

Pedagogies Of Academic Writing For Undergraduate Students In Political Science: A Discussion On The Literature

Giorgian Guțoiu

“Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu, Romania

giorgian.gutoiu@ulbsibiu.ro

Abstract

Our paper discusses academic writing for political science undergraduate higher education students. In the first part it focuses on the main topics in academic writing in political science, such as citation, references list, academic style, plagiarism. The second part focuses on recent discussions of teaching strategies in the field. While depicting a global picture in discussing trends in the literature, the paper also employs a minor focus on Romania. The paper makes a contribution to understanding the literature on academic writing in undergraduate political science higher education and helps comprehend recent pedagogical trends and developments.

Keywords: academic writing, political science, undergraduate students, higher education teaching

JEL Classification: I20, I21, I23

Introduction

This paper presents a discussion on the literature developed on the pedagogy of scientific writing in political science in higher education at the undergraduate level. Nowadays, courses, seminars, laboratories that teach students to write scientific papers are a common presence in undergraduate programs in the social sciences worldwide. This paper presents: 1) some characteristics of the pedagogy of scientific writing at the academic level, namely the essential topics of the discipline and 2) recent research in the field. The literature on academic writing proposes a myriad of pedagogies for the different disciplines, but in many situations the

pedagogies in one discipline can also be suitable for their application in another one. In social sciences, there are important similarities between disciplines. For example, in the case of some types of papers that use quantitative empirical research, like those in political science and sociology, the differences are at times very small. Political sciences are significantly inspired by the humanities, such as philosophy or political history. Here, again, we may find little distinction between pedagogies. For this reason, many of the issues presented in the paper will be addressed at the general level of the social sciences, and only in some situations, we will also refer to specific studies or topics of political science in particular.

In the first part, we discuss the main topics in academic writing. Things like academic style, the use of appropriate references, citation and construction of the bibliography, academic integrity will be presented here. Next, in brief, we mention the main genres of academic writing. The following part discusses the recent literature on the pedagogy of academic writing for social sciences and political sciences.

Main topics in academic writing

Universities deal with the production and dissemination of scientific knowledge, which is different from common knowledge. In this story, the process of writing scientific papers plays a central role. Universities around the world have recognized the need to adapt their curriculum in order to teach students how to develop scientific academic papers. Students generally write scientific papers in two situations, although the first is the most common — for projects, homework — and the other, for the dissemination of knowledge in academia — articles or presentations at conferences. The latter is mostly frequent for doctoral or master students.

Whether the text we read is scientific or not, i.e. non-scientific, can be easily observed from early-on. Academic writing, which seeks to convey scientific knowledge, uses a writing style specific to it. Academic writing in the social sciences uses an impersonal, simple, clear and precise style. This is because the ultimate goal of academic writing is only to convey the scientific message, as it does not want to instill emotional, sentimental impression, as we may find in the fiction genre. Moreover, scientific knowledge is itself complex, multidimensional, so the language must be as simple as possible, non-ambiguous. The text and its organization must simplify the task of tracing ideas without difficulties.

Another feature of scientific papers is the use of references. A scientific text is built based on previous research on the topic. The vast majority of paper genres in the social sciences, including the political sciences, usually start with a presentation of the literature. This is mostly to be found in a chapter often called the theoretical or literature review. Sometimes this exposition of literature is found in the introductory parts of the works. Finally, the purpose of a literature review is to map the scientific landscape of the field, the topic, or what are the important landmarks in terms of ideas, authors, methods, epistemologies. References to literature can be used in the theoretical sections of papers, but also in the chapters of analysis, methods or conclusions, where the authors develop a dialogue between their own research and existing literature. Some pedagogical research has been dedicated to help students or even teachers to develop such skills, more precisely to build a literature review and to work properly with references.

For example, Greetham (2021), in his book, explains that the process of writing a literature review comprises stages of: 1) selecting the type of literature review (independent or integrated through dialogue and criticism), 2) searching for sources, 3) processing ideas, 4) work organization, 5) planning the integration of references in the paper, 6) writing the review, 7) writing the reference list (we will return to this below), and then finally editing and proofreading the manuscript.

Bibliographic references are inserted and organized following conventions in the academic world, and any academic writing is written in accordance with these rules, usually contained in so-called academic-style textbooks, such as the Chicago-style textbook. Two processes are part of this process: citing and constructing the bibliography. Conventions for both are generally adopted at the level of the academic community, such as a department, a university, a specialization, type of papers, academic journals, publishing houses, etc. There are several ways to cite a source. We can cite using references in footnotes, which may include a shorter description of the source or a longer, full description, and in this second situation at the end of the paper it is not mandatory to mention the bibliographic list. There is also the option to make the citation in the text, mentioning the author and the year of publication of our source. The sources used, if not mentioned in full in the footnotes, can be listed, with all their details, at the end of the paper in what is called a bibliography and consists of an alphabetical list. If

bibliographies are common to all genres and domains, preferences for footnotes or text citations vary across disciplines. Footnotes can often be found in the humanities, where much work is done using archives or reprinted versions of canonical works, such as history, or even studies of philosophy or political history in the political sciences. In the social sciences, commonly used is citation in text.

