Opening Moral Inquiry in a Principles of Economics Course

Using Writing-to-Learn Conversations
to Introduce the Moral Limits of Markets Debate

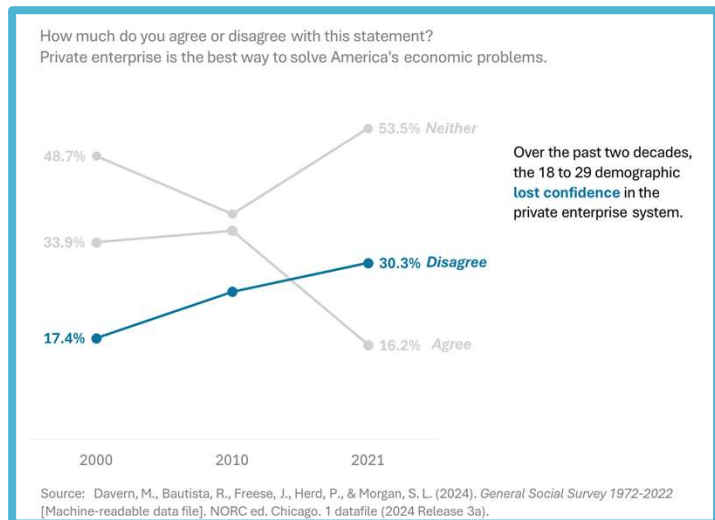Brooks Depro, Elon University

bdepro@elon.edu

JET SET 2024

August 2, 2024

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What Do These Attitudes Mean for Your Principles of Economics Class?
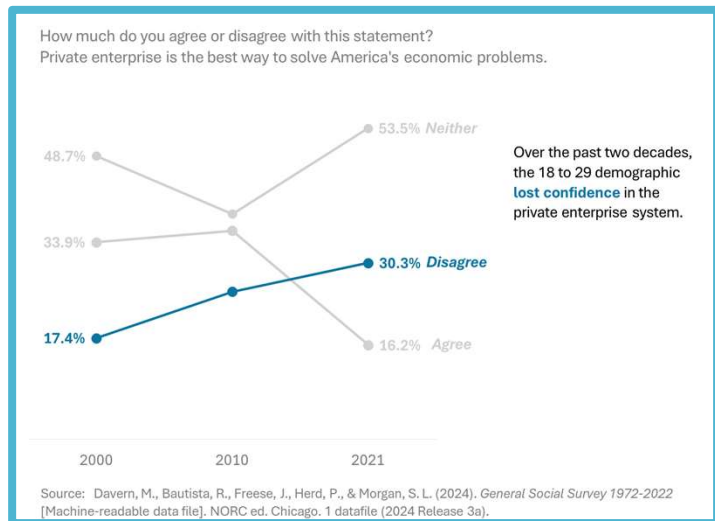
- Principles at Elon
  - 33 student per section
  - Micro/Macro
  - Society General Education Requirement
  - Part of the Philosophy, Politics, and Economics Minor

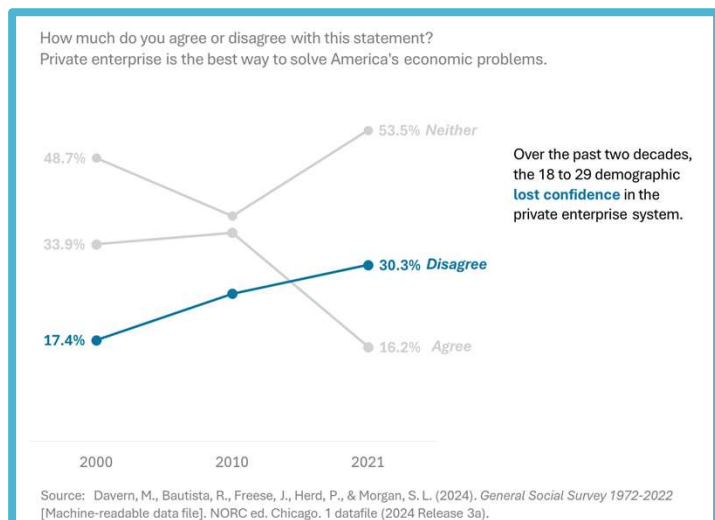- Observed a change in attitudes over time.

