

Use of Cover Letters & Radical Revision as Part of Formative Written Feedback

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ABSTRACT

This teacher's research paper discusses the combined use of Cover Letter and Radical Revision prompts, and their effect on teachers' formative feedback and students' writing. The article focuses on feedback in written form. The pilot assignment that stands at the center of this paper required students to write a legal essay in two stages. In stage one, the students were to prepare a first draft of the essay and fill in the Cover Letter. In stage two, they had to revise their draft paper, based on the feedback received. For this purpose, they had to apply one or two strategies for revision suggested in the Handout for Revision distributed by the instructor. The data for this case study was gathered through a students' questionnaire, the students' assignments and the reflections of the instructor. The direct and indirect data in relation to the pilot assignment showed that students perceived the formative written feedback as clear and helpful. The majority of students recognized the value of the Cover Letter and the Handout for Revision, stating that these documents helped them write better papers. A number of students stated that while the Cover Letter and Handout for Revision did not help them personally, they could see how these documents could help a student who struggles to start writing or struggles with essays in general. These last comments seemed to indicate that the modified version of the Cover Letter and Handout for Revision, used in the pilot assignment, might be better suited for inexperienced writers or students who find it hard to organize and revise their writing. On the other hand, it seems that experienced writers or students who already know how to write and revise an essay find these documents less effective. The case study results show that in their present form, the Cover Letter and Radical Revision prompts help students to improve their writing. The same tools have a positive influence on written teachers' formative feedback.

KEYWORDS: Feedback, Focused Freewriting, cover letter, revision, radical revision, formative assessment, summative assessment, color-coded feedback map, discipline-specific essay.

1 INTRODUCTION

I am the kind of teacher that lives for the *A-ha* moment in the class. That moment of realization when students connect the dots and finally come to the deeper understanding I want them to reach. My feedback style is a reflection of how I teach, namely, guiding students towards the answer, as opposed to telling them the answer. In this sense, my most common type of comment to a paper until the pilot assignment was in the form of leading questions that helped students write a better paper, be it a master thesis or end of the year course paper. As far as essays were concerned, though, my assessment was rather summative, as opposed to formative. While conducting this research, I found out that this focus on summative assessment of written exams or essays is traditionally a characteristic of assessments in law school.¹ Much to my disappointment, it seemed that neither the university where I worked at the time nor I as a law teacher were an exception to this tradition.

In July 2023, I was at Bard College (NY) for in-person week of workshops, part of the IWT CLASP Fellows program. When discussing feedback with Nicole B. Wallack, I realized there were many assessment strategies I did not know about or I did not apply. I suddenly found myself wondering whether my leading questions were as clear to my students as they were to me. Said differently, was letting the students guess the answers to my leading questions the best way to guide them?

I was looking for an additional feedback strategy, something new but at the same time, something that allowed me to preserve the essence of my feedback style, namely, guiding students by means of leading questions. What better way to do this than through the use of focused free writing questions?

With this in mind, I decided that the capstone project that would mark the end of my two-year journey with the CLASP Fellows program should focus on formative feedback. The current paper is a teacher's research paper that explores the use of focused free writing, in the form of cover letters and radical revision prompts, as a tool to improve formative feedback to students' work.

The paper provides answers to two research questions. First, how can the use of cover letters and radical revision practices influence the quality of teachers' formative feedback in written form? Second, how can the use of the very same practices influence the student writing process?

In order to provide answers to these questions, I drafted a pilot written assignment, in the form of a legal essay, accompanied by a Cover Letter and a Handout for Revision. The assignment was tested initially with a small group of law students and then with a bigger group of non-law students taking law classes. The data used in this paper is a result of a questionnaire filled out by the students, the students' written assignments, and my observations.

This paper will first provide a definition of the concepts of feedback, Focused Free Writing, cover letter and radical revision. Then, it will provide an overview of the pilot assignment that stands at the centre of this article. Next, the focus will shift to data interpretation and finally to the results of the implementation of the capstone project. The paper concludes with an overview of possible changes to the pilot assignment, for future use.

2 DEFINITION OF TERMS

2.1 FEEDBACK

This section will explore different types of feedback and will identify the kind of feedback incorporated in the pilot assignment.

