

The Action Memorandum: An Assignment with a Promising Future

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to introduce educators and educational developers to a form of policy writing – the action memorandum assignment – which appears to have improved the learning experiences of the author's post-secondary students without adding unnecessarily to the instructor's workload. In doing so, this article expands on recent scholarship on policy writing by emphasizing how action memorandum assignments can be altered to accommodate students at a variety of academic levels and in a variety of disciplines. Drawn largely from anecdotal evidence, this paper is meant to inspire further, empirical research into the purposes and value of policy writing in the post-secondary context. The author thanks Véronique LaRue Constantineau for her assistance with the appendices and the anonymous reviewers for their feedback.

Key Words:

Policy writing, action memorandum, interdisciplinarity, post-secondary education.

Introduction

In today's harsh economic climate, it is hardly surprising that the challenges of teaching at the post-secondary level are growing. Expanding class sizes have added significantly to faculty workload, causing many professors to adjust, or shorten, assignments to compensate. At the same time, the combination of the increasing accessibility of the internet and ever-growing pressures on the student body to achieve superior grades appears to have led to a rise in findings of academic misconduct (Hughes & McCabe, 2006). The cheating has in turn made both problems worse. By damaging the reputation of the academy, it has made the job of advocates of increasing funding for post-secondary education more difficult, and it has also increasing demands on professors' time by compelling them to prosecute greater numbers of their students.

In this context, many post-secondary educators appear to be struggling to find time to design original, efficient assignments which nonetheless preserve academic

standards and promote student learning. It is for this reason, among others, that the scholarship of teaching and learning has sought to document empirically those strategies that encourage student success (Hughes and Mighty, 2010). To identify these innovative approaches, researchers can and should draw from the positive experiences of practitioners. In other words, we must work to create learning communities based on best practices that have been identified and then confirmed empirically. It follows that through this article, I – a committed teacher never formally trained in the scholarship of teaching and learning – hope to inspire future research by offering an innovative, flexible, and efficient means of assessing student learning that has yet, to my knowledge, to be tested empirically. I do not mean to suggest that it is a panacea – as Noel Entwistle (2010) has said, “Making use of just one general approach could never suit all topics, all subjects, all students, and for all purposes” (p. 16), but I do maintain that, anecdotally at least, it is a profoundly underutilized teaching method that merits greater practical and scholarly attention.

At the scholarly level, this paper seeks modestly to extend a dialogue recently initiated by a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Andrew Pennock (2011), who has called for more instructors to integrate policy writing assignments into undergraduate political science courses. Whereas Pennock focuses on a single discipline, I will suggest that policy writing – and specifically an action memorandum assignment – can be used by instructors who teach in a variety of academic disciplines, including history, journalism, environmental science, and public administration. Indeed, any subject which deals even remotely with political activities could incorporate policy writing.

On Policy Writing: Defining the Subject

As Pennock (2011) has explained: “Policy writing is the process by which government employees and non-governmental organizations create written documents for lawmakers and policy professionals to read” (p. 141). Briefing notes, action memoranda, and policy evaluations are the most common forms of this mode of communication. At the post-secondary level, policy writing assignments are typically short – anywhere from a single page to perhaps six pages long; they generally follow a specific formula with particular section headings of relatively consistent lengths; and the good ones are written in clear and concise prose. Policy writing is largely free of theory and literature reviews; however, policy writing assignments do not have to be. And although policy writing typically focuses on contemporary challenges, that need not be the case either.

A standard action memorandum includes a cover page, outlining the issue in question in a single sentence; a background section of one to two pages that identifies the key events and ideas that will shape the policy recommendations; two or three policy options; between two and two-and-one-half pages of considerations; and a final page which makes a recommendation and outlines preliminary steps towards implementation. (A sample action memorandum and a corresponding rubric are appended to this article.)

Pennock has identified five benefits to policy writing: (1) it is demanded in the real world; (2) it is relevant to academic careers – similar skills are needed to develop grant

proposals, for example; (3) it serves a citizenship function by teaching students how advocacy works; (4) it teaches students how to write to a specific audience; and (5) it encourages and fosters higher level learning skills like analysis, synthesis, and creativity. Additionally, from an instructor's perspective, such writing – when it replaces a traditional essay – can reduce the quantity of marking in terms of pages of text. It can also curb plagiarism because such assignments typically call for original thinking and unique policy proposals.