Within the literature on academic writing another important subject is that of plagiarism, or academic integrity. Practical scientific writing guides are increasingly discussing the issue of plagiarism. In general, today's literature dealing with this subject tends to discuss the phenomenon in all of its dimensions, both among teachers, scholars and students. For example, Sarah Eaton (2021), in her book, makes a history of plagiarism, analyzing the phenomenon itself, discussing its causes, and identifying various forms of plagiarism among students, teachers or plagiarism arising from the dialectic of teacher-students relationships. The discussion about these aspects of copying or intellectual theft is accompanied by the analysis of the issues of ethics and academic integrity. This book goes into the causes, conditions, historical developments, and ethical issues, as the work is intended for the mature academic public, namely professors or researchers. The literature dedicated to students and which discusses the issue of plagiarism tends to focus more on forms of plagiarism among students and techniques to avoid it, trying to help maintain the academic integrity of the student. Eaton contemplates plagiarism today, in the age of the internet and digital, in the context in which we have an increase in plagiarism among students and teachers. However, she wonders if this increase is due indeed to the Internet. The literature on this subject oscillates between finding the internet as responsible or explaining it as a consequence of the transformation in the morals and ethics of societies. Eaton says that the Internet plays indeed an important role here because it ensures the speed of the circulation of documents, texts, and as presented in another chapter of the book, today, the exchange of files on the Internet is one of the main factors leading to plagiarism.

From this discussion of digitalization, arises, says Eaton, a need to redefine plagiarism, in order to include contemporary transformations. In the classical form, plagiarism involves copying ideas and texts, appropriating them without acknowledging the source, or their previously formulated existence. The author argues that definitions of plagiarism in academia should be extended beyond this classical definition, beyond outdated notions centered on texts and ideas.

Instead, the notion of plagiarism should also include extracts from music, art, design, codes and computer data. We could add, with direct reference to the discipline of political science, that such a reconceptualization would be necessary, because in political science, or in sociology or psychology, a lot of work is performed using informatics data in quantitative studies and they are processed with computer programs which use databases and programming codes to perform analyses. These codes or databases can circulate faster on the Internet between students or teachers as text files.

Academic work in the political sciences, including the social sciences, can be of many kinds. In academic writing, students generally work with the vast majority of the genres we list below. There are genres such as: academic monographs, chapters in edited volumes, book reviews, conference papers, dissertations, essays, scientific articles, research report, doctoral thesis, translations. Students read and process ideas from these genres throughout their undergraduate studies, but in terms of their production, in most situations, students produce genres such as essays, reports, research papers, presentations, book reviews, and dissertations/papers, theses.

Academic studies in political science generally have the following structure, which is actually found in most disciplines of social sciences: introduction (here we have a summary, an overview of research in the field, but we can also find it independently in a chapter of the literature review), the methodology (research questions, research tools), the results (presentation of results, often includes graphical visual quantitative data presentation) and finally a section of conclusions (resumes the main results from the perspective of literature, implications and future avenues of study). We will see later, in the next section, that there are books in the literature, which deal comprehensively with all of these topics, namely handbooks that try to provide advice and techniques on how each of these sections of a scientific work should be developed.

After this foray into the main elements of academic writing in political science for undergraduate students, we continue the discussion by moving to an analysis of literature dedicated to the pedagogy of academic writing, more specifically on the scientific literature that proposes methods of improvement, seminars, workshops, courses dedicated to academic writing for students. This literature has generated only a handful of articles or books that are exclusively intended for students in political science. For this reason, the literature we present below does not only talk about academic writing in the political sciences, but also makes references to

studies from other fields. We argue that our approach is favored by the general characteristics that we encounter in academic writing, which apply to mostly all fields in the social sciences.

Recent developments in the literature

In a 2021 article, Bantalem Wale and Yenus Nurie Bogale propose a method of writing through investigation, as a way to improve the academic writing for students, an activity to be used during undergraduate classes. This would require students to acquire knowledge and skills by asking questions, or in other words by taking an interest in and investigating their environment. The classroom activity starts with the students actively asking, rather than passively to be presented with information by the teacher. Students would make observations, examine sources, analyze, make interpretations, and communicate their findings or questions their concerns, and then follow a class discussion to reflect and find solutions. This would help overcome a common problem for students. In their research, projects, papers, students tend to first make assumptions and then move these assumptions to the register of scientific theses, without having solid knowledge, prior documentation to support the hypotheses or objectives initially formulated, and afterwards students look for evidence which are not convincing, only to support those insufficiently documented theses. Specifically, the idea could be applied to the classroom through role-playing games in which students play the role of writers, who discover their own research topics, investigate the necessary information and write texts, building their work on criticism or comments from colleagues.

