Using Mentor Texts for Writing Instruction in a High School Economics Class

Kristine E. Pytash  
*Kent State University*

Elizabeth Edmondson  
Arin Tait  
*Gilmour Academy*

Writing is an important tool for content acquisition and for teaching analytical skills in economics. Students must be able to read and write in the economics with an understanding of how knowledge is produced and disseminated in the field. This study sought to understand how 12 secondary students enrolled in an economics course engaged in evaluating, critiquing, and studying a mentor text to learn how to craft a policy paper. A mentor text is a high-quality model text students can read and study to learn more about how to write in the field of economics. Results found students self-reported learning: the content of economics how to structure their paper, the discourse of economics. They further gained an understanding of why economists write.

*Key Words:* writing, writing instruction, high school, economics, mentor texts, disciplinary literacy

**Introduction**

Reports from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (2012) note 76% of twelve grade students in the United States write at a basic or below basic level. This data is concerning as it highlights that there are a number of students who will be graduating and entering college or the workforce with writing abilities below the expectations of their grade level. The National Commission on Writing (2004) calls writing a “threshold skill” and estimates that employers spend 3.1 billion dollars remediating writing deficiencies (p. 3).

Educators argue one way to combat these issues is through teaching writing with a disciplinary literacy stance (Moje, 2008; Monte-Sano, 2010; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Disciplinary literacy is an examination of the specific literacy practices in particular fields. Through this instructional approach, students gain specialized knowledge in order to understand how to read, write, and think in subject-specific ways. Students also learn the particular nuances of literacy practices associated with the discipline.

The call for disciplinary teachers to teach the reading and writing practices integral to their field has been echoed in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2012). The History/Social Studies standards are based on the idea that social studies teachers will use their expertise to teach, guide, and engage students in reading, writing, speaking, and thinking relevant to the field (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). According the CCSS, students in social studies should routinely write arguments, read informative texts, and incorporate narrative accounts into analyses of historical events or individuals. Research, however, finds adolescents only write reports in social studies classes at a minimum of one or two times a year (National Center of Education Statistics, 2002).
The study of economics is under the social studies curriculum umbrella. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) (2008) encourages the teaching of economics as part of a larger program to help young adults become engaged citizens in a democratic society. The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework echoes this statement by further explaining that studying economics “helps students understand the interaction of buyers and sellers in markets, workings of the national economy, and interactions within the global marketplace” (p. 35). The study of economics can develop students who are aware of local, national, and global economies and how policy can influence economic conditions that can create benefits and constraints for people (NCSS, 2013).

Despite the importance of economics and the need for students to be able to write effectively in economics classrooms, there is a significant lack of research focused on writing in high school economics classrooms. Although economics is generally taught at the high school level, much of the research on how students learn to write in economics has been conducted in college classrooms. If students are first going to be exposed to economic thought, principles, and literacy practices relevant to economics at the high school level, it is necessary to explore how they learn to write in a high school economics classroom.

**Theoretical Framework**

Writing is an important tool for content acquisition and for teaching analytical skills in economics (Docherty, Tse, Forman, & McKenzie, 2010). Writing in the field of economics requires students have knowledge of economic principles in order to apply them to real-world situations and to communicate their interpretations to others (Grunin & Lindauer, 1986). Students should not only demonstrate their content knowledge, but also engage in the “doing” of economics through the application of economic thought (Grunin & Lindauer, 1986, p. 228). Part of the “doing” in economics is being able to read and write in the discipline with an understanding of how knowledge is produced and disseminated in the field. Writing from a social perspective “draws on social literacy [Street, 1995] and situated cognition learning theories [Gee, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991] to focus on how learners acquire social practices through interaction in events and activities” (Newell, Beach, Smith & VanDerHeide, 2011, p. 279). From this perspective, writing is a social practice requiring students to participate in the “social world” of economics (Newell et al., p. 290). The field of economics has genres with the specific purposes of arguing, critiquing, or providing an analysis of economic thoughts or principles. White papers are one of the genres written by economists. White papers inform policy; provide solutions to problems; or argue specific positions. Writing a white paper requires students to have knowledge about how to write an effective argument.