We can classify feedback in several ways. Firstly, feedback can be formative or summative. Formative feedback is the commentary of teachers on non-graded students' work, while summative feedback on the other hand is attached to graded assignments. The aim of the feedback is to provide students with information on where they are in relation to their learning and what they should do next to further such learning.² In case of formative feedback, students can go back to their work and revise it based on the comments received. This opportunity no longer exists when teachers provide summative feedback to final graded assignments.

Second, whether formative or summative, the feedback can be in verbal, written, or digital form. Based on the nature of the feedback, the latter may be punitive, actionable, and corrective.³ There are numerous strategies for delivering feedback such as three-minute conferences, leading with questions, summarize, explain, redirect, resubmit (SE2R), here is what, so what, now what, using comment codes, using single point rubrics etc.⁴

As teachers, we choose the feedback methods that best suit our students and our teaching styles. Once the students become familiar with the teacher's feedback method, they engage and respond better to it. From a teacher's perspective, the use of a feedback method ensures that the commentary provided to students contains all the elements of a high-quality feedback.⁵ But what constitutes effective and high quality feedback? Moreover, why should teachers be concerned with it?

In the framework of Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET) Ryan and Deci argue that positive performance feedback improves intrinsic motivation.⁶ On the other hand, Knowblauch and Brannon argue that effective written feedback facilitates, stresses performance, takes place both before and after revision and is characterized by immediate revision.⁷ Moreover, effective feedback is characterized by a stu-

dent- friendly formulation.⁸ Such high quality feedback starts by describing what the students did well, connects the skill with the learning progress and indicates the next step the student needs to take.⁹

Ultimately, effective feedback is one of the factors that improves students' learning.¹⁰ Effective feedback is formative "feeding forward to improve student learning and writing".¹¹ On the other hand, feedback that does not meet these requirements can have negative effects on students, such as lowering students' motivation and undermining their confidence.¹²

In order to provide effective and high quality feedback in relation to my pilot assignment, I employed both formative and summative feedback using the following written feedback methods: leading with questions, color coded comments (only with one group of students) and a simplified version of summarize, explain, redirect, resubmit (SE2R). My version of SE2R feedback started with summarizing the best elements of the paper (what the student did well), then identifying what needed to be improved in order to meet the requirements of the assignments, and suggesting students what to do before re-submitting. In relation to the non-law students, I also incorporated peer feedback into the process.

2.2 FOCUSED FREE WRITING

In addition to the essay writing, I used two additional documents for this pilot assignment, namely the Cover Letter and a Handout for Revision. Both of these documents are mainly composed of focused free writing prompts that students have to answer in class or at home. For the purposes of this paper, the definition of focused free writing is taken from the Institute for Writing and Thinking Handouts:

FFW is all reflective, probative, speculative writing, free written yet focused, that explores a term, problem, issue, question open-endedly. First thoughts on a subject, casting a wide net of inquiry. May be used to initiate or conclude a class discussion or, mid-class, to focus a discussion that is confused or lacks energy: What are we learning?¹³

This type of writing is partially shared publicly with the instructors and the other students.¹⁴ In relation to the pilot assignment, the students had to share their completed Cover Letter with the instructor and also with one of their peers, for peer review purposes.

2.3 COVER LETTER

The Cover Letter in relation to an essay is a document where students reflect on their writing (among other issues).¹⁵ A Cover Letter can accompany a first or second draft of a paper. When accompanying the first draft, the questions on the Cover Letter focus on helping the student check whether they have included all elements of an essay. In addition, the questions invite self-reflection.

When accompanying a second draft, the Cover Letter questions focus on the process of revision. The students have to explain what action they undertook in order to respond to peer or instructor feedback. In this sense, this time around the Cover Letter has a more reflective style.

In relation to the pilot assignment, I used a modified version of a typical Cover Letter that accompanies the first draft of a paper. The purpose of this letter was to help students organize their thoughts, come up with a structure and start writing. The last questions asked students to reflect on the best part of their draft and on the one that needed more work.