Inter-group communication in undergraduate classrooms is discussed also in Huisman et al. (2018) who want to see if there is a positive influence of the group of students on writing skills, more precisely if feedback coming from colleagues helps them to produce works of a higher quality. The results showed that both sending and receiving feedback led to improvements in writing performance. Objective explanatory comments were identified in the research of the article as positively correlated with the increase in performance. These explanations also generated a higher rate from students to integrate the suggestions. However, the article did not point to a significantly direct relationship between the perception of feedback and the increase in students' written performance.

Another article (El Tantawi, Sadaf and Al Humaid 2016) talks about the potential role in classroom for gamification, namely the mechanisms of reward, simulation, gratification, interaction. The discipline of scientific writing at the university level, as in most socio-human disciplines, amid the development of digital technologies, video games in society, has begun to adopt and effectively integrate digital methods or elements of games.

Some studies have tried to organize and classify these developments towards the implementation of tools inspired by the digitalization of society. Strobi et al. (2019) review the digital tools used in secondary and higher education for academic writing classes. The authors discover that the range of technologies and pedagogies in the digital context is very diverse. Specifically, 44 tools for supporting academic writing are identified by the authors in their meta-analysis. Diversity goes even further, because these 44 tools are employed separately depending on the stages of the writing process, such as the planning, editing, or revision stage. Furthermore, they are classified and used according to the adaptability of the instrument to the educational specifics of the student or are classified according to the communication they provide in the classroom, between the people involved in the act of learning and / or teaching.

Another research, done by Blings and Maxey (2016), focused on the performance of first-year students at undergraduate levels in political science, in terms of evaluation, analysis and integration of studies and literature in their own academic papers. The authors conducted an experiment to test the method of classroom discussions to see if it helps to improve performance. The conclusion of the study highlights the multiple benefits of using the method of conversations in the group of students, especially in helping students cope with the results, scientific evidence, and contributions of academic articles. However, there are differences between groups of students in the way they react positively to the method. An important difference is given by the course in which the students are enrolled. Then, other factors are important in this variety, such as students' familiarity with the instructor or with the research tools and methodology. As a consequence, for the best possible results, the conversation technique should be adapted to the different groups of students, given the psycho-pedagogical variety of the students.

Critical thinking is important in higher education and particular in political science. Moon (2008) describes critical thinking as “the capacity to work with complex ideas whereby a person can make effective provision of evidence to justify a reasonable judgement”. However, Cavdar and

Doe (2012) argue that traditional writing assignments often fall short in addressing problems of developing critical thinking skills and comprehension of course content. In their article, the authors propose the use of two-part writing assignment with postscript as a strategy for improving student critical thinking in political sciences courses. The authors suggest that through the use of post-script students can engage in self-ascension their revision and reflect on what they have learned from the writing assignment. Students write two papers by following specific requirements: one draft paper and one final paper. Critical inquiry is employed when revising the draft paper before writing the final text. The authors conclude that “the second papers present, in general, clearer and more accurate definitions. In revising their first paper (draft), students’ arguments become more coherent, substantiated, and developed.”

In regard to political science specific writing, Diane Schmidt's book (2019) offers practical advice for academic writing, for students in our field of interest, and is the common example of a handbook that deals with writing and research in all of its stages, from a more general theoretical framework to practical aspects. Among other things, the book offers practical advice, improvement solutions for aspects such as critical thinking, selection of study topics, internet research, management of sources and resources, talks about common mistakes made in writing, how to quote, conventional examples of genres in political science etc.

Another example of work in the academic writing of political science is Lisa Baglione's book (2020) which again recognizes the need to discuss together the process of writing scientific work with the methodological and empirical research. Her book is aimed at undergraduate and graduate students, preparing them with advice on how to write a science paper in political science. In fact, the title of the book is suggestive in this sense: *Writing a Research Paper in Political Science: A Practical Guide to Inquiry, Structure & Methods*. The author goes through several basic aspects in the writing process, already mentioned, such as the use of the right citation style, the importance of the revision and correction stage or the importance of critical and analytical thinking that should guide the whole process. Also, the book insists on the idea formulated by us here, namely that the political sciences mostly use the same conventions as other social sciences, and in the few cases where we find exceptions, there is still a great similarity.

