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# **DESIGNING UPPER ECONOMICS ELECTIVES WITH A SIGNIFICANT WRITING COMPONENT**

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# Courses with a Significant Writing Component

- Students must write regularly and complete substantial writing projects
- Students' writing must make up a substantial part of the course grade
- There is a capped enrollment to allow professors to work closely with each student and provide sufficient feedback on student's written work
- Individual schools may include other requirements. For example, at the University of Texas at Austin students enrolled in writing intensive courses must receive feedback from the instructor to help them improve their writing, and be given an opportunity to revise at least one assignment

# Research Paper with Drafts

- This approach is built on the belief that the professor's comments are most effective when a student has an opportunity to revise the paper and incorporate the comments to ensure improvement.
- Policy paper assignments:
  - Proposal, 10% of the grade
  - First Draft, 20% of the grade
  - Peer Review, 5 % of the grade
  - Final Paper, 15% of the grade
- Short papers with no drafts

# Added Value of Improvements

- Blogging
- Grading rubrics
- Literature review guide
- Writing consultant

# Blogging

- Pigovian Tax News: President Biden Calls for a Three-Month Federal Gas Tax Holiday
  - [FACT SHEET: President Biden Calls for a Three-Month Federal Gas Tax Holiday | The White House](#)

## Proposal Stage

Topic	Importance of the study	Literature review	References	Writing quality	Due date
Picks a narrow topic within a field (e.g. recent public policy change)	Justifies importance of the study/reasons for government intervention	Reviews several (at least 4) previous research papers on chosen or similar topic / policy	All outside sources and numbers are referenced	No grammatical errors with clear and correct use of English	Met
40%	15%	20%	5%	10%	10%

# Proposal Stage

- Choice of topic
  - Blog
- Literature review
  - Incorporated within Research Help in Canvas
  - Teaching students to conduct a literature search enhanced the quality of literature review and provided them with research tools for other courses within and outside of economics.
  - UT Libraries, NBER, JSTOR, Google Scholar

## First Draft of the Research Paper

Topic	Importance of the study	Literature review	Theoretical model	Empirical model	Conclusion	References	Writing quality	Due date
Should address topic concerns if any from proposal stage	Should address any comments from proposal stage 5%	Should address comments from proposal stage 20%	Applies one theoretical model presented in class to chosen topic 20%	Applies one empirical model (e.g. regression, difference-in-difference) to chosen topic. 20%	Reconciles theoretical predictions with previous literature 10%	All sources and numbers are referenced 5%	No grammatical errors with clear and correct use of English 10%	Met 10%



## Peer Review

- A successful peer review process should benefit both the reviewer and the writer and lead to genuine substantial revision.
- Asking a student to peer review a paper on a different topic is aimed at enhancing deeper learning of another subject as well as improving the student's writing skills.
- Peer reviews can take many forms
  - in-class peer review workshops
  - out-of-class formally written peer reviews
  - electronic peer reviews on course discussion boards

## Peer Review

Topic	Importance of the study	Literature review	Theoretical model	Empirical model	Conclusion	References	Writing quality	Due Date
Is topic interesting and timely?	Is relevance well-explained? Are market failures listed and explained?	Is relevant literature presented?	If theoretical model is missing, propose one. Economics mistakes should be pointed out.	If empirical model is missing, propose one. Is empirical model testing what theoretical model predicts?	Is there a logical conclusion to the paper?	Does author provide full citations and clear references in the text?	Is paper well written?	Missing due date on peer review may result in 10-100 point deduction

# Final Revised Paper

- The final (revised) paper should address content critiques and improve writing quality.
  - Points are added to the first draft grade based on improvement. In this case students may be given an option not to resubmit a revision if they are satisfied with the grade on their first draft. In this case only their peer review is graded (if peer review is required).
  - Revision is mandatory for credit and the grade since previous draft can decrease if instructor or peer comments are not addressed.

# Writing Consultant: Course Specialist Consultant (CSC)

- While the UWC's generalist consultants can help any UT student with any piece of writing at any stage, CSCs are dedicated to particular writing intensive classes. CSCs attend their assigned class meetings, get familiar with their class's writing assignments, and thus can offer course-specialized writing help in 45-minute consultations in the UWC.
- CSC consultations are scheduled by appointment, and students in the class have scheduling priority over other UT students. Appointments were scheduled on a first-come-first-served basis. If CSC is not available when you want writing help students can schedule consultations with UWC generalist consultants through the UWC's online scheduling system.

# Data

- Data sources: course instructor surveys (CIS)
- 11 sections of public finance, taught between Fall of 2012 and Spring of 2018, 287 observations

# Empirical Model

- Ordered Probit
- Empirical Model:

$$\text{Teaching Quality} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Improvements}) + \beta_2(\text{Students Characteristics}) + \beta_3(\text{Class Characteristics})$$

- *Improvements*: Blogging, grading rubrics, literature review guide, writing consultant
- *Student Characteristics*: GPA category, probable grade, perceived workload
- *Class Characteristics*: class size (number of students), presidential election year

