



Politics, Policy, and Economics of Health and Healthcare (ASEM)

Yavuz Yasar
Department of Economics

Context and Background

I consider writing in my course an important part of a broader learning experience, rather than the sole or ultimate goal and/or outcome. I expect my students to learn the content of the course as much as using and developing their writing skills. That is the main reason why I feel that I need to briefly describe the context in which writing activities take place in my course. It will also help me to explain my approach to the writing aspect of the course and its evaluation.

The course is designed in four modules by following the course objectives and learning outcomes as the table below shows. Since the course is an interdisciplinary one, it employs readings from different disciplines. I also use various learning tools and methods such as screening documentaries, holding in-class discussions, and reading articles and chapters from journals and books. Thus, students are exposed to different writing styles and formats as well as various ways and formats of learning about the topics in the course.

Course Objectives	Learning Outcomes
1. To understand inequities in health and their consequences from the social determinants of health perspective.	1. To identify, differentiate and evaluate the relative significance of individual (or life-style) and social determinants of health, and their role in health inequities.
2. To understand the way health care services are delivered and financed in the U.S. and their relation with economic theory from a political economy perspective.	2. To understand how utilization, access, and quality of health care services are affected by different financing mechanisms (i.e., the ability vs. need-based) and organization of delivery of health care services (i.e., the organized vs. disbursed delivery).
3. To understand equity in health and health care from different ethical perspectives such as medical ethics, moral and political theories, social justice and human rights approaches.	3. To understand the role of different conceptualizations of health, financing mechanisms, and delivery of health care services in terms of equity and equality in access and utilization of health care services.
4. To understand political and policy aspects of health and health care in the context of a comparison with national	4. To understand and critically evaluate the U.S. health care system in comparison with other health care systems and health care

health systems in other countries and health reform debates in the U.S.	reform proposals in light of policy making and politics in the U.S.
---	---

The modules build on each other. Students read, discuss, learn and finally write about the basic concepts and ideas and move to the more complex ones that require knowledge of previous modules. Writing activities in my course follow the same structure and they are twofold: informal and formal. Informal writing assignments are exploratory, spontaneous, in-class writing activities. They aim to prepare students for the formal writing activities by allowing students to think and write about the key components of the question that they will see in their formal writing activities. I do not grade them. I only use them to give students feedback and count as their participation.

For formal writing activities, I assign four essays, one for each module. These essays are usually two to three pages long (except the last one, which is longer) where students are asked to discuss a specific case (e.g., discussing mortality statistics in a table by race, gender, and social class, or a medical ethical dilemma regarding who has the priority of receiving donated organs, etc.) in the context of the associated module. By following specific instructions, students write their essays that have two major goals:

- demonstrating their knowledge and background from each module to a specific case discussed by a proper use of terminology, rather than simply producing a summary of whatever they learn.
- writing a concise, well-organized, and authentic essay by following the rules of grammar and punctuation.

So, I want to achieve both learning about a topic and improving students' writing skills in such essay assignments. (Mission impossible?).

Formal writing activities accommodate different writing styles: from an analysis and interpretation of data to writing a speech for a presidential candidate who defends one reform proposal over another. This allows some students to express themselves in different writing formats and styles.

Finally, I consider writing assignments a way of communication between myself and students that takes time to develop. Therefore, I assign weights in a gradual fashion (i.e., from lowest to highest) to each essay. As students get feedback about each assignment, they are expected to pay attention to those points so that they can improve their writing skills over time.

Assignment

The assignment that I submitted for this workshop is about the fourth course objective and learning outcome. The following is the assignment:

“You are the only speech writer in town for two candidates for presidential nomination. One candidate favors **the existing Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act** and the other a **single-payer** approach. Write an essay regarding what points you would have made for each candidate about the strengths of his/her position and the weaknesses of other candidate's position.”

This assignment relies on the fact that students have written about the building blocks of the topic from different perspectives in their first three essays. In this essay assignment, my expectation is to have the students demonstrate their background on the topic by writing two speeches for two candidates with opposite positions about healthcare reform. As I remind students in my instructions, their audience does not have the technical and academic background or terminology about the topic. So, students need to provide a clear, direct and well-organized argument without watering down the complexity of the topic. More importantly, they have an election to win.

Assessment of Two Sample Assignments

Among the two samples that I picked, the relatively better one (#1) is a good example for achieving both of the goals that I mentioned above. The student provides a concise and well-organized speech where he uses the relevant terminology and concepts by explaining their meaning to a lay person without compromising the complexity and significance of the issue at stake. In addition, he achieves these by putting himself in two opposite views and criticizing the other side while he is making a convincing case for his own proposal. All these indicate that the student did process what he learned in the previous modules and articulates those issues in a speech writing activity by implementing the feedback that he received in his previous writings. However, I have to admit that the student did not exploit most of the possible opportunities that a speech writing activity can offer. He preferred to play it safe and produced a not-so-passionate, very formal, and perhaps to some extent a dry speech. I say this because, in the past, I read essays that took advantage of this format and produced some creative ways of making ambitious and convincing arguments even if they were not as successful as the current essay in terms of conveying the key aspects of a health reform.

In comparison with the first essay (#1), the second one (#2) is relatively less successful in terms of conveying the key aspects of the reform proposals. The student is selective in her touch on the issues related to the reform proposals even though instructions explicitly ask students to focus on specific aspects of healthcare reforms as we discussed in the class. In other words, she provides an incomplete and sometimes inaccurate representation of the two proposals, particularly of the one that perhaps she is less familiar with (i.e., the single-payer solution), despite the fact that both proposal ideas have been studied at length and discussed in detail in class. Moreover, this student provided a reconciliatory third perspective about the issue after putting herself in the shoes of two opposite views. This was not asked or required. I think that the reason she did that was because she could not reflect on or address the contradictions and complexities of those health reform proposals within the existing format that she needed to follow.

On the other hand, the student uses a less formal, more personable and relatively more engaging language to convey the message about a complex issue for ordinary people. In that sense, she does a relatively better job than the first essay (#1). Yet, this approach sometimes leads to seriously poor writing choices made by her (e.g., "The U.S. is too capitalistic and autonomic to make such a drastic change.") Among the four essay assignments, perhaps this was the best for this student who definitely took into account previous feedback and showed improvement as we moved from the first to the fourth essay during the quarter.