2.4 RADICAL REVISION

According to Nicole B. Wallack, radical revision is:

[A]n approach to drafting that presumes the first draft – even a well-crafted one – is likely to need deep reconsideration and restructuring. Revision is a process by which a writer can generate missing thinking on the page, re-write (from scratch) parts that are not yet doing the work the writer needs them to do, and sacrifice anything in the draft that is not contributing to the writer's project.¹⁶

Said differently, radical revision consists of Focused Freewriting prompts that are designed to assist students when conducting deep revision.¹⁷ In order to carry out a substantial or radical revision, students need guidance. This is where the Handout for Revision¹⁸ comes into play by providing students with concrete actions to undertake in order to revise effectively. In my view, the Handout for Revision provides students with ways to respond to my leading questions or my commentary to their paper. Said differently, the Handout helps students answer leading questions and take concrete action to improve their draft paper.

3 PILOT ASSIGNMENT

The pilot assignment explores the way in which the joint use of Cover Letter and Handout for Revision in a discipline specific essay, influences student's writing and the quality of teacher's formative feedback.

3.1 CONTEXT

The assignment was completed by two groups of students. The first group completed the assignment in January 2024, when attending the Law of the World Trade Organisation class. This class is part of the full-time LLM program in International Law and EU Law, offered by the European Humanities University, in Vilnius, Lithuania to fourth year master students. The majority of students were from Belarus and a few of them from Russia. While the students were non-native English speakers, the language of instruction was English and the assignment was to be written in English.

The second group of students completed the pilot assignment in October 2024, when attending the Business Law and Legal English class. This class is offered to a mix of bachelor students from different programs in the Anglo-American University of Prague. The majority of the students were from the US and the rest from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Ukraine, Russia, Mexico, and Nigeria. This time around many of the students were native English speakers or with an English proficiency close to native.

3.2 CONTENT OF ASSIGNMENT

The pilot written assignment is a law essay, accompanied by a Cover Letter and a Handout for Revision.

3.2.1 Stage 1

The students receive the topic of the essay, together with the Cover Letter. Within one week from receiving the topic, the students prepare the first draft of the paper and submit it together with the filled Cover Letter. The idea of using a Cover Letter came to me after reading Ellen Carrillo's *Preparing College – Level Readers to Define Reading as more than mastery*, during our July 2023 workshop at Bard College. The Cover Letter I use in the pilot assignment consists of two parts. The first part of the Cover Letter contains a series of focused free writing prompts that students have to answer after conducting their research but before starting to write their paper.

See Appendix 2.

This part of the Cover Letter is a result of my desire to help students organize their research and come up with a structure for their paper. More concretely, questions 1 to 5 help the students identify the assumptions, arguments, and their order, as well as the hypothesis of their research paper. In addition, in order to account for students who respond better to visual stimuli, I provide an alternative way of answering questions 4 and 5. Thus, instead of answering these questions in writing, students can choose to send a map/chart that shows how they are going to progress from the assumptions to the center of gravity of the paper. Question 6, on the other hand, is related to one of the learning objectives for my courses, namely, mastering the terminology of the field. For this purpose, the students have to identify the terms that an essay in the field of international trade or business law should contain (please see Appendix 2).

The questions in the second part of the Cover Letter are to be answered after the students write their first draft, but before they submit the latter for feedback. The model I used for this part is Ellen Carrillo's "Cover Sheet for Essay 2,"¹⁹ simplified. The main reason why I decided to use only a few of the questions of Carrillo's Cover Letter is the fact that my students were asked to fill a Cover Letter for the first time and I expected resistance in complying with my request. In order to encourage them to finish the assignment with all of its components, I chose to use only a few questions from the abovementioned Cover Letter.

The purpose of this group of questions is to lead the student with questions/requests towards an initial self-assessment. In this regard, in Question 1 I chose to focus on identification of claims, as often students do not explain and support all the claims they make at the beginning of the paper. Moreover, throughout my ten years of teaching, I have noticed that students often do not provide a separate conclusion, as they believe their findings are evident. Hence, Question 2 asks that they identify the conclusion. The last two questions of the second part of the Cover Letter encourage self-reflection and self-correction through asking students to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their work.

Provision of formative feedback: Within 3–4 days from the submission of the first draft together with the Cover Letter, I provide students with formative feedback in the form of written comments and concrete tasks they need to complete in order to revise their paper. In addition, the students also receive peer review.

For the first group of students I send them a simple "map" to my comments. The idea for the map was inspired by Haswell's "minimal marking" concept.²⁰ However, instead of marginal marking I used color coding to reduce the number of comments. This version of minimal marking was not applied to superficial aspects of the paper, such as grammar or editing, but rather to the content of the paper.