There has been a call for more research about how students learn argumentative reading and writing (Newell, Beach, Smith, & VanDerHeide, 2011). Educators in economics have begun exploring specific instructional approaches that might improve students’ learning of economic thought and foster their growth as writers in the discipline. An instructional approach that may improve students’ reading and writing in an economics classroom is using a mentor text to evaluate, critique, and study in order to inform students’ own writing. A mentor text is a high-quality model text students can read and study to learn more about how to write in the field of economics. The use of mentor texts to teach writing in economics, as argued by Harlan M. Smith II, Amy Broughton, & Jamie Copley (2005), might provide students with knowledge of how to use language as an “instrument of economic thought” (p. 44). This instructional approach has also been found effective by researchers in the field of adolescent literacy. Meta-
analyses have also identified instructional approaches effective for teaching writing (Graham & Perin, 2007; Hillocks, 1986). In two separate investigations, Hillocks’ examined 60 studies, while Writing Next identified and analyzed 136 writing studies conducted in grades 4-12. Both research reviews found the study of models to be a beneficial instructional writing approach. This instructional approach exposes students to mentor texts, which are models of “quality” writing. When students analyze quality models they have the expectation that they will “emulate the critical elements, patterns, and forms embodied in the models in their own writing” (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 20).

The study reported here explored 12 high school students’ experiences with using a mentor text to craft their writing in an economics class. Two research questions guided the study: (1) how did students in a high school economics classroom use a mentor text to guide their writing of an original policy paper? (2) what did students learn about writing in economics?

Method

Academy is a private, Catholic school in a suburban area (pseudonyms used for all names). The economics course was developed for high school seniors with a particular focus on urban renewal and development. The economics course had 20 students enrolled; twelve (seven females; five males) students participated in the study. One of the co-authors was the instructor for this course.

Collection and Analysis

Data were collected over a four-week period through the following means: (1) observations and field notes completed during the instructional unit, (2) students’ outlines of papers, (3) students’ final papers, and (4) focus group structured interviews at the end of the unit lasting approximately 45 minutes. The focus group structured interviews were used to gain more detailed information about students’ experiences with the instruction and to understand the intentional decisions they made as writers (see Figure 1 for the interview questions). To ensure understanding of their responses, probing questions were used to delve deeper into the participants’ responses and to check for clarification. An example of a probing question was: “Can you specifically show me where you used statistics in your piece and why you made this decision?”

Structured Interview Questions

1. What was the most important thing you learned about writing a policy paper from reading Lindsey’s Nostaganomics?

2. Did you include this in your paper? Where specifically?

3. Why do economists write policy papers?

4. What did you learn about the American Jobs Bill?

5. Do you think you would have learned as much if you did not have to write your
own policy paper? Why or why not?

6. What did you learn about writing that you could carry over into something else you need to write?

Figure 1. Structured Interview Questions.

recognizing themes, systematically examining the data for clarification and coding, and a final synthesis (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The first author completed initial coding of the field notes, interviews, and students’ papers. Using constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the first author created and sorted data units. Example categories include: “why economists write,” “learning the discourse of economics,” “learning how to structure a policy paper,” and “content knowledge acquisition” (See Figure 2 for the categories and a representative piece of data). The second and third authors independently coded the same data using the established categories.

### Categories and a Representative Piece of Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Using a Mentor Text Made Writing Easier</th>
<th>Mia: “The whole structure of how he wrote his thing kind of – it was easier to write my paper then.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structure of White Papers</td>
<td>Ava: “each section was like an expansion upon each point, so I kind of did that, like a shortened version, like a thesis at the very end and then each body paragraph was an extension of this segment that applied to that part.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discourse of Economics</td>
<td>Madison: “I guess you could just write a paper about what the facts are, but there is a biased tone to it because everyone has their opinion as they’re writing it.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Why Economists Write</td>
<td>Jacob: “It could be informative, to explain what is going on to people. It could be a lobby for one side or the other for certain policies that are going on. It could be to criticize someone else’s argument of what’s going on, which is specifically</td>
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The Writing Instruction

White papers of policy critiques or policy statements are not a form of writing with which high school students generally are acquainted. Often published by advocacy groups or research institutes, they can be long and dense, requiring specific background knowledge or expertise. They are useful in this context as they model a clear structure, a persuasive tone, and an integration of data and statistics into a narrative description. White papers often support a particular ideological stance and often promote a specific policy preference.