Policy writing has its detractors. Pennock notes that some academics would prefer that it be relegated to public policy courses; some maintain that it is inconsistent with the liberal arts tradition; some are concerned that it requires instructors to teach students a new style of writing; some argue that it is too easy; and others claim that it is more difficult to grade. None of these arguments, however, are overly convincing. As “The Case for Using Policy Writing in Undergraduate Political Science Courses” makes clear, departments whose disciplines have policy implications do not always offer public policy courses; the critical thinking necessary to construct convincing policy briefs is an integral part of the liberal arts; this form of writing should be familiar enough to any instructor who has submitted a grant proposal or authored a committee report; the challenges of writing succinctly should never be underestimated; and, so long as one has developed an effective rubric, the grading process for policy writing work should be no more difficult than it would be for a traditional assignment (Pennock 2011).

More important, and what Pennock does not discuss, is how policy writing – in the form of an action memorandum assignment in particular – can be adjusted to reflect the learning needs of students at different academic levels and in a variety of courses. I will draw from my own teaching experiences to explain:

Modifying the Action Memorandum Assignment by Academic Level

At the first and second-year undergraduate levels, to encourage students to utilize critical thinking strategies, I recommend assigning an action memorandum as the culminating element of a two-part project. (Note that this assignment would replace a more traditional eight to ten page research paper.) First, students would be asked to compile an annotated bibliography based on their research question – for example on the merits and drawbacks of proportional representation – with that question having been devised in consultation with the instructor.

Only after they had come to a basic appreciation of the state of the literature would students draft their action memorandum. To promote academic integrity, their memos would include endnotes. Particularly ambitious instructors might add a third component to the assignment: a multi-paragraph reflection on the editorial decisions that affected the way that the students framed the issue that they had been considering.

If the course sought to encourage group work, and the sharing and comparing of student papers, I might assign different students the same topic but ask each one to write the memorandum from a distinct point of view. For example, a Canadian memorandum on gun control might be drafted by representatives from the Privy Council Office, the Prime Minister's Office, the Department of Justice, and the Department of

Finance. One on Canadian environmental regulations might include Natural Resources Canada, Environment Canada, and Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

At the senior undergraduate level, where I have in the past assigned a 15-20 page research paper, I recommend increasing the students' freedom significantly and replacing the annotated bibliography with a paper proposal. The proposal would require students to suggest their own topics. It would include a preliminary bibliography, a brief summary of the literature, and an explanation as to why the question that they planned to use as the crux of their memorandum was worth asking. In the memo itself, rather than focusing on word limits, I would emphasize space on the page. (One former Canadian Prime Minister, Jean Chrétien, was known to demand that memos addressed to his office be limited to a single, double-sided sheet of paper. He never said anything about word counts.)

At the graduate level, in the place of a 25-35 page research project, I might call for up to three memos, each from either a different point of view or a different point in time. In addition to the three memoranda, I might demand a brief paper explaining the contrasts between each perspective.

For example, I might challenge my students to draft an action memorandum for the Canadian government about policy towards failed and failing states from the perspectives of the Canadian International Development Agency, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, and the Department of National Defence. Or a memo on Canadian policy towards the Arctic from the perspectives of Aboriginal and Northern Affairs Canada, the Prime Minister's Office, and a First Nations Advocacy Group.

Modifying the Assignment by Course or Discipline

An action memorandum assignment can also be modified based on the course. In a history class, for example, the memo could be set in the past. Journalism students could be asked to construct the same memorandum before and after a particular event, like the invention of the internet. In a comparative politics course, the same paper might be drafted from the perspectives of similar representatives from different countries. In a public administration course on how government works, leading representatives from different departments might be used. In a course on non-state actors, the memo could be based around a submission to a parliamentary committee.

I have used this assignment in undergraduate contemporary history courses, in graduate-level Canadian foreign policy courses, and I now use it extensively in an interdisciplinary graduate-level course on Canadian governance and decision-making in a strategic context. In the latter, I have replaced a 30 page research assignment with a 20-25 page policy writing exercise.

This past year, I asked my students to draft three memos: one from Canada, one from the United States, and one from an additional Canadian ally. The scenario was that recently, without warning, the three relevant heads of government had announced, independently, that they planned to pursue a new national strategy for Asia. The job of the drafters of the memos was not to develop that Asia strategy. Rather, it was to propose a process by which the government might set priorities to inform the strategy.

In the Canadian context, for example, the drafter might have considered options like a royal commission, the establishment of a special cabinet-level committee, a Foreign Affairs-led process, or a whole of government initiative coordinated by the Privy Council Office. In addition to the three memos, the students were asked to produce a five to ten page reflection which justified the decisions that informed each memo; considered the similarities and differences among the memos; and assessed the strategic implications of the exercise as a whole.