Haswell argues in favor of a type of feedback based on using checks that appear on the margins of the paper. The number of checks corresponds to the number of what the author refers to as "surface errors," referring to grammatical errors or unimportant ones.

After applying the map during the first round of assignments, however, I realized that despite using the colors as specified in the map of comments, I tended to still provide lengthy separate comments to explain myself. This defeated the purpose of using a color-coded map in the first place and doubled my comments without any visible benefit for the students. For this reason I decided not to use such a feedback strategy for the second round of the pilot assignment.

Handout for Revision: Together with my feedback, the students received a Handout for Revision. Carley Moore and Nicole B. Wallack created the original Handout for Revision used as a model here. The version of the Handout for Revision I used is simpler than the original one, for two reasons. First, my students were non - native English speakers (first round of assignment). Hence, I decided to reformulate some of the strategies using simpler words suitable to students who might struggle understanding English as second language. Second, it was the first time students were asked to complete a Cover Letter (stage 1 of the assignment) and they were initially overwhelmed by such a request. Some of them, in fact, did not complete the Cover Letter. In order to encourage them to finish the assignment with all of its components, I chose to use several strategies as part of the original Handout reformulated.

3.2.2 Stage 2

In stage 2 of the assignment, having received feedback and the Handout for Revision, the students have one week to revise their papers in accordance with the specific tasks I gave each of them. In addition, they have to choose to apply one or two approaches that appear in the Handout for Revision. Once the revision is complete, students upload their final paper on Moodle/NEO.

After the submission of the essay, the students receive a request to fill out an optional questionnaire.

In order to ensure objectivity, the questionnaire was sent after the assignment was graded but before the announcement of the grades. See Appendix 5.

4 DATA COLLECTION & INTERPRETATION

4.1 DATA COLLECTION

The data for this project comes from my reflections as an instructor, a questionnaire for the students in relation to the pilot assignment and the students' assignments themselves. The following paragraphs will provide a summary of the sources of data.

4.1.1 *Instructor's Reflections on Round 1: Online Classes (January 2023)*

A total of nine students completed the assignment with all its components. I introduced the assignment during one of our online sessions. The instructions for both stages were explained in class. Once I mentioned the Cover Letters and the Handout for Revision, the students were clearly nervous and worried. They asked only one question, namely, if filling out the Cover Letters was mandatory (!).

I had initially planned that the students would submit two Cover Letters. The first one would accompany the first draft of the assignment and the second one would accompany the final submission. Due to the students' reaction and the low rate of completion of the first Cover Letter, I decided to remove the requirement to submit a second Cover Letter with the final essay. Some of the questions in this letter then became part of the students' questionnaire.

4.1.2 *Instructor's Reflections on Round 2: Face to Face Classes (October 2024)*

A total of 64 students wrote an essay and were required to write a Cover Letter and use the Handout for Revision. I introduced the assignment during one of our face to face sessions. This time around I did not introduce all the stages of the assignment at once. Most of the students seemed to be familiar with the concept of the Cover Letter. In fact, all of them turned in the filled out Cover Letter.

After the first stage was complete, I asked them to bring the draft with them in the classroom, in order to receive peer review. For this purpose, the students worked in pairs. Within two days, the students received feedback from me. It was at this point that I introduced and explained stage 2 of the assignment to them. Together with my feedback, they received the Handout for Revision. They then had one week of time to revise their work and submit the final paper.

Many of the students, in particular the exchange students coming from the US were clearly used to the Cover Letter and comfortable with it. Some of them sub-

mitted the Cover Letter with their final essay, even though it was not a requirement for this assignment. The Handout for Revision, though, was new to all of them.

When filling out the questionnaire, the majority of students evaluated the Cover Letter positively. A few wrote that the Cover Letter was wordy or confusing, that it made their writing more difficult, and that it should not be mandatory for all students. On the other hand, almost all students reacted positively to the Handout for Revision and found it useful.

