

## GENERAL COMMENTS ON POLI 100 WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

As has also been the case in past semesters, many of the writing assignments demonstrated more or less serious problems in presentation and exposition. Only a few were written at an essentially professional level. I am pleased to note, however, that in recent years most papers have been largely free of the most basic kinds of spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors (that is, they were mostly satisfactory with respect to Criterion (A)) that were commonly made by earlier generations of UMBC students.

Probably most of you aim to pursue careers of a professional or semi-professional nature. As suggested in the instructions to the writing assignment, the ability to write a good memo, abstract, legal brief, report, etc., is a requirement for success in most professional-level jobs in business, government, and other institutions. The POLI 100 writing assignments are specifically designed to help you develop this skill. Writing is particularly a skill in which “practice makes better” — even if, for most of us, it doesn't make perfect. Therefore you should continue to take courses that give you multiple opportunities to develop your writing skills.

The following guidelines and observations pertain to any writing task.

- (1) It is very hard to express complicated points clearly and concisely on the first attempt. A good final product almost invariably requires multiple drafts and revisions. [For examples, see below.] Many people find word processing technology helpful in this respect.
- (2) Between drafts, get feedback and editorial criticisms from others. At this stage, regard critical comments and suggestions from your readers as more valuable than praise (so take all my red ink in this spirit). Even if some of the criticisms are off the mark, they will encourage you to consider whether you can present points more clearly or concisely. If your preliminary readers are not knowledgeable about your subject matter, so much the better — if they can't understand what you are trying to say, your ultimate readers probably won't be able to either. In addition, you must try to function as a critical reader for yourself.
- (3) You can't express a thought clearly and concisely until you have a clear thought to express. Good writing is difficult precisely because it forces us to develop, refine, clarify, and organize our thinking. (Informal oral presentations allow us to get away with sloppier thinking and organization.) The process of revising drafts sharpens your thinking.

*With respect to my red ink editorial markings* (which typically focus most heavily on the first several paragraphs):

- (a) Refer to the attached sheet explaining marking symbols and diagnostics.
- (b) Note that where I have written alternative phrasing above your words, my phrasing is proposed as clearer and/or more concise.
- (c) What I suggested most commonly was the deletion of words, phrases, or whole sentences that were irrelevant to the question, or that repeated what was said elsewhere, or (especially) that could be compressed or combined. [See examples below.] A good professional memo (as well as other good writing) says what needs to be said in as few words possible. Achieving clear and concise expression typically requires multiple revisions, which in turn requires (for most of us) considerable

time and effort. (Mark Twain once wrote a letter to a friend in which he said apologetically, “I’m sorry this is such a long letter, but I didn’t have time to write a short one.”)

### ***Two very common writing problems***

- (1) The word *it’s* is the contraction of *it is* (and probably should not be used in formal writing); the possessive form of the word *it* is spelled *its*. Likewise *who’s* is the contraction of *who is*; the possessive form is *whose*.
- (2) If you incorporate someone else’s writing (including distinctive words and phrases) into your own text, the quoted material must be enclosed in quotation marks and attributed to the author. But then *what appears within quotation marks* must match the *exact words* of the quoted author.

### ***Refer to the original documents, not just the summaries of them in the textbook***

The assignments asked you to read original documents in the Course Pack. Quite a few students writing on the Virginia and New Jersey Plans, said (i) that, under the Virginia Plan, the lower house of the National Legislature [rather than the Legislature as a whole] elects the National Executive and Judiciary; (ii) that, under the Articles of Confederation, Congress had a unanimity requirement [it was actually a 9/13 requirement, except for amendments to the Articles]; and (iii) that, under the New Jersey Plan, this unanimity requirement would be replaced by a simple majority requirement [the NJ Plan left this unspecified: “none of the powers hereby vested in the United States in Congress will be exercised without the consent of at least \_\_\_\_\_ States”). It turns out that the K&J textbook (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) on pp. 52-53 (pp. 46-47 in the 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) says (or implies) the same erroneous things. Also some students said that, under the NJ Plan, the legislature “can exercise supremacy clause over state legislation” (or words to that effect) — a statement that apparently comes from K&J’s Figure 2.2, not from the text itself, but that in any case does not come from the NJ Plan and that makes no sense. Finally, many students paraphrased or quoted the textbook to the effect that the NJ Plan (unlike the VA Plan) failed to propose the organization of the executive and judicial branches and generally was less complete than the Virginia Plan. However, a comparison of the actual text of NJ resolutions #4 and #5 with VA resolutions #7 and #9 does not support the first claim, and the text of the NJ Plan is actually slightly longer than that of its rival.