The structure represented by the policy paper is rhetorically familiar: an overall thesis supported by a variety of claims, which are supported by warrants and evidence. These sections are clearly delineated syntactically and thus easy for developing writers to recognize. The use of clear signaling words—such as: “first,” “further,” and “finally”—when listing claims, makes obvious transitions for students to follow and recreate. Policy papers create defined sections, whose pattern is repeated within the body of the paper. These sections are nested within the

| Specific Content Knowledge about The American Jobs Act | Olivia: “tax cuts for workers, and so I mostly focused on how the middle class struggles and how tax breaks are necessary to help the economy because when people are spending less it actually slows down the economy” |
| Developing a Deeper Understanding Through Writing | Ava: “It’s not like I can just Google ‘what are the tax cuts for the upper 1%;’ there’s all kinds of different numbers so I had to narrow it down and then think about which types of earners I wanted to focus on.” |
| Why Writing is Beneficial to their Learning | Mia: “If I just have to sit in class and learn about it and don’t have to write into a paper why it’s a good thing that I’m not going to go as in-depth to learn about it than if I have to write a paper explaining it to people who might not have known about it.” |

Figure 2: Categories and a Representative Piece of Data
whole, organized logically, and connected by the overall thesis; this makes these papers easily outlined by students seeking to duplicate the style of argument. Data and statistics frequently are used as evidence to support the author’s claims. The author’s interpretation of the data strengthens his or her claim and advances his or her ideas, policies, goals, and ideologies. The data can be presented in several different forms: including graphs, tables, etc., which are then analyzed within the body of the text. As students emulate this type of description, they are able to build their analytical skills.

Our instructional unit lasted four weeks. Because of the school schedule, the class alternated between meeting three days a week and two days a week. Each class was 90 minutes long. The unit was designed to engage students in an inquiry about President Obama’s American Jobs Act (add year). The following questions guided the students’ study: “Is The American Jobs Act, a policy for reducing unemployment, a good choice?” “Why or why not?”

To prepare students to write an original white paper about the American Jobs Act, students studied a mentor text, Paul Krugman’s Nostalgianomics: Economic Policies, Social Norms, and Income Inequality (Lindsey, 2009). This text was selected as the mentor text because of the structure as it represented the ideal form of the paper. Although longer than the students’ final writing assignments, the teacher viewed Nostalgianomics as an example of the traits of a white policy paper.

The overall premise of Nostalgianomics is the current liberal desire, promulgated by Paul Krugman in particular, to recreate the golden age of the middle class—high wages, secure pensions, job security—is based on a nostalgic remembrance of the period (Lindsey, 2009). The argument that Lindsey makes is that nostalgia is misplaced, in the sense that the unique conditions of expansion after World War II make that golden age impossible to recreate. He further argues growth was built on social norms of gender and race that should be offensive to liberal sensibilities. The author’s arguments relied heavily on the debate over how involved the government should be in the functions of the economy. This argument would be similar to the arguments students would have to make in the sense both would be based on a tension between moral belief and economic data.