4.1.3 Indirect Data: Students' Questionnaire

The questionnaire contained eight sections. Section 1 aimed at understanding whether students had previous experience with a written assignment accompanied by both a Cover Letter and a Handout for Revision. In addition, the questions aimed at gauging the students' reaction to the assignment at the beginning and at the end of it. Section 2 of the questionnaire focused on the Cover Letter and its perceived effect on students' writing. Section 3, on the other hand, aimed at clarifying the reasons why some of the students decided not to complete the Cover Letter.

Sections 4–6 focused on the Handout for Revision, whether students filled it or not, what strategies did they apply when revising and what was the perceived effect of the latter on their writing. The last question of this section inquired on the reasons that led students not to use any of the revision strategies suggested in the Handout. Next, the questions on Section 7 of the questionnaire inquired about the clarity of instructions and feedback. In relation to feedback, the idea was to understand whether the feedback was perceived as helpful and useful in improving students' writing.

Section 8 of the questionnaire focused on suggestions regarding the type of feedback students prefer and ways the instructor could have provided better assistance in relation to the assignment.

Finally, Section 9 invited students to reflect on the process of completing this assignment and identify what they would have done differently. The last question asked them if they would use the Cover Letter and Handout for Revision as introduced in the pilot assignment when they complete other assignments.

4.1.4 Direct Data: Student Assignments

This section is applicable only to the group who completed the pilot assignment in January 2024 (online class). This group of students was the same group I had taught in spring 2023. At the time they had an assignment in the form of an es-

say. Different from the pilot assignment, this essay was to be submitted directly, without receiving formative assessment. After a comparison of this essay with the essay the same students had to submit in the pilot assignment, it resulted that all the students showed an improvement in their writing, which was also reflected in their final grades. The essays that were submitted in the framework of the pilot assignment were more analytical, better organized, supported by more sources and properly footnoted. All the students received a higher grade on their pilot essays as compared to the essay they had written a year before.

The formative feedback, enhanced by the Cover Letter and the Handout for Revision, had clearly given positive results. The students' writing had improved. This conclusion is supported also by the answers students provided in the questionnaire, in connection to the effect of the Cover Letter, the feedback and the Handout for Revision. While I cannot claim that the improvement I noticed in student's writing is to be attributed only to the formative feedback, the Cover Letter and Handout for Revision, I am confident that the latter have played a role in improving students' writing.

As for the second group of students, the final essay here is clearly much better than the first draft. However, due to the fact that I am teaching these groups for the first time, I am not aware of how these students usually write essays. In this sense, I cannot conclude whether there is a substantial improvement of their writing that can be attributed to the formative feedback and the use of the Cover Letter and Handout for Revision.

4.2 DATA INTERPRETATION

4.2.1 First Group of Students (January 2024)

Based on students' responses:

7 out of 9 students had never done an assignment like this before
4 out of 9 students reported feeling anxious once they received the assignment
3 out of 9 students found the pilot assignment very difficult. However, when asked what their impression of the assignment was after they had completed it, no student reported finding the assignment very difficult. In fact, 2 out of 9 students found the assignment easier than what they initially thought after having completed it

8 out of 9 of the students filled out the Cover Letter and reported positive effects on their writing.

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More concretely, when
answering the question whether
the Cover Letter influenced their
writing process, some of the
students responded as follows:

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S1 Without any doubt the cover letter helped me structure my final essay. Because usually when we are faced with various requirements we get confused and do not know exactly how to start. Having this first opportunity to present our arguments gives us the freedom to make some mistakes that could not be made in the final essay and to correct some parts.

S2 The cover letter undoubtedly helped me a lot in structuring my final essay. Through this first step I was able to organise my ideas separately (in topics) and by answering the questions I was able to get a more concrete idea of what I should include in my essay.

S3 I liked an idea to prepare a Cover Letter before starting an essay because later I have used the Cover Letter with comments from the lecturer as a base for an essay itself. For example, within the cover letter I have started to formulate the main idea, the list of abbreviations, main arguments and the list of sources for the essay.

S4 This really helped me. I wrote the cover letter after submitting the draft. After I did this, I realized that my work could look much better. In many ways, it was after writing the cover letter that I rewrote a big part of my work.

S5 The cover letter was very useful! It made me rethink the structure I had in mind and change the order of the arguments. I also realized that there were some 'gaps' in my structure so I had to do additional research and come up with some additional ideas.