The lesson is that *textbooks* (and other secondary sources, especially on the web) *can be wrong*. Of course, beginning students are ordinarily justified in presuming that their textbooks are accurate — but *not* when original documents have been provided against which they can check statements in the textbook and when the assignment refers specifically to these documents.

Finally, many students said the NJ Plan called for a unicameral legislature, with delegates selected by state legislatures and each state delegation having one vote. However, the text of the Plan itself says nothing about the nature of the national legislature, because in this respect it proposed to make no change in the existing Articles of Confederation.

Along the same lines, quite a few students who chose the *Marbury v. Madison* question mostly focused on explaining the story behind the case (drawing on the textbook and/or class lecture or other sources), rather than on how Marshall reasoned from Marbury’s request for a *writ of mandamus* to the conclusion that the Supreme Court has the power to declare acts of Congress unconstitutional (which was the assigned question and can be answered only by referring to the original document).

With respect to Federalist 39, note that Madison equates the terms “federal” and “confederal,” and he argues that the constitution entails a mixture of “(con)federal” and “national” features. It is precisely this mixture that we today call “federal.”

### ***Multiple Revised Drafts Almost Always Improve and Shorten a Final Written Product***

Here are several actual examples from earlier semesters of words, phrases, or whole sentences that can be compressed or combined in the manner suggested in (c) above. My markings on the first several paragraphs of your paper mostly suggest similar revisions and condensations.

#### *Student draft:*

The origins of the U.S. Constitution lie in two rival plans. These plans are the Virginia Plan and the New Jersey Plan. Both the Virginia and New Jersey Plans were brought up and debated on, at the Constitutional convention in 1787. Each plan had significant differences, but both were keys to framing the final U.S. Constitution.

#### *Suggested revision:*

The origins of the U.S. Constitution lie in the rival Virginia and New Jersey Plans proposed at the Constitutional convention in 1787. Despite significant differences, both were keys to framing the final U.S. Constitution.

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#### *Student draft:*

The Virginia and New Jersey plans, were both put before the Constitutional Convention, both representing two different ideas, and motions. The U.S. Constitution would be developed with both of these rivaling concepts. Each plan put forth some kind of contribution towards the U.S. Constitution. The question is, how much did each contribute, and what were the main points that each plan differed in.

#### *Suggested revision:*

The Virginia and New Jersey plans at the Constitution convention represented opposing ideas that would be combined in the U.S. Constitution. Here I examine how the plans differed and how each contributed to the Constitution.

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#### *Student draft:*

Madison proposed a “check” on the legislative branch which he deemed the Council of Revision. This council would be comprised of members of the executive and certain judges from the judicial, elected by the legislature. The power bestowed upon the Council of Revision was the ability to veto legislation.

#### *Suggested revision:*

Madison proposed a “check” on the legislative branch called the Council of Revision, to be comprised of members of the executive and some judges with the power to veto acts of the legislature.

