated with prompts specific to a given course. In addition, the modular structure developed in political science makes it easy to adapt, swap out, and add or delete modules as appropriate for a specific discipline’s writing needs.

11 An example of how this exercise is implemented on the Web site, along with an instructional guide given to teaching fellows, can be seen in the following appendix.
Consequently, we depend on this term to cover two manifestations of “modularity”: 1) instructor-/classroom-centered and 2) platform-based. Regarding the first of these, the tool is scalable. At one end of the spectrum, there is the least ambitious implementation: a student simply uses, or is assigned to use, the tool on their own (no cost to instructor). At a mid-range implementation, the tool may be used in a workshop setting to work through decoding prompts or identifying strong thesis statements as a group, with the workshops taking place outside the regular hours of instructions (relatively minimal cost to instructor, especially if responsibility can be delegated to a teaching fellow or writing tutor, as it is at Harvard). Notably, at this level it may also be used as an effective teaching aid to prepare new teaching fellows for leading discussion sections and grading assignments. We have learned that we cannot rely on graduate students—even the brightest—to be great writers or, even if they are, to be able to effectively communicate what good disciplinary writing looks like. However, by providing them with a means to see exactly what undergraduates are learning, it also aids them in developing critical instructional skills. For example, understanding the logic behind how an undergraduate reasons through a complex or nested essay prompt—and seeing where the major sources of confusion are—allows teachers to adapt their expectations and teaching styles in later iterations of material related to that assignment, and will likely how the assignment itself is graded (the intervention, in other words, need not just act on students, but may look more like this: instructors ↔ govwrites ↔ students). Meanwhile, the most ambitious implementation exacts higher costs from the instructional team, but it also brings the highest rewards—this is where the tool really shines. In this implementation, faculty can actually replace sample texts with real examples from previous classes geared towards refining a specific writing skill or subset of skills. This allows virtually infinite customizability in how the underlying tool can be utilized in a classroom or workshop setting, and a variety of low-, medium- and higher-cost interventions depending on a faculty member’s or department’s perceived need at a given time, for a given course.

The above gets at the flexibility of the underlying platform—indeed, the underlying template designed by us is so customizable that others departments are able to quickly use it to create their own discipline-specific versions of GovWrites. (It is worth noting that the original
implementation of this website was designed in OpenScholar, but we have begun transitioning to WordPress for the added flexibility it affords in this regard.) Meanwhile, we are able to build-out content online to allow the tool to evolve along with departmental needs, and the most ambitious instructors are even able to custom-populate text boxes and assignments, allowing them to have very precise control over which skills are being taught, when they are taught, and how they are taught. In short, we have sought to develop a tool useful to entire department as a turn-key system, while also allowing faculty who chose to do so to emphasize writing directly in their courses while lowering the start-up costs of doing so.

Measuring Effectiveness

The next stage of this project will involve actually measuring the impact specific pedagogical interventions (e.g., writing workshops on specific topics, or using a volunteered paper for online peer-review) have on student outcomes. While we have not yet gone through the IRB process, we hope to be able to conduct randomized studies in our largest classes this coming fall term to determine the relative effectiveness of various ways of utilizing GovWrites in the teaching of effective disciplinary writing. The early stages of the GovWrites process were designed to leverage available resources and fill immediate needs, and led to the understanding of the advantages modularity would have for the implementing departments. At the next stage, GovWrites will provide opportunities to test the effectiveness of specific interventions, and it is at this stage that guidance for collecting and testing is needed.

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Appendix A: Sample GovWrites Exercise

To see how this exercise is implemented on the Web, visit http://govwrites.fas.harvard.edu/writing-discipline

Exercise: Decoding Prompts

What to Do:

1. **Prepare** by reading about the elements of paper prompts in the "Tips" tool to the right.

2. **Read** the three sample prompts below and select one to work with.

3. **Answer** the questions in the text boxes below the sample prompts.

4. **Write** a 1-sentence version in your own words of the prompt you have selected. You can do this in the first “Re-write” box below the questions.

5. **Try re-writing** the other two prompts in a single sentence.