For two weeks, students read and deconstructed the mentor text. Each day began with a teacher leading and modeling the analysis of the text for both content and form. During this time, the teacher read sections of the text aloud and periodically stopped and highlighted specific elements of the writing, such as: transitional phrases, important vocabulary words, and statistics that reinforced the author’s argument. The teacher also asked specific questions and made specific comments about the writing, such as, “What does this sentence do?” and “Look at this shift in his rhetoric. He is now using words like ‘wrongheaded’ and ‘hijacked’”. The teacher, in addition, highlighted instances of bias within the text. Prior to beginning a reading, the teacher asked students to locate, the Cato Institute, the publisher of the text. She then engaged students in a discussion about the history of the Cato Institute and how the author’s involvement in the institute might sway his positions, goals, and purposes for writing this particular white paper. Throughout the unit, the teacher emphasized how Lindsey used language to make claims and support his positions. When discussing unions and income tax, the teacher highlighted how the author used language such as “winner-take-all” and “superstar markets” (Lindsey, 2009, p. 8). Similarly, the class was engaged in discussions relative to the manner in which statistics were used to support Lindsey’s position. When discussing Lindsey’s comments on immigration, the
class specifically examined the data he used to support his claims and discussed how statistics can be presented to alter or steer an argument in a particular direction.

Students worked in collaborative groups to examine additional sections of the text. Their ideas and thinking were then discussed as a whole class. This pattern was the structure for most of the class periods when the students were reading the mentor text. During the instruction, the teacher covered particular elements of writing including punctuation for emphasis (bullet points), word choice (jargon and specific vocabulary such as lateral move, free agent, analog, wage gaps), structure of the argument (thesis, counterarguments), and transitional words (first, second, in addition to, finally, furthermore). This structure engaged students in both learning content and writing.

For the remainder of the unit, students researched the American Jobs Act, crafted their position and wrote their policy paper. Students watched President Obama’s Address to a Joint Session of Congress about the American Jobs Act given September 8, 2011 (Curtis, 2011). Outside resources, such as videos, news articles, and websites were used to find information. Working in collaborative learning groups, students discussed their research findings. Students also assisted each other in developing an outline for their original papers then wrote their own original paper taking a stance on Obama’s American Jobs Act. The papers advocated either for or against a specific aspect of the American Jobs Act, including, (1) tax cuts to help America’s small businesses, (2) “Pathways” back to work, (3) infrastructure re-development, or (4) tax cuts for workers.

Findings

Observations and field notes, students’ written work, and focus group interviews provided an understanding of how these students in a high school economics classroom used a mentor text to guide their writing of an original policy paper and what they learned about writing in economics. The instructional unit provided opportunities for students to learn about President Obama’s American Jobs Act, how white papers are structured, the Discourse (Gee, 2004) of economics and why economists write.

Content Knowledge

Students self-reported learning about the American Jobs Act during the unit voicing what they learned, such as specific aspects of the plan and also why they thought it would be effective or ineffective. Olivia, for example, explained she focused, “on tax cuts for workers, and so I mostly focused on how the middle class struggles and how tax breaks are necessary to help the economy because when people are spending less it actually slows down the economy.” Ethan further explained the tax cuts for workers would stimulate the economy because “that will help put more money into their income and they (workers) in turn will buy more stuff.” Students described how writing a white paper helped them further understand concepts because they argued a specific point and had to be strategic in using evidence to support their ideas. For example, Ava said, “It’s not like I can just Google ‘what are the tax cuts for the upper 1%; there are all kinds of different numbers, so I had to narrow it down and then think about which types of earners I wanted to focus on.” Similarly, Emma stated, “I had to know what people who argue against it and I know why that doesn’t work. I have to know their argument and I have to know why I think this will help.”
Structure
The writing assignment required students to write a white paper advocating for or arguing against President Obama’s American Jobs Act incorporating a thesis and supporting their position using evidence. Students reported reading the mentor texts provided them with knowledge of how to structure their papers. Olivia and Ava explained how they established their argument by having their thesis in the opening of their paper, similar to the mentor text. Ava continued to explain that in the mentor text, “Each section was like an expansion upon each point, so I kind of did that, like a shortened version, like a thesis at the very end and then each body paragraph was an extension of this segment that applied to that part.” Students also discussed including a counter-argument, a section they noticed was included in the mentor text. Olivia explained, “He recognized the other side, the other guy was like advocating, but at the very end he’s like proving why he’s wrong with his point.” Ethan agreed, “You’re kind of coming at both sides of the argument, you’re like hitting the person in both directions.”