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*Student draft:*

When constructing the United States Constitution many ideas and opinion were evaluated. Two positions that were presented at the Constitutional convention were the Virginia Plan and the New Jersey Plan. The two plans conflicted on various issues and a combination of both of the plans is seen in the final draft of the United States Constitution. The plans varied in their theory about how the representative government should be chosen, what laws and legislations could be created and by whom, and the establishment of a judiciary. The Virginia Plan detailed a mixed system of how the representatives were to be delegated and how the number of representatives for each state was to be chosen. In the Virginia Plan there was to be a two-chamber legislature where the representatives were based on how many people lived in the state. The lower legislative chamber was based on election, its voters consisting of the citizens of the United States. An election held by the lower house would decide the representatives in the upper house chamber, the courts, and the executive. The standards for election of representative differed in the New Jersey Plan. In the New Jersey Plan you did not have this mixed system of how many representatives were delegated and how these representatives were elected or chosen. In the New Jersey Plan each state had equal representation disregarding differences in population. Each single house chamber was equally represented by each state.

*Suggested revision:*

When drafting the United States Constitution, the convention delegates considered many proposals, including the Virginia and New Jersey Plans. While they differed on various issues, features of both plans are found in the final draft of the Constitution. The plans differed about how representatives should be chosen, the powers of the legislature, and the establishment of the judiciary. The Virginia Plan called for a two-chamber legislature representing states according to population. The lower chamber was based on direct popular election and would choose the representatives in the upper-chamber. In contrast, under the New Jersey Plan, each state had equal representation regardless of population.

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*Student Draft:*

The Virginia Plan and the New Jersey Plan were created as attempts to redefine or make changes to the Articles of Confederation. After the independence of the states, the Articles of Confederation was proposed as the new form of government. Soon after, this government did not succeed and a new government was sought after. Some of the propositions for the new government were the Virginia Plan and the New Jersey Plan.

The Virginia Plan was introduced by Edmund Randolph. It proposed a strong national government that could make and enforce laws and collect taxes. Unlike the Article of Confederation, the Virginia Plan would create a Federal form over government. This plan also allowed the legislature to regulate interstate trade. It allowed the legislature to take out laws it deemed unconstitutional and to uses armed forces to enforce laws. Both houses of the legislature would be represented proportionately based on the state population. This was highly favorable to larger states. Small states, however, opposed this plan and thereby created one of their own call the New Jersey Plan. In this plan, unlike the proportional representation in the Virginia Plan, states would be represented equally independent

of size. Its legislature only consisted of one house.

*Suggested Revision:*

The Virginia Plan and the New Jersey Plan were proposed to revise or replace the Articles of Confederation that formed the central government after independence, but which proved to be unsuccessful.

The Virginia Plan, introduced by Edmund Randolph, proposed a strong national government that could make and enforce laws, collect taxes, and regulate interstate trade. Unlike the Article of Confederation, the Virginia Plan would create a federal form of government. It allowed the legislature to veto state laws it deemed unconstitutional and to use armed force to enforce laws. Both houses of the legislature would represent states proportionately to their population.

Small states proposed the rival New Jersey Plan, under which states would continue to be represented equally in a unicameral Congress. . .

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Here is a much weightier example of effective revision (that also indicates that drafts can sometimes be usefully expanded rather than condensed).

*First draft* of the Preamble of the U.S. Constitution (as reported by the Committee on Detail, August 6, 1787):

We the people of the States of New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode-Island and Providence Plantations, Connecticut, New-York, New-Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North-Carolina, South-Carolina, and Georgia, do ordain, declare, and establish the following Constitution for the Government of Ourselves and our Posterity. [Followed by a draft Constitution containing 23 Articles]

*Final draft* of the Preamble of the U.S. Constitution (as presented to the convention by the Committee on Style, September 12, 1787):

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America. [Followed by a draft Constitution containing 7 Articles]

Note that the words of the final draft not only are much more powerful but they also correct what might be deemed a logical defect in the original draft. (Would the original preamble be appropriate if some of the original states failed to ratify the Constitution or after new states have been admitted?)

John Stuart Mill's procedure for writing his many books (including *On Liberty*) and essays was as follows. He would first write one complete draft and then put it aside for a year or so. He would then write an entirely new draft from scratch (not consulting his earlier draft) and put it aside for a while. Finally, he would review the two drafts two together, drawing the best from each to create a final draft.