How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?
Private enterprise is the best way to solve America's economic problems.

53.5% Neither
48.7%
33.9%
30.3% Disagree
17.4%
16.2% Agree

Over the past two decades, the 18 to 29 demographic **lost confidence** in the private enterprise system.

2000   2010   2021

Source: Davern, M., Bautista, R., Freese, J., Herd, P., & Morgan, S. L. (2024). General Social Survey 1972-2022 [Machine-readable data file]. NORC ed. Chicago. 1 datafile (2024 Release 3a).

2

1

You're not sure where you should go.

- Should you ignore the trends and stay the course?

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In Short, You'd Like to Know Where You Go.

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Today, I Share Some Ideas You Might Try

1

Moral Limits of Markets Debate: Introduce the debate to students.

2

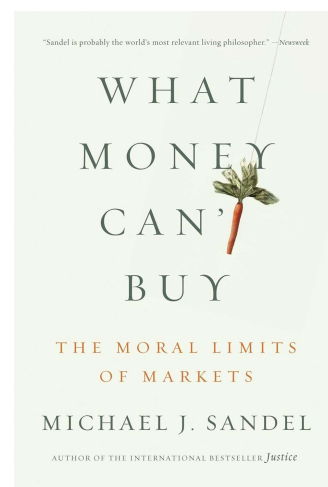**Writing-to-Learn:** Semester-long, scaffolded writing activities.

3

Peer-review: Up your game using LMS, AI, or both.

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Moral Limits of Markets Debate

- Beyond traditional market failure stories.
- Listen, think, and talk about the reach of markets.
- **Big Questions**
  - **Question 1.** Do economists "out-source" moral inquiry?
  - **Question 2.** Does introductory principles overlook important aspects of exchange and the good life?

"Sandel is probably the world's most relevant living philosopher." —*Newsweek*

WHAT
MONEY
CAN'T
BUY

THE MORAL LIMITS
OF MARKETS

MICHAEL J. SANDEL

AUTHOR OF THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER *Justice*

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Examples of Popular Choices

- Body Billboards
- Death Bonds
- Nuclear Waste Sites
- Selling the Right to Immigrate
- Bribes to Lose Weight
- Pay Kids for Good Grades
- Concierge Doctors

- Jumping lines
- Cash for Sterilization
- Carbon Offsets
- Tradable Pollution Permits
- Paying to Kill a Rhino
- Hired Friends
- Day Care Pickups

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Get Up to Speed Quickly on Some Key Ideas in the Debate

- Sandel, M. J. (2012, May/June). How markets crowd out morals. *Boston Review*, 37(3), 17–19.

- McCloskey, D. N. (2013). The poverty of communitarianism. *Claremont Review of Books, 13*(2), 37–40.
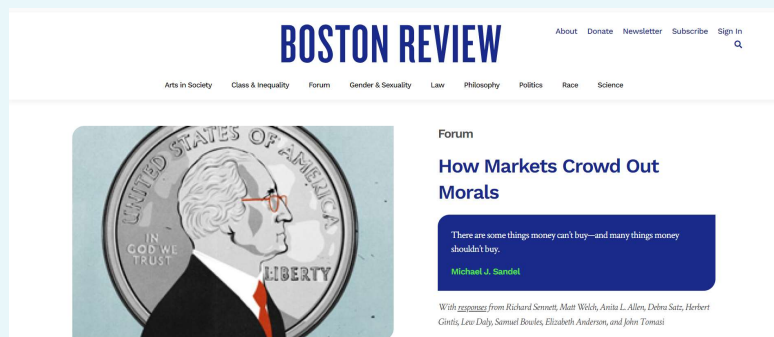
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Writing to Learn

- "Writing to Learn (WTL) is an act of using writing activities to help students think through key concepts presented in a course (Ayadi & Onodipe, 2023, p. 198).