Tips

**Design and Purpose**

Instructors have two main goals with most prompts: First, they want to test how well you’ve understood assigned material for the course and gauge your progress over the term. Second, they want to encourage you to think about certain questions in a way that may not be directly covered in the course materials themselves. In this way, prompts facilitate guided learning through writing.

In most cases, the instructor will have both of these goals in mind. Depending on the assignment, though, one goal may carry greater emphasis than the other.

**Central Question**

This is the main question that the instructor wants you to answer. It may be a yes/no question, where you need to agree or disagree with a given statement. Or it may be an open-ended question, where you need to develop your own line of argument. Either way, the central question is the core of the paper, i.e., the question your instructor is asking in order to test your knowledge about material from the course or to encourage you to develop a reasoned opinion based on that material. Your thesis statement should respond directly to this central question.

- Example of a central question:
  - What do you think is Aristotle’s strongest justification for participatory citizenship?

- Example of a multi-part central question:
  - What do you think is Aristotle’s strongest justification for participatory citizenship? Does it translate from ancient democracy to the present; does it apply today?

**Supporting Questions**

In addition to the central question, prompts typically include additional points to consider as you write your paper, and these points often come in the form of secondary or supporting questions. Supporting questions are meant to prompt your thinking and can help remind you of important debates that may exist within the topic you are writing about.
That being said, prompts made up of more than one question can be harder to decode. For one thing, the first question in the prompt is not always the central question, and it might be possible to interpret more than one of the questions as the central question. This ambiguity might be intentional (to allow students to write a range of essays), or it might be unintentional. For these reasons, it is always helpful to try putting the prompt in your own words. What is the central question being asked? And what is the central question your paper is answering with its thesis? What are the supporting questions being asked? And how will your paper answer those questions in relation to your thesis?

In the following example prompt, notice how the first set of questions (greyed out and in italics) form a multi-part central question about an idea of Aristotle and its relevance to the present day. The subsequent supporting questions provide a number of possible directions in which to elaborate on this question, but none of these supporting questions should be the main focus of an argument responding to this particular prompt.

- Example:
  - What do you think is Aristotle’s strongest justification for participatory citizenship? Does it translate from ancient democracy to the present; does it apply today? How do modern democracies define citizenship? Do modern democratic institutions (representation, voting and elections, political parties) and/or the organized groups of civil society (voluntary associations, demonstrations, social movements) provide arenas for political participation? If so, how and why is participation valued? If not, why not, and how is the division of political labor justified?

Additional Cues:

Prompts often provide cues about what should or shouldn’t be the focus of a writing assignment. For instance, there may be debates or themes that have been raised in the course, but which are not meant to be the particular focus of the paper at hand. In the following excerpt from a prompt, you can see that Aristotle's definition of "citizen" is crucial, but the goal of the essay is to use the definition to make a further point, rather than getting bogged down in the definition itself.

- Example from a Gov prompt:
  - In the Politics, Aristotle defined a citizen as someone who takes turns in ruling and being ruled, identified who was eligible (and ineligible) for citizenship, gave an account of citizens’ judgment, and set out reasons for popular political participation.

Restrictions

Prompts often include additional requirements that either guide or limit a writing assignment. These restrictions are usually straightforward requirements for the essay's form (how long it should be) or for its content (what question(s) it should answer and which sources or cases it should use).

- Examples from Gov prompts:
  - You must analyze Aristotle’s text
  - You may pick just one or two government institutions or civil society groups to illustrate your answer.
  - You must refer to at least two authors (in addition to Aristotle) in composing your response.

Sample Prompts

1. The traditional definition of democracy is captured by Schumpeter’s statement that democracy is the “institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by
means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.” Is Schumpeter’s “free competition for the free vote” a sufficient conceptual and normative definition of “democracy”? What else, if anything, would you add to this definition?

2. The majority of Gov 97 has focused on state actors, but the Internet is a whole new non-state world that currently has little to no formal governance. Should the Internet be governed democratically? What does it mean to have democratic governance of the Internet? (Will there be elected bodies? Will the Internet be governed by democratic principles?) If you were on a committee to develop Internet governance, what democratic processes (if any) would you recommend? Why?

3. How do new technologies affect democratic politics? We have read a number of accounts of traditional forms of democratic participation and democratic institutions – choose one topic or outcome (e.g. elections, campaign finance, regime change, economic institutions, the welfare state, democratic peace etc.) that we have read about, and think about how new technologies challenge or add to traditional theories about that outcome.