## Table 1. Dependent Variables

The graded, formal writing assignments were relevant to what I learned in this course	Strongly disagree = 1	Disagree = 2	Neutral = 3	Agree = 4	Strongly agree = 5
Instructor provided expectations and criteria for grading in written form for each assignment	Strongly disagree = 1	Disagree = 2	Neutral = 3	Agree = 4	Strongly agree = 5
My instructor provided sufficient, useful comments about my writing	Strongly disagree = 1	Disagree = 2	Neutral = 3	Agree = 4	Strongly agree = 5
The writing assignments in this class helped me to understand the course material	Strongly disagree = 1	Disagree = 2	Neutral = 3	Agree = 4	Strongly agree = 5
As a result of taking this class, I have improved my ability to organize what I write	Strongly disagree = 1	Disagree = 2	Neutral = 3	Agree = 4	Strongly agree = 5
As a result of taking this class, I can better express what I mean to the reader	Strongly disagree = 1	Disagree = 2	Neutral = 3	Agree = 4	Strongly agree = 5
Overall, the instructor was	Very unsatisfactory = 1	Unsatisfactory=2	Satisfactory =3	Very good=4	Excellent=5
Overall, this course was	Very unsatisfactory = 1	Unsatisfactory=2	Satisfactory =3	Very good=4	Excellent=5

## Descriptive Statistics: Dependent Variables

Variable	Mean (st. dev)	Min	Max
The graded, formal writing assignments were relevant to what I learned in this course	4.24 (0.73)	1	5
Instructor provided expectations and criteria for grading in written form for each assignment	4.19 (0.87)	1	5
My instructor provided sufficient, useful comments about my writing	4.31 (0.79)	1	5
The writing assignments in this class helped me to understand the course material	4.14 (0.81)	1	5
As a result of taking this class, I have improved my ability to organize what I write	3.98 (0.84)	1	5
As a result of taking this class, I can better express what I mean to the reader	3.92 (0.85)	1	5
Overall, the instructor was	4.23 (0.82)	1	5
Overall, this course was	4.01 (0.87)	1	5



## Descriptive Statistics: Independent Variables

Variable	Mean (st. dev)	Min	Max
In my opinion the workload in this class was	3.025 (0.525)	1	5
My overall GPA to date at UT is	3.92 (0.882)	2	5
My probable grade to date in this course is	3.18 (0.752)	0	4
Literature review	0.354 (0.479)	0	1
Blog	0.143 (0.350)	0	1
Writing consultant	0.225 (0.418)	0	1
Grading rubric	0.556 (0.498)	0	1
Presidential election	0.184 (0.388)	0	1
Number of students	39.88 (9.078)	25	50

## Empirical Results: Overall Instructor and Course Ratings

Variable	Instructor rating	Course rating
GPA	0.0396 (0.898)	-0.0506 (0.883)
Probable grade	0.374 (0.101)***	0.374 (0.0996)***
Workload	-0.183 (0.132)	-0.305 (0.130)**
Presidential election	0.553 (0.291)*	0.313 (0.284)
Blog	0.650 (0.396)*	-0.256 (0.385)
Literature review	0.245 (0.215)	0.380 (0.211)*
Grading rubric	0.392 (0.275)	0.329 (0.267)
Writing consultant	0.0190 (0.232)	0.186 (0.229)
Number of students	-0.0151 (0.0128)	-0.0111 (0.0125)

## Empirical Results: Assignments, Expectations, Comments

Variable	Relevant Assignments	Expectations & Criteria	Sufficient & Useful Comments
GPA	0.0314 (0.0927)	0.0114 (0.0912)	-0.00847 (0.0937)
Probable grade	0.358 (0.103)***	0.311 (0.101)***	0.240 (0.109)**
Workload	-0.0246 (0.133)	-0.0678 (0.132)	0.00535 (0.137)
Presidential election	0.0691 (0.294)	0.0667 (0.293)	-0.293 (0.294)
Blog	0.193 (0.399)	0.846 (0.397)**	0.612 (0.397)
Literature review	0.381 (0.22)*	0.348 (0.221)	0.232 (0.225)
Grading rubric	0.563 (0.277)**	1.185 (0.278)***	0.502 (0.276)*
Writing consultant	0.381 (0.239)	0.233 (0.238)	0.450 (0.247)*
Number of students	0.000519 (0.124)	0.000903 (0.0130)	0.00709 (0.0128)

## Empirical Results: Improved Writing Ability

Variable	Writing assignments helpful	Improved ability to organize and write	Better express meaning to reader
GPA	-0.0424 (0.0929)	0.0989 (0.0911)	-0.0241 (0.0903)
Probable grade	0.368 (0.108)***	0.442 (0.106)***	0.236 (0.105)**
Workload	0.0222 (0.136)	0.036 (0.132)	0.147 (0.132)
Presidential election	0.195 (0.29)	0.0787 (0.283)	0.189 (0.292)
Blog	0.538 (0.393)	0.204 (0.382)	0.389 (0.381)
Literature review	0.409 (0.223)*	0.226 (0.218)	0.194 (0.217)
Grading rubric	0.785 (0.274)***	0.523 (0.269)*	0.486 (0.268)*
Writing consultant	0.401 (0.241)*	0.383 (0.236)*	0.394 (0.235)*
Number of students	0.00553 (0.0127)	0.0154 (0.0123)	0.0180 (0.0123)

# Conclusions

- Of the four evaluated improvements, developing explicit grading rubrics had the largest impact on writing component ratings.
- While writing quality is a small part of the grade (10% on all written assignments) investing in a writing consultant seemed to make a significant difference
- Number of students does not seem to matter for both writing component ratings as well as overall ratings of the course