The Quote Analysis: Teaching Political Science Students to Read with Focus

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How often have we questioned our students about a book or article they have read, only to find that they cannot state the main arguments or even say what they have found interesting? Our first assumption might be that they have not done the reading, but frequently this turns out not to be the case. Instead, the problem lies with how they have read. Too often, when confronted with a reading assignment, students let their eyes run over the page line after line without having a clear sense of what is important or how it might relate to their lives. This is especially true in political theory courses, where stu-
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students are confronted with “old,” often difficult, texts written in a style to which they are unaccustomed.

I have devised an assignment called a “quote analysis” that helps students to read and write in a more focused and engaged manner. The instructions, contained in the syllabus, are as follows:

A quote analysis is a two-paragraph assignment in which you choose a quotation of no more than three sentences from the reading and discuss it. (The choice of quotation is entirely up to you, but pick a quote related to politics and the themes of the course.) In the first paragraph of the analysis explain the argument of the quote, in your own words. In the second paragraph present a reasoned argument of your own supporting, extending, or criticizing the thesis of the quotation.

I assign one every other week, although they can be used more or less frequently.

This assignment accomplishes a number of objectives. It teaches students that with some effort they can find something interesting even in difficult works. This may seem obvious to academics, but it is not to students reading primarily to fulfill the assignment and pass the course. The quote analysis helps make reading a process of active engagement rather than passive absorption. In addition, the quote analysis gets students to search for the argument while reading. This may take them a while to learn; they might focus on a trivial detail in the quotation. However, by the end of the term, most hone in on key arguments in the reading.

The quote analysis also teaches students to make stronger arguments themselves. Being asked both to state accurately the argument and to respond with their own view helps them learn that a strong argument against a particular point of view must be grounded in an accurate understanding of it. In my comments on their analyses, I point out ways to strengthen their argument: for example, by anticipating and answering possible objections, or by phrasing their view in a more limited and accurate manner. The assignment’s two-paragraph structure teaches students to develop a single argument. My comments often run something like, “You began by focusing on one argument, and then veered off in another direction. Pick one argument and develop it fully.” They learn from this that a quotation, article, or book presents a series of interrelated points, and it is up to the writer to focus on one, omitting discussion of the others. As such, the quote analysis is a rehearsal for writing a paper with a single, fully developed thesis. Indeed, my paper assignments mirror the structure of the quote analysis: I tell them to devote two-thirds of the paper to a focused analysis of the writer’s views and one third to their own argument in response.

The quote analysis can also be used to enhance class discussion by asking students to read their work aloud. Sharing with the class gives students a sense of mastery: they have something to teach others about political science. Students often are surprised at the insights their peers discover. One can also ask other students to respond to the presentation, or to present a counterargument.

One can structure these oral presentations in a number of ways. Sometimes I will ask several students the location of their quotations and ask them to present them in the order they occur in the text. This becomes a way of reading through the text in class. Sometimes we find that more than one student has picked the same quote and emphasized a different facet of what is being said; when this situation arises, students realize the possibility of differing interpretations of a work.

Alternatively, I have asked a student to present his or her analysis, and afterward asked, “Did anyone discuss a quote on a similar theme?” This thematic approach brings out a number of facets of a single theme within a work. However, it can also illustrate the relationship between the themes in a work: often a student will respond to one presentation with another about a different theme that seems to elaborate on or speak to the first.

Of course, focusing class discussion on quotations chosen by students does not guarantee that every important point in a text will be covered. However, in my experience most of the key arguments come to light. Points not encompassed by students can be discussed by the instructor at the end of the class or at the beginning of the next one.

Neither does quote analysis ensure that students will read the whole assignment. Some students read just enough to find a good quote. However, they soon learn that although they can minimally fulfill the assignment this way, they will not do well. It is difficult to write a good analysis of a single quote without having understood the larger structure of the argument contained in the rest of the assignment.

The quote analysis does not in itself accomplish the task of making students better readers and writers. It is primarily a supplement to the work done in class: reading texts together, finding the argument, and discussing its importance. As such a supplement, however, I have found it particularly valuable.

About the Author

Charles Hersch is assistant professor of political science at Cleveland State University. He has published articles about the political functions of the arts and American constitutional interpretation in Politics, Cultural Critique, and Legal Studies Forum. He is currently working on a book about the arts’ role in political education in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s.