

# Teaching Research, Writing, and Information Literacy: How to Handle Misinformation

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Many instructors are intentionally integrating new pedagogical approaches to teaching core political science skills. Reading, writing, and critical thinking skills are both in high demand by many employers and are foundational to students expressing their ideas and becoming active participants in civic life. Our 2023 TLC track explored teaching these skills in the context of the current state of global politics, which is facing the challenge of misinformation, low information literacy, and underdeveloped critical thinking skills.

Presenters agreed that factual information — while important for establishing a foundational level of civic literacy — can be effectively integrated into activities that teach students skills that transfer outside of the classroom. Emphasizing skills is not a new insight, but presenters discussed truly innovative approaches to integrating content and skills that give students more flexibility in directing their learning, integrate high-impact teaching practices, and are carefully assessed. As part of the theme of expanding the scope of political science, we also found great value in partnerships across disciplines and courses. Many institutions are increasingly resource-constrained, and collaboration with pre-existing campus, community, and national programs can help to share best practices and to increase the impact of any one intervention. An excellent opportunity for this work is teaching students to evaluate misinformation by collaborating with librarians, creating common course shells, involving students in developing content, and scaffolding approaches to teaching research, writing, and information literacy across both substantive and methodological courses.

We describe each of these themes below and conclude by calling on instructors to consider their own teaching practices, institutional situation, and student needs and to apply research-based pedagogical practices to enhance student learning. In other words, challenges breed innovation, so now is the time to get innovative!

## Don't Emphasize the Content, Teach the Skills

Traditional political science courses that rely heavily on distilling theoretical content are quickly becoming outdated. Students knowing information is insufficient in a 21st century world abounding with mis- and dis-information. Instead, they need to build skills. Students become more prepared for the real world when they actively engage in learning experiences embedded with skills that they can apply outside of the classroom. Employers want to hire graduates that

have gained relevant, transferable skills, including critical information analysis, recognizing reputable sources of information, and challenging one's personal assumptions and bias. Track panelists applied these ideas in a variety of creative ways. Our main take-away was that the discipline needs to focus on skills in addition to content. Skills-based design needs to be incorporated into all courses at all levels and institutions.

Introductory courses are a natural place to start. While attention has traditionally focused on American politics as a place to integrate media literacy and critical thinking skills, Rachel Sternfeld and Michele Calderon presented approaches to teaching introductory world politics and international relations courses. Sternfeld focused on the skill of locating, reading, and analyzing reputable media sources. In her World Politics course, she assigns students a series of six in-class media analyses that build transferable research, writing, and critical analysis skills. Students learn the basic structure of news articles, how to connect current events to theoretical concepts, and recognize reputable sources. They also confront bias and fairness in reporting and gain tools to assess new information. These scaffolding assignments culminate in a final essay in which students demonstrate the skills they have gained over the course of the semester. Students are required to synthesize three articles about a current event and analyze the event using one international relations theory. Similarly, Calderon found creative ways to add an intensive writing component to her introductory international relations course through the use of writing workshops. Typically relegated to composition courses, writing workshops provided an applicable way for students to use writing skills to analyze current events.

Standalone upper-level undergraduate courses are another way to teach information literacy skills. Jarrod Kelly teaches "Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation." The course focuses on building literacy skills over delivering content as it teaches students how media organizations collect, process, and record information, and what they do if they get something wrong. Students learn about headlines and how they are used as bait, but do not always represent the content of the article. By the end of the course, students are better able to rely on reputable sources and recognize mis- and dis-information.

Even graduate student practitioners working in an information environment can benefit from cultivating information literacy. Celestino Perez presented examples of systems thinking maps created by his military officer graduate students to teach causal literacy. These causal systems maps are useful for evaluating military decisions, but can also be applied to thinking critically about current events and analyzing politician decision-making.

## **Innovate Through Scaffolding**

Teaching students' skills related to research design, information literacy, and academic writing are all concepts that work well with scaffolding. Introducing and structuring assignments in this way helps students to take the material in pieces and to slowly become more independent in their learning over the course of the term. Scaffolding is also an excellent tool for helping students to manage their time and to stay organized in a particular course.

Scaffolding was an important part of the African Political Systems course presented by M.P. Broache and Rachel Olsen. Students were given smaller assignments throughout the course of the term and encouraged to piece those components together, resulting in longer-length research papers by the end of the course. Their process involved focusing on topic selection, keyword formation, literature reviews, and then emphasizing the importance of citation. Their intervention leveraged online and in-person instruction and suggests future work on scaffolding comparing these approaches.