On the other hand one of the
students did not see the value of
the cover letter:

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S1 In my opinion, this task made it more difficult to write the entire paper. Since arguments arise during the writing process. Also, in case of disagreement with the instructor's position in the cover letter, it is necessary to completely change the vision of the essay, which can be quite difficult.

6 out of 9 students reported
using the Handout for Revision.

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When asked how the Handout
influenced their writing process
and the quality of their paper,
some of them stated that:

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S1 The Handout for Revision influenced my writing process and the quality of my final paper, the strategies in the Handout for Revision impacted the structure of my final paper.

S2 I believe that the Handout for Revision was fundamental, because when I listed arguments/opinions that went against the ones I had presented, I had to find a way to make my arguments valid and correct. To do this, I had to delve into technical concepts, examples and a long contextualization that would allow me to show that my arguments were in fact correct and well-founded. In simpler words, Handout for Revision gave my essay more quality and credibility.

S3 I think that the handout made the essay writing process more complicated but enhanced its quality.

On the other hand, one of the
students commented differently:

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S1 I would say the Handout was not as helpful as the Cover Letter. All the suggested approaches seemed quite intuitive to me. However, the Handout did not complicate the revision process either.

In relation to feedback, students' answers suggest that the majority of them would like detailed feedback on what they need to do to improve their paper:

2 out of 9 students reported that they want brief feedback, which identifies the problems but then lets them figure out the solution by themselves.

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6 out of 9 of students rated the formative feedback as clear and helpful.

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In relation to the question on what should the instructor have done to help students to be more successful in this assignment, some students wrote:

S1 Online meeting might facilitate the process, however there was enough time [sic].

S2 Dear Neada, Everything was great and I just would like to thank you. I do appreciate your approach and the cover letter was very helpful. Also thank you for the time and effort that you devoted to check the draft and to review the final version. I am so happy that I got an opportunity to work with you again and I was really touched by your review when I read it. I appreciate your kindness. Thanks for everything!

When asked what would they do differently if they could go back and do the assignment again, students answered as following:

S1 I would have done differently the common approach to a cover letter. I'd like to simplify the cover letter. I guess that points 4 and 5 of the cover letter are complicated for the initial draft

S2 Make the filling of the cover letter less strict, for example, allowing the option not to fill in all the sections.

S3 I would have made my Cover Letter a little more detailed

S4 I would appreciate having more time for the essay preparation

Finally, 3 out of 9 students stated that they would use the Cover Letter and Handout for Revision in the future, and 6 out of 9 of them stated that they might use them.

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4.2.2 Second Group of Students (October 2024)

Based on students' responses:

12 out of 15 students had never done an assignment like this before.

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3 out of 15 students reported feeling anxious once they received the assignment

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13 out of 15 students found the pilot assignment moderate or difficult.

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Only 1 student found the assignment very difficult.

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9 out of 15 students reported finding the assignment to be easy or moderate after having completed it, and no student reported finding the assignment very difficult

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15 out of 15 students filled the Cover Letter and the majority reported positive effects on their writing.

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S10 I think it is a good start in organizing on what you actually want to write about or essentially serves as an outline which can help you to formulate your essay. Overall, I think it was quite helpful in creating the essay.

S11 It helped me understand the assignment and what was going to be asked/ what I needed to answer and talk about in my essay. It helped me develop a good structure.

On the other hand a few students did not see the value of the cover letter, with some reporting that the Cover Letter made their work harder:
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S1 The cover letter did not influence how I wrote my paper. It made the rough draft more complicated and time-consuming than necessary.

S2 It wasn't very helpful to be honest, I usually just make an outline of my own to help with the formulation of my arguments, if anything the cover letter confused me.

S3 It was helpful, but not too much, as my essay was revised heavily and my thoughts differed in the very end.

S4 It was helpful, but I don't think it really improved my essay.

12 out of 15 students reported using the Handout for Revision.

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When asked how the Handout influenced their writing process and the quality of their paper, almost all of them evaluated the handout positively. Some of the students stated that:

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S1 It was helpful along with the feedback, as it directed me on my next steps.

S2 It helped shape my perspective on the essay.

S3 The handout was helpful to organize better the essay.

S4 The handout was very effective as it made me read through my essay multiple times and ensure that all my points were developed and clearly explained. I also liked how it made me challenge some of the concepts in place as