I cannot say that my students have absolutely loved the exercise (how many students truly love any assignment that is over twenty pages long?), but few have suggested that they would have preferred a formal paper, and virtually all have – if at times grudgingly – agreed that this process gave them little choice but to develop a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies of the strategic governmental decision-making processes in their three countries. And while the sample size is small, and my department's course evaluation tool does not solicit student feedback on specific assignments, my overall scores have increased notably since I introduced policy writing. The anecdotal (and very preliminary empirical) evidence suggests, then, that there is reason to study the value of this approach to teaching and learning more rigorously.

Modifying the Assignment by Learning Objectives

In another graduate-level course in a professional master of defence studies program, I use the memorandum assignment much differently. Defence Studies 800: Canadian Foreign Policy – Analysis and Evaluation is a six-week interdisciplinary course that devotes two-thirds of each three-hour session to historical cases and one-third to contemporary affairs. In my experience as an instructor and a scholar, six weeks is hardly enough time for students to produce quality research; it is sufficient, however, for them to improve their critical thinking, writing, and oral communication skills. Students in Defence Studies 800 are therefore allotted seven days to produce an action memorandum set in the past for distribution to their peers. They are encouraged, but not required, to provide me with a complete (six page) draft of their document no fewer than two days before the class in which it will be discussed. If they do so, they receive specific feedback the following day. (In my experience, it takes no more than 15-20 minutes to provide helpful feedback on drafts of this length.) In seminar, fellow students have no more than fifteen minutes to read the memorandum and to come up with questions or concerns about it. We then 'go around the table,' with each student offering advice, critiques, and posing questions. Authors are allowed, literally, one minute to gather their thoughts, after which they provide a five to ten minute oral defence of their recommendations. When the process is over, we debrief, and the authors have seven additional days to revise the memorandum and submit it for formal assessment.

Conclusions

To summarize, policy writing, and action memorandum assignments in particular, have tremendous potential as learning and assessment tools in post-secondary education. From an instructor's perspective, their relative brevity and reliance on accessible prose makes them less time consuming to mark than traditional research papers. Their uniqueness makes them more difficult to plagiarize. And, given what I

have suggested in this article, there are plenty of ways to demand academic rigour and to challenge students tasked with completing such assignments to develop higher level critical thinking skills. Just as important, from a student's perspective, the assignment is attractive because it feels real, and therefore meaningful, without being overwhelming in terms of length (Lindblom-Ylänne, 2010).

I am not suggesting that policy writing like the action memorandum assignment would be appropriate for every post-secondary course, or even necessarily for use every year, but for instructors who are looking for a change, I strongly recommend giving an action memorandum, or a similar policy writing exercise, a try. And I think it is equally important that users of this assignment and teaching and learning scholars confirm the value of policy writing by assessing its effectiveness empirically (Weimer, 2010).

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Appendix 1: Sample Action Memorandum

CLASSIFIED

Insert relevant date here (2 January 1921)

Student's name

Course's name and number

Instructor's name

Date submitted

Action memorandum for:

Insert Relevant Person Here

ISSUE:

How the Canadian delegation to the Imperial Conference of 1921 should respond to the British proposal to renew the Anglo-Japanese Alliance.

Summary of Recommendations

The Canadian delegation should object to the renewal of the Alliance in private, in the hope that it will be able to make its case successfully without threatening the stability of the Empire.

Canadian objections should highlight the potential impact of renewal on the United States from a security perspective. The potential security benefits of non-renewal should also be discussed.

Signed:

Insert individual and relevant position here

BACKGROUND

1. Great Britain and Japan signed the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in January 1902. Japan provided the Empire with naval repair facilities in East Asia while also agreeing to take primary responsibility for the patrol of the region against the threat of Russian expansionism, freeing up the British navy for responsibilities elsewhere, particularly in European regions targeted by Germany for expansion. In exchange, the British promised to look the other way if Japan acted aggressively towards Manchuria and Korea. The agreement also pledged the two states to come to each other's aid in the case of a war with more than one Great Power. As a part of the British Empire, Canada was automatically a party to the agreement.
2. When the agreement was renewed in 1905, a Gentleman's Agreement was added, restricting Japanese immigration to the Empire. Anti-Asian sentiment in the Canadian West, is strong, and active support for the alliance in Ottawa was contingent on the additional protocol.
3. Initially, the United States supported the Alliance: Great Britain was a marginal ally, and the agreement strengthened the defensive position of the Empire as a whole by allowing the British navy to remain mostly in European waters. By 1911, US-Japanese relations had begun to deteriorate and Washington was no longer looking at the Alliance as favourably. The problem was that American industry wanted open access to all aspects of the Chinese economy and officials in the United States had become suspicious of Japan's allegedly imperialistic intentions in the area.
4. The Alliance was renewed in 1911 for a period of ten years. At this point, an important amendment was added, mostly to reassure the Americans. Article IV removed the obligation for either country to join a war against a state with which it had a general arbitration treaty.
5. The Alliance generally served Canadian interests in the years that followed. In July 1914, for example, a German squadron travelled through the northern Pacific Ocean. The Canadian navy was sent to intercept, but failed to do so. Fulfilling its obligation under the Anglo-Japanese Alliance to defend all of the dominions, Japan immediately dispatched a battleship and a cruiser to defend the coast of British Columbia. The British also sent a light cruiser. By then, the German ships had moved down to the American coast, never to return.
6. Despite its usefulness, the desirability of the Alliance increasingly came into question as the end of the decade drew near. Japan was demonstrating expansionist tendencies, exemplified by its decision to annex the Korean peninsula (1910) and its twenty-one demands on China (1915). These worried both Britain and Canada, and concerned the United States even more. There are reasons to believe that, as Japanese interests in China become stronger, American policy towards Japan will become more aggressive.
7. Although the government in London still seems to favour renewal, the issue is now causing difficulties for Britain in its relations with both the United States and its dominions. New Zealand and Australia are unwavering in their support of the Alliance and the military security it brings them, but the same cannot be said of

Canada. Canadians do not trust the Japanese as a people; they fear that renewal will upset the Americans and that US anger will have a detrimental impact on their security; and they are concerned that Japan has become inappropriately aggressive and antagonistic in its attitude towards the rest of Asia. The Americans, of course, want the Alliance to end immediately to remove one of the forms of protection that Japan currently has against a US response to their actions in China.

OPTIONS

At the 1921 Imperial Conference, the Canadian delegation has the following options:

1. It can do and say nothing. The British will make their own decision about renewal. Considering Canada's lack of capacity to affect the decision, all an active protest would do is embarrass the United Kingdom and harm the Anglo-Canadian bilateral relationship.
2. The Canadian delegation can publicly demand that the Alliance be rejected in order to maintain the special relationship that currently exists between the United States and the entire Empire. The possibility of an angry and threatened United States poses a significant risk to Canada's national security.
3. The Canadian delegation can object to renewal in private, hoping to make its case without threatening the stability of the Empire.

CONSIDERATIONS

1. Canada's most significant interests are securing the support of its major allies, Great Britain and the United States, and maintaining international stability.
2. When the alliance was originally signed, it did both. It secured Australia and New Zealand from East Asian aggressors, allowed the British to divert the Royal Navy to other trouble areas, and generally pleased the increasingly powerful United States. International developments since 1902, however, mean that the entire situation must be reconsidered.
3. Some things have not changed, and there are good reasons for the British to renew the alliance. Renewal will keep the Japanese happy, which limits the possibility of conflict in the Far East. If the alliance is not renewed, Japan will no longer have any incentive to protect the interests of Australia and New Zealand, and the Royal Navy will be called back to patrol. This will be expensive, and perhaps unsustainable. It may result in demands for the dominions to increase their military contributions to imperial defence, a proposal that will be unpopular in Canada. If Japan feels threatened, it might also expand the size of its navy. This could spawn an arms race with the United States which could de-stabilize the international community. Canada, as a part of the Alliance, would become an American opponent. The British do not seem to have recognized this possibility, and it must factor into their decision-making process. For Canada, the impact of non-renewal would also be felt at home. Fewer British resources would be available to protect the Canadian coasts, making this country increasingly dependent on the United States for national security.