Transitional words helped students structure their arguments. During instruction the teacher pointed out specific transitional words that were used purposefully in the mentor text to organize the author’s argument. During the unit, the teacher highlighted transitional words. Students then engaged in discussions about the purpose of these words. Throughout the unit, close attention was given to words that indicate a list of points that the author wants to make (first, second, in addition to, furthermore), words to indicate counterarguments (in contrast, although), and words to indicate conclusions (thus, consequently). The teacher and students discussed the words’ function in the mentor text and then discussed how these words could help with clarity and organization when writing their policy papers. Students used these transitional words in their papers to do similar things. For example, Mia argued that the American Jobs Act would modernize the country and help people gain employment. She wrote, “The American Jobs Act will achieve two things in the future. First, it will help restore the economy by creating jobs as well as finding cost effective ways to modernize America. Second, it will help make the “American Dream” achievable.”

Discourse
Students reported and demonstrated knowledge about the discourse of economics including tone, specific vocabulary use, and statistics to build and support their arguments. Students discussed how their word choice influenced the tone of their policy paper. They described the tone of their policy paper as “business-like,” “not textbook-y,” and conversational. Blake said that he learned policy papers were “informative” but with “a twist on it and shows your voice talking to someone as opposed to just reading facts.” In his analysis of the Pathway Back to Work Plan, Blake cited how in his paper he wrote, “With the reform of unemployment insurance, workers will not be completely cut-off from the world of unemployment. Instead of being laid off, the working training program makes it so an employee still has a shift, but the shift is shorter.” He cited this sentence as informing the reader of what was going on, but doing so in language that others might understand.

Students also cited their use of specific language to support their position. They explained how language indicates bias. Madison said, “I guess you could just write a paper about what the facts are, but there is a biased tone to it because everyone has their opinion as they’re writing it.” In Madison’s paper, she used a quote by President Obama. This quote stated “fully paid for as part of the President’s long-term deficit reduction plan.” Madison then
followed with the sentence, “this seems like the President really does not know exactly where all this money is coming from.” She highlighted words and phrases that showed her position throughout her piece; for example, “digging ourselves into a hole,” “losing domestic self-sufficiency,” and “leaving the economy in worse shape.”

Throughout the instructional unit, the teacher emphasized how statistics and data were used to support the author’s policy preferences and ideological stance in the field of economics. All student papers referenced statistics to emphasize their positions. Ava stated, “The statistics help back up your argument; having numbers and facts and figures really aide in your argument.” In her paper, Ava argues that Obama’s American Job Act will stabilize the middle class since they are the group of people “often given the highest taxes because those below cannot afford it and those above have the system working to their advantage.” She uses statistics such as, “last year, 4,000 millionaires owed no federal money at all” to support her argument.

**Why Economists Write**

After participating in the instruction, when asked why economists write, the majority of students discussed how economists write to inform the mass population of people about current policies or economic theories. Ethan stated, “economists write to inform the public about what’s going on.” Aidan explained that economists give “insight” into economic issues or principles. Similarly, Olivia said, economists write “to share ideas about the economy and ways it can be improved.” Lucas highlighted the specific tasks of helping others make sense of statistical data. Jacob and Lucas also noted the multiple reasons people might write in the field of economics, including making arguments for or against policy. Jacob explained:

> It could be informative, to explain what is going on to people. It could be a lobby for one side or the other for certain policies that are going on. It could be to criticize someone else’s argument of what’s going on, which is specifically what he does, so it really depends on what the person was either asked to do, or aimed to do in general.

**Discussion and Implications**

The goals of this study were (1) to examine how students in a high school economics classroom used a mentor text to guide their writing of an original policy paper and (2) the students’ report of their learning about writing in economics.