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Step 0

Introducing the writing assignment:

The One-Page Memo

Source: Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy. (n.d.). Policy writing overview. University of Michigan. Retrieved July 12, 2024, from https://fordschool.umich.edu/writing-center/policy-writing-overview

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Start with a
Context-Rich and 'Messy' Problem

- Students faces **a realistic situation** that involves decisions where they can **do economics** (Bangs, 2012). The situation should be **'messy'** (Carithers, Ling, & Bean, 2008).
  - The situation should be "Messy."
    - "requires thinkers to propose a 'best solution' and justify it with reasons and evidence" (Carrithers, Ling, & Bean, 2008, p. 153).
- As **generative AI** becomes more widely used, the tool can help brainstorm and reduce the cost of developing situations from scratch.

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Example:

- During the fall, **your community** is currently **debating whether an item should be for sale.**
  - Imagine a local **community member** has asked you to read an **opinion article** that considers whether the item should be for sale **and asks for your view**.
  - In response to the request, you will provide a short **one-page memo** to the local community member **summarizing the opinion article's primary argument** for or against selling the item.

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Share How Scaffolding Will Work Early

- I worked with Elon's Writing Center and Disciplinary Writing Consulting Program
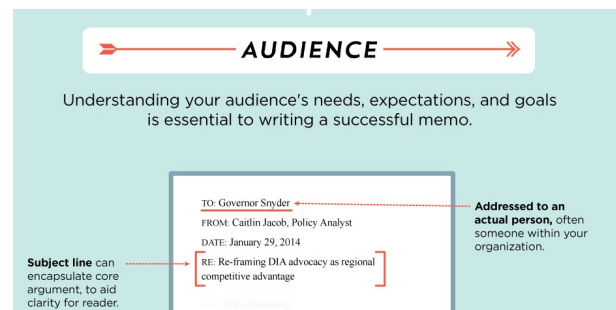- Here is what it looks like today. Note how it ends before Thanksgiving Break.

Table 1: Sequence of Semester-Long One-Page Policy Memo

Sequence	Begin	Milestone
0. Introduction to Assignment	Tuesday 8/29	NA
1. Topic Choice and Memo Header	Tuesday 9/5	Sunday 9/10
2. Identify Opinion Article	Tuesday 9/12	Sunday 9/24
3. Memo Introduction	Tuesday 9/26	Sunday 10/1
4. They Say	Tuesday 10/3	Sunday 10/22
5. I Say	Tuesday 10/24	Sunday 11/5
6. Final One-Page Memo Compilation	Tuesday 11/7	Sunday 11/19 (11/17)

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Step 1

Topic Choice and Memo Header with AI

→ AUDIENCE →

Understanding your audience's needs, expectations, and goals is essential to writing a successful memo.

TO: Governor Snyder — Addressed to an actual person, often someone within your organization.

FROM: Caitlin Jacob, Policy Analyst

DATE: January 29, 2014

RE: Re-framing DIA advocacy as regional competitive advantage

Subject line can encapsulate core argument, to aid clarity for reader.

Source: Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy. (n.d.). Policy writing overview. University of Michigan. Retrieved July 12, 2024, from https://fordschool.umich.edu/writing-center/policy-writing-overview

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Don't Fly Past the Header—It's Worth the Time Spent

- Audience should be non-experts.
- Role-play the assigned audience.

Carrithers, D., Ling, T., & Bean, J. C. (2008). Messy problems and lay audiences: Teaching critical thinking within the finance curriculum. *Business Communication Quarterly, 71*(2), 152-170. https://doi.org/10.1177/1080569908318202

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Allow Students to Use AI to Create a Great Headline

- Sandel has several topics
- In-class brainstorm activity with memo subject line.

- GPT prompt:
  - Act as if you are the writer and oppose or support [item for sale]. You will make a great headline. The headline should be persuasive, concise, specific, and conversational. The headline could be easily understood and used for a NY Times, The Economist, or Wall Street Journal article. Construct five examples.

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Step 2

Identify an Opinion Article

Don't Assume Students Know What an Opinion Article Is

- At first, I did.
- I was wrong.
- Bad assumptions have consequences:
  - After realizing they have picked the wrong article, students fall behind. Many never recover.

Also, Don't Assume Students Know How to Find One

- Many don't.
- If you can, it's worth designating a "library day" with your university librarian.