Exercises

1. What is the central question being asked here in this prompt?
2. What parts of the prompt are asking additional supporting questions?
3. What do you think the instructor is trying to get students to think about with this prompt?
4. Re-write the prompt in your own words. Try to do it in one sentence.
5. Re-write one of the other prompts in your own words.
   a. See if you can do this one sentence, too
6. Re-write the other remaining prompt in your own words.
   a. Try to do it again in a single sentence.
Appendix B: Sample GovWrites Exercise – Teaching Fellows’ Guide

GovWrites – Decoding Prompt Exercise
Guide for TFs

While students are able to access this GovWrites exercise on their own, it was primarily designed for TFs like you to use during section. This guide should give you some suggestions on how to run the exercise in the course of a section meeting, with the goal of helping students learn how to deal with prompts they will receive in Government courses (and in social science courses more broadly).

Goals of the Exercise:
- To have students understand the kind of prompts assigned in Gov courses
- To put students in the instructor’s frame of mind, so they know what they are being evaluated on or what skill they are expected to develop
- To get students in the habit of putting the prompt’s question(s) in their own words
- To get students in the habit of thinking of prompts as questions that need to be answered.

Necessary Preparation:
- Students will need laptop access or computer access in section for this exercise.
- Decide whether you want to review student answers to the exercise. If so, have them hit the submit button when they rewrite the prompts, and ask the Departmental Writing Fellow for access to the results.

Things to Remember:
- Especially in foundational courses like Gov 20 and 30, this may be the first complex prompt that students have ever encountered. Up to this point, most students will have been asked in Government or Civics courses only to provide a description or “compare and contrast” type prompts.
- Many students will have been introduced to more complicated concepts and to some causal arguments, but almost none of them will have experience in analytic arguments where they’re comparing the explanations of different answers.
- For example, look at the question in the box at right, taken from the 2016 AP Gov exam: students are being asked mostly to describe concepts. There are causal ideas in some of these, but there is no expectation that they will evaluate these arguments. This is likely the type of

2016 AP US Government – Free Response #1

Linkage Institutions—such as political parties, the media, and interest groups—connect citizens to the government and play significant roles in the electoral process.

(a) Describe one important functions of political parties as a linkage institution in elections.

(b) Describe the influence of the media on the electoral process in each of the following roles.
   *Gatekeeping/agenda setting
   *Scorekeeping/horse race journalism

(c) Describe two strategies interest groups use to influence the electoral process.

(d) Explain how, according to critics, interest groups may limit representative democracy
prompt that students are most familiar with when they arrive at Harvard.

- And don't forget that a number of your students will not have even taken a course at the AP or equivalent level, so it may be an even bigger conceptual leap. Either way, do not forget that analytical argument is a skill they will need to learn, rather than something that comes naturally.

- Students may have already taken Expos or be taking it simultaneously with your course. This may be a help in terms of general writing skills, but Expos is also teaching them to write a slightly different style of essay, often fitting humanities courses more closely. Do not imply that what they're learning in Expos isn't relevant, but do key them in that there may be different expectations in different fields. In the end, it is the TF's job to make sure students are at least aware of the expectations underlying course assignments.

Suggested Steps:

1. Explain to the students that prompts for Government papers are likely different from what they're used to.

2. Talk to students about the difference between defining terms or concepts, explaining arguments, analyzing and contrasting arguments, and offering normative statements.

3. Have them read the “Tips” section at the right of the exercise page.

4. Use one of the sample prompts, and ask them as a group to describe:
   1. The central question.
   2. Any additional supporting questions.
   3. What they think the instructor's goals are.

5. Have the students work independently to answer these questions for another prompt. When they have done so on their own, have them discuss their answers with the other students for 5 minutes or so. See if there are commonalities, or if there are different understandings of the prompt that are equally valid. (It may be best to break the class into two groups, each answering a different prompt, to keep the discussions small).

6. It is probably best not to use a prompt already assigned for the course; the goal of this exercise is not to improve their essay grade per se, but to give them a transferable skill of interpreting social science prompts that they can apply to current or future essays.