4. On the other hand, renewal will mean that the combined British and Japanese fleets will remain stronger than the American Navy. Considering the deteriorating state of US-Japanese relations, Washington could opt for its own naval build-up in response, potentially starting the same arms race between the two countries.
5. A British decision to reject the Alliance brings a number of benefits. First, Britain would no longer be obligated to support an increasingly unpredictable Japan in a war in the Far East. Since non-renewal would represent a symbolic condemnation of Japan's imperialistic Far Eastern policies, it would please the American and Canadian publics, and could improve relations between Washington and the Empire. The alliance is also inconsistent with article X of the League of Nations (which deals with collective security). Rejecting it would enhance Britain's international credibility as well as the credibility of the League as a whole. Supporting renewal would effectively sanction Japan's antagonistic policies in the Far East, contrary to public opinion in Britain and Canada. Moreover, recent British appeasement of Japan has not given the Empire any leverage in restraining Japanese expansionist policies in the Far East, as was demonstrated by the annexation of the Korean peninsula.
6. A Canadian decision to say nothing and hope for the best would make Britain's dilemma easier. The British might also recall the Canadian decision to opt for peace within the Empire should Ottawa request diplomatic or other support in the future.
7. On the other hand, not informing the British of Canada's concerns may cause these concerns to be ignored, and could result in a decision to renew the Alliance that could hurt Canadian interests more than it helps them.
8. A bold Canadian outburst against renewal would call attention to the lack of unity within the Empire. Any perception of British weakness could encourage even greater aggressive actions from its competitors. It could also alienate British representatives, making it more difficult for Canada to pursue its own interests within the Empire later on.
9. On the other hand, it would put the Canadian position on the public record, which would boost the government's credibility with the United States regardless of Britain's eventual decision. It would also make America's opposition clear, which could force the British to think particularly carefully before renewing. While criticizing the Empire would certainly anger Canadian imperialists, it would also please the majority of the public, which is extremely resentful of Japan and the Japanese in general.
10. In the end, Canada must throw its support behind its current superpower ally, Great Britain, or its increasingly militarily and economically powerful neighbour, the United States. It is a choice between loyalty and pragmatism.
11. The decision to act loudly or to speak quietly should be based on two considerations. First, one must consider whether a strong Canadian voice make a difference to the final British decision. Then, one must consider the secondary impact of making a public statement that challenges the position of the Empire. The latter is a more complicated decision, and must be thought through carefully in light of the decision to support or reject renewal.

RECOMMENDATION: OPTION # 3

The Canadian delegation should object to renewal in private, hoping to make its case without threatening the stability of the Empire.

1. Renewing the alliance is not in Canada's best interests. When faced with a choice of alienating Great Britain or alienating the United States, the decision should be clear. An angry United States poses a threat to Canadian national security against which the Empire cannot defend. It also risks Canada's relationship with a trading partner that can only grow in importance. The United States is on its way to becoming a world power. It makes little sense for its closest neighbour to create tension within the relationship.
2. Nevertheless, it makes just as little sense to deliberately embarrass the Empire on the world stage. There is no guarantee that such a tactic would work, and even if it did, it could still anger the British and could have ramifications for Canada.
3. Making the Canadian case privately does not preclude a public response later. Instead, it provides the delegation with leverage: if the British refuse to consider Canada's point of view, it could always threaten not to support the alliance publicly later on. At the same time, if the situation is eventually settled in Canada's favour, the British will be appreciative. Since the United States does not recognize Canada as an independent entity, acting solely to secure American approval seems short-sited. Moreover, the idea of alienating the British simply to please the Americans is a poor one. Finally, since there is reason to believe that some members of the Canadian public will disapprove of the results of the conference regardless, it makes little sense to draw any more attention to it publicly than necessary.

Appendix 2: Sample Grading Rubric

Action Memorandum Grading Rubric

A+

- Background summary is concise, relevant, and linked effectively to the rest of the document
- Analysis is clear, convincing, logically organized, and original
- Clear and indisputable evidence of potential for policy implementation
- Structural problems / typographical errors are few and far between
- Memorandum is the right length and is formatted properly

A

- Background summary is concise, relevant, and linked to the rest of the document
- Analysis is clear, convincing, logically organized, and somewhat original
- Clear and convincing evidence of potential for policy implementation
- Structural problems / typographical errors are insignificant
- Memorandum is the right length and is formatted properly

B

- Background summary is concise and largely relevant
- Analysis is clear, convincing, and logically organized
- Evidence of possibility of policy implementation
- Structural problems / typographical errors are generally insignificant
- Memorandum is about the right length and is formatted properly

C

- Background summary's relevance is only somewhat clear and of limited value
- Analysis is somewhat flawed
- Evidence of need for substantial improvement to result in a viable policy option
- Structural problems / typographical errors at times prevent a clear understanding of the memorandum
- Memorandum is too short / long and is missing no more than one section

D

- Background summary is neither helpful nor relevant
- Analysis is flawed
- Evidence that the memorandum, as it stands, will not lead to policy implementation
- Structural problems / typographical errors generally prevent a clear understanding of the memorandum
- Paper is far too short / long and does not include the required sections