Scaffolding is also appropriate in introductory courses. William O’Brochta showed how a scaffolded research article writing assignment can help students who are non-majors connect their interests and major to political science. Term-length assignments and projects provide an ideal opportunity to foster curiosity in the discipline and to show students how political science tools and techniques can help to address salient public policy questions.

Benjamin Toll’s presentation focused on a multi-class approach to teaching these skills and involved a political science research module to help introduce and reiterate concepts over semesters. Discussion with current and past students was cited as a specific tool for improving the multi-class curriculum approach, and the need for faculty to discuss where and how these skills are taught and measured was emphasized. J.R. Reiling also scaffolded across courses — this time courses taught to U.S. Army Officers. Officers operate in an environment where education that does not connect to command qualification activities is a waste of precious time. This means that using scaffolding to target the appropriate levels of knowledge for the appropriate audience is critically important. Reiling advocated for increasing the importance of information operations in the military, improving command readiness in the future. His model was similar to the need for undergraduates to be healthy participants in democratic discourse.

## **Teaching Skills to Evaluate Misinformation**

Following the insight of emphasizing skills over content, our track centered on information literacy pedagogy. Inviting students to practice ways to evaluate information consistently is vital to developing these critical thinking skills regardless of discipline. However, we do not have to “reinvent the wheel” when teaching information literacy skills. Instructors can adapt assignments and rubrics from a standardized module or resources shared among instructors. Depending on an institution’s resources, librarians can play a fundamental role in organizing and generating these materials.

Barbara Robertson and Tamra Ortgies-Young created a scaffolded lesson plan available through their learning management system designed to be “dumped into” any class among different general education disciplines. The professor can customize the structure of the six mini-lessons to fit the norms of their field and the course objectives and has the added benefit of prepared PowerPoints, assessments, and other resources. The student learning objectives are to learn how to minimize misinformation’s spread and how it is tied to democratic erosion. Robertson and Ortgies-Young reported that 80 percent of students who did not think critical thinking or information literacy was important changed their minds after completing the

modules. Terry Gilmour built on this foundation and invited students to participate in creating information literacy modules that were then incorporated into a wide variety of courses. In this way, students become leaders in teaching information literacy to their peers — an empowering opportunity.

Lanethea Matthews-Schultz and Jennie Sweet-Cushman’s holistic approach to teaching American politics reflects the desire to include “caring,” “choosing,” and “doing” into politics rather than concentrating solely on content. Concerning information literacy, this translates to students “knowing” about the information environment but also realizing their role in shaping that environment and using media effectively to produce any desired change. Their work contains sample assignments that, like Robertson and Ortgies-Young, can be adapted to course needs.

Leslie Caughell highlighted that information literacy instruction often emphasizes skills while ignoring the social and cognitive elements that feed it. Directing students to use fact-check websites, read laterally, and know the identifying characteristics of fake news is useful but only part of the picture. News is also a social phenomenon that signals emotional connections and motivations that lie outside of the facts. “Grandma Carol,” the relative we all seem to have who has bought into misinformation, is motivated by signaling social networks. Students are tasked with discovering how misinformation and conspiracy theories travel in news stories, on social media, and in person, specifically how it targets people based on cognitive biases. Additionally, students reflect on their emotional responses to news and are encouraged to consider the source’s motivation for publishing information. By removing the focus from content, this approach connects students with the ongoing research in our field and makes students feel less targeted regardless of their ideological preferences.

Having civil conversations about politics can be an important way to develop critical thinking skills that can help to combat information. Stephanie Williams described a course focused on analyzing political speeches that helps students gain the analysis and information literacy skills needed to meaningfully engage in political conversations and to analyze misinformation effectively.

## **Call to Action**

Political science as a discipline needs to re-evaluate its role in preparing students as engaged citizens and to ensure that majors, courses, and programs are aligned with this mission. While many political scientists have long been invested in this work and APSA Past President John Ishiyama’s task force on rethinking political science education brings these issues to the forefront, presenters in this track demonstrated that key research, writing, and information literacy skills can be effectively taught to a wide variety of students in many different ways. Students from all institutional types, backgrounds, ages, and experience levels can benefit from interventions as small as one-time class activities and as large as major institutional or cross-institutional curricular development.

Our call to APSA and to the broader disciplinary community is to truly integrate research, writing, and information literacy skills into core parts of political science pedagogy. Often these aspects of political science education are reserved for quantitative methodology courses where they are eclipsed by an emphasis on teaching statistical techniques. Not only do research, writing, and information literacy skills take time and require practice to develop, but they form the core of political science education without which content cannot be analyzed or conveyed. We invite all political scientists to reach out to colleagues and to establish relationships with partners across and off-campus to help to develop students as effective communicators and consumers of information.