“High literacy” is defined as the “deeper knowledge of the ways in which reading, writing, language, and content work together” (Langer, 2002, p. 3). Students explored President Obama’s American Jobs Act through an inquiry unit that required them to read the mentor text, research a specific aspect of the American Jobs Act, and write an original white paper arguing for or against the American Jobs Act. Students used the mentor text, *Nostaligianomics* (Lindsey, 2009) to learn content and explore issues in economics such as: government policies, distribution of wealth, and social implications. They also used the mentor text to guide their writing of a white paper. Students were required to answer the question, “Is The American Jobs Act, a policy for reducing unemployment, a good choice? Why or why not?” The students’ discussions about reading the mentor text before writing supports how deconstructing and studying a text as part of the writing process can be a valuable tool for learning. Students reported gaining knowledge about the American Jobs Bill. They discussed learning particular aspects of the bill such as: tax breaks, subsidized employment, and supply and demand.
Students learned not only what economists write about, but they learned how the readings provided them with an understanding of how a white paper might be constructed. Students reported applying Lindsey’s structure to help them write their white papers. Students specifically stated that they noticed how Lindsey (2009) supported his thesis throughout the piece. Students knew that in order to make an effective argument they had to have evidence for their claims, such as statistics. They also noted the importance of a counter-argument and how that element is used to strengthen positions.

As educators consider how students acquire “academic language within specific social practices” it is important to explore how students recognize and used discourse related to the field of economics (Gee, 2004, p. 13). Through teacher modeling and discussions the students in this study focused on not only the content, but also how the author was using language to indicate and strengthen his economic position. Students noted how the language was used to promote an ideological stance, to support policy preferences, and to organize the author’s argument in a way that is most persuasive.

Researchers and educators note students often conclude that history has a correct answer (Monte-Sano, 2010; Wineburg, 1991) rather than “multiple interpretations created by people with particular biases at a given point in time” (Monte-Sano, p. 542). It is important for teachers to engage in pedagogical practices that help students recognize that economists are not only biased, but also have a particular agenda supporting a policy preference and ideological stance. Actively deconstructing the mentor text, through teacher modeling, provided students opportunities to recognize and discuss how authors use language, rhetoric, statistics, and data to support claims and arguments. As evident in their class discussions about Lindsey’s Nostalgianomics, students recognized the author was arguing for a certain position, and he was inherently biased. In their writing and their interviews about their papers, students also discussed how they used features of texts such as: specific language, rhetoric, and data to construct and support their positions.

When asked why economists write, students discussed the need for economists to inform, to provide insight, or to make an argument. The students did not articulate how writing a white paper would also advance a particular ideology, a way of not only advancing economic thought, but a way of understanding and viewing society. This finding is important because not only should students in high school economic classes learn about genres relevant to the field, but also explore how writing advances opinions on important and current social issues. The seniors in high school who participated in this study were of age to vote in the 2012 Presidential election. Students need instructional units that provide opportunities to study, critique, and develop stances on social issues that are important and have potential for helping them develop civic engagement.

Writing is an integral part of economics. It is a practice essential in how economists formulate ideas, produce arguments, disseminate knowledge, and communicate within society. It is important for students to have opportunities learn about the ways experts in the field produce and disseminate knowledge. Studying authentic texts, important in the field of economics, is one way for students to grow as readers, writers, and learners in the discipline.
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National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief 


U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for 

**Author Bios**

**Kristine E. Pytash** is an assistant professor in Teaching, Learning and Curriculum Studies at Kent State University’s College of Education, Health, and Human Services, where she co-directs the secondary Integrated Language Arts teacher preparation program. Her research focuses on disciplinary writing and writing instruction in juvenile detention facilities. Email: kpytash@kent.edu

**Elizabeth Edmondson** teaches 10th grade English, Advanced Placement (AP) Literature and Composition, and a course on creative nonfiction at Gilmour Academy in Gates Mills, Ohio. She also serves Chair of the English department. She is a doctoral student in the Curriculum and Instruction program at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio.

**Arin Miller-Tait** is an Instructor and Director of Civic Engagement Initiatives at Gilmour Academy. She currently serves as co-director of Teaching Cleveland, a non-profit organization dedicated to local history, economics, and public policy education in the Cleveland area.