The book is structured so as to correspond to the 12 stages that the author identifies in the entire process of writing a scientific paper in political science. I think it is important to mention them, or at least to sketch them: 1) selection of a research topic and research questions, 2) identification, processing and evaluation of the most important contributions on the chosen topic, 3) establishing a hypothesis at an early stage, 4) developing the research model, 5) reviewing and 6) editing the whole process so far, 7) planning the study, the methodology and establishing a schedule, 8) testing and evaluating the hypotheses, including the analysis part, 9) drafting the conclusions , 10) writing the introduction, 11) choosing a title for the paper, 12) writing a summary / abstract or completing any steps necessary for dissemination of the paper. The book elaborates extensively on all these essential topics in the writing of scientific papers by students.

Other practical academic writing is aimed towards the master or doctoral students or professors or researchers, who are part of the academic system of publication, research, dissemination. These are books that propose methods to succeed in the competitive academic publishing space, proposing solutions on how to publish a lot, fast but also of quality. Paul Silvia's book (2018), aimed towards this purpose, suggestively titled “How to write a lot” says that the main solutions for success can be taking part into a writing group.

In this context of more general works, however, it is important to distinguish between the scientific writing of undergraduate and doctoral students, or even MA or master’s degree students. The difference between undergraduate and doctoral students is massive, and the literature recognizes these differences, in the sense that the pedagogy of writing scientific papers at the doctoral level has produced another separate literature, even if quite related to the studies we present in our chapter. As a difference, for example, first-year students write papers that cover a maximum of 15-20 pages during their studies and a maximum of 50-70 in general for the completion of undergraduate studies, whilst a doctoral dissertation may reach around 200 pages.

In Romanian, perhaps the most well-known book used in academic environments for academic writing courses is that of Septimiu Chelcea, published in 2003. It focuses on aspects related to writing style, writing rules, text editing — without including and contextual issues behind research and writing. Consequently, the paper does not refer to the digital technological advances of the last two decades that have, however, greatly influenced the way research is conducted and disseminated.

But academic writing classes can also use works that are not necessarily aimed towards the academic public. Many books have appeared in the current digital age to provide general advice for all those who write for professional reasons (Kenower 2017). From such books you can learn how to write with authority, to adapt the style to the audience, to achieve success in the profession of writer or, very importantly in writing, how to overcome the so-called writer's block.

Much of the academic literature with which Romanian students interact and which they produce in certain circumstances is written in a language of international circulation. In most cases, in the discipline of political science, it is English. In the political sciences studied in our country or in other countries where the natives do not speak English as a mother tongue, students must therefore work with English as a secondary language, read, analyze and write in this language. From here, of course, language barriers emerge. In this context, part of the academic research has been directed, and is increasingly done in the context of increased academic globalization, towards understanding the role of English as a secondary language in the pedagogy and practice of academic writing. There is also an academic journal for this, in which articles on this topic are published. It is called the *Journal of English for Academic Purpose* and is considered an important academic journal in the international scientific community, hosting articles on the writing problems that appear when using English as a secondary language worldwide. There are also books that deal with this topic of great importance in today's academic world (Corcoran et al. 2019).

Few studies talk about the Romanian case, so they need to be mentioned, as we did above with the work of Septimiu Chelcea. This literature, which aims at writing scientific papers in the social sciences, not even to mention strictly the one on political science, and with papers written in Romanian, unfortunately is currently quite poorly developed.

A study by Băniceru and Tucan (2018) presents an analysis of a survey conducted in 2012 among students and professors in the Language and Literature Department at the West University of Timișoara, to understand their attitudes towards writing academic papers. It is important to note that at that time, the respective humanities field did not have such a course or seminar on academic writing in the curriculum. Therefore, the research was done in the context of pressures for internationalization and adaptation to the global academic community. The study

analyzed what it means for both students and teachers *good writing*. The analysis revealed important differences in the way students self-assess their competencies and adjust their expectations in an academic context and how students are perceived by teachers in terms of their development through the competencies they should have. Although the curriculum lacked courses on writing academic papers, the authors mention that teachers were nevertheless expecting students to master such skills.

Conclusion

This paper provided a presentation of the literature dedicated to teaching activities for the academic writing in political science at the undergraduate level. The arguments first followed the discussion of the main aspects related to academic writing, about its structuring in the teaching activities, with reference to some works. We identified, for example, the importance of plagiarism and academic ethics and integrity. Recent discussions in this regard, in the context of the digitalization of learning, propose a reconceptualization of academic plagiarism, so that it is no longer limited to text plagiarism, but also includes examples of video or coding content. The second part of the article went through the diverse palette of literature. We discussed the methodological aspects of teaching and some efficient tools involved in the teaching-learning process, the problems faced by this discipline and some solutions to improve learning.

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