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Step 3

Memo Introduction

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A brief paragraph emphasizing the purpose of the memo

- The paragraph should include three elements:
  - o Context and Problem,
  - o the specific assignment or task, and
  - o the point or purpose of the memo.

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Example: Paying Kids to Read

Context ⟶ Some adults believe that paying kids to read is an easy way to get kids to learn how to read. However, many others argue that bribing children to read does not yield long-term results.

Task ⟶ You asked me to review KJ Dell'Antonia's article about the alternatives to monetary incentives for promoting reading and offer my argument against traditional bribery.

Purpose ⟶ I encourage you to look at the key arguments I made for other ways to reward children to help their developing reading skills without cash.

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Step 4

They Say
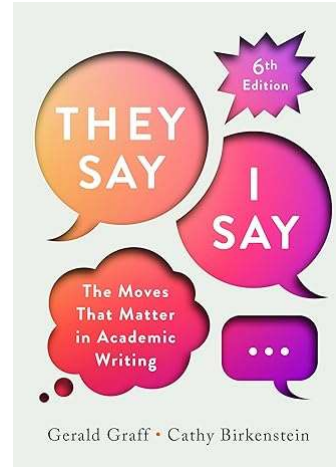
Listen first

- In first iterations of the assignment, students wanted to start with their opinion first.

- But the goal of this assignment is to enter a conversation and listen first.

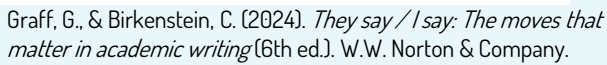- They can choose to paraphrase or quote using guidelines from Graff & Birkenstein (2024) Chapters 2 and 3.

Common Errors: Avoiding List Summaries

THE EFFECT OF A TYPICAL LIST SUMMARY

Graff, G., & Birkenstein, C. (2024). *They say / I say: The moves that matter in academic writing* (6th ed.). W.W. Norton & Company.

- Instead ask:
  1. What are you asked to accept or believe by the opinion writer?
  2. Why? What are the reasons?
  3. Is there any evidence provided?

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Step 5

I Say

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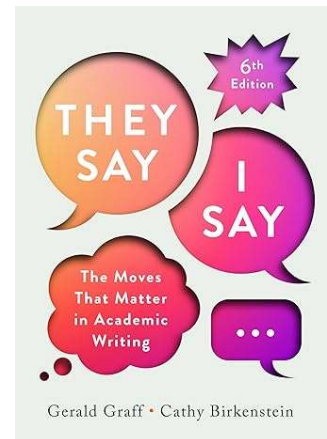
Writing-to-Learn: Respond

- Choose one of the two ways of responding to the author in the "they say" portion: Agree, Disagree
  - Agree: Do you agree but are your reasons different?
    - Explain and give reasons why?
    - Bring something different or fresh to the conversation?
  - Disagree:
    - Explain and give reasons why? If more than one reason is provided, what is the most important reason?
- **Use one or more economic principles to explain why you disagree? Is the principle interpreted and applied correctly?**

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Peer Review

- LMS Peer Review System (Moodle)
  - Students submit draft memo online.
  - They will review 3 other students drafts online.
    - I often reserve time in class
  - Guided Yes/No Prompts plus comments.
  - Students get graded for submission and their assessment.

Workshop:
Peer review

learn moodle

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Step 6

Final One Page Memo Compilation

Evolving Ideas

- Semester Timing: Adding Competition and Presentation?
- Create GPT Grader? Self-Grade?

Examples of Articles that Influenced the Assignment

Ayadi, M. F., & Onodipe, G. (2023). Writing-to-learn: Strategies to promote engagement, peer-to-peer learning, and active listening in economics courses. *The Journal of Economic Education, 54*(2), 198-204. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220485.2022.2160398

Caviglia-Harris, J. (2020). Using the process approach to teach writing in economics. *The Journal of Economic Education, 51*(2), 116-129. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220485.2020.1731384

Schmeiser, K. (2017). Teaching writing in economics. *The Journal of Economic Education, 48*(4), 254-264. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220485.2017.1353459

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