



Economics Undergraduate Writing Improvement Project

In Winter and Spring 2019, the Writing Hub worked closely with four Economics faculty (Dr. Melissa Famulari, Dr. Prashant Bharadwaj, Dr. Giacomo Rondina, and Dr. Alex Gelber) to build and pilot the Undergraduate Writing Improvement Project (UWIP).

The UWIP aimed to increase student writing and engagement in three courses in the Economics curriculum offered in Spring 2019. The collaboration responded to the department's desire to add more opportunities for students to engage with course concepts through writing. As a result, 294 students in the targeted courses received both meaningful writing assignments in courses that might otherwise not have offered them, and received individual support on their writing at the Writing Hub.

In addition to student support, through the UWIP pilot, the Writing Hub focused on increasing the participating faculty's expertise for using writing effectively in undergraduate courses. Participating faculty reported deeper student engagement as a result of the UWIP, and that they felt more prepared to advise colleagues on effectively implementing writing in their undergraduate courses.

Dr. Giacomo Rondina, Associate Teaching Professor and Director of Instruction in the Economics department, summarized the impact his participation in the program had on his teaching:

As an educator, I feel like I have received training [through the Writing Hub] that I so much needed to effectively and successfully incorporate a writing component in my classes. There are two aspects that I feel I have begun to learn in participating in the program and interacting with Matthew and Erica. The first one is how to construct effective writing assignments, the second is how to provide effective feedback to the students on their writing.

Upon my return at UCSD in the Fall of 2017 I set out to design a new upper elective class on data analysis in macroeconomics. Since the beginning, my idea was to have a class that had a strong analytical and numerical component (i.e. what statistical tools do I apply to the data, why, and how), and, at the same time, a strong writing component (i.e. now that I have the numerical results, how do I communicate how and why they are interesting and relevant?). Students seemed to respond well to the analytical and numerical component, but I often sensed frustration on their part in dealing with the two writing assignments during the quarter. It is in this context that I jumped enthusiastically at the opportunity to improve my skills by taking part in the Writing [Hub's] Program in [Spring 2019].

The first impact that the program had on my teaching was to make me think about how to construct a writing assignment by first clarifying to myself what transferable skills and knowledge the students should use and improve by working on the assignment, and then clarifying it in the assignment's directions. I have also learned how much more effectively students respond to specific and clear directions, as opposed to general and vague directions. More importantly, I have seen the evidence of the effectiveness in the quality of the students' assignments. In Spring 2019 the overall quality of the writing assignments has been much higher than all the previous times I taught the class.

The second impact that the program had on my teaching was to make me think about how to provide good and effective feedback on the writing assignments. Grading writing assignments is for me a great challenge because of the number and types of comments that one can, in principle, provide. I often find myself providing feedback on a fundamental aspect of the writing next to a comment on grammar. Through the program I have learned how important it is to prioritize, to start from what is working in the writing in order to address what is not working, to have a set rubric with a few dimensions for evaluations. Having a more structured approach to evaluating writing assignments has turned grading papers into a more enjoyable experience – as much enjoyable as grading can be, of course. More importantly, I have noticed that students responded to my comments, both by asking me to discuss them more thoroughly in office meetings, and/or by incorporating them in their second writing assignments.

Overall, after participating in the program, I feel that I have acquired several critical tools that have permanently changed my approach to the use of writing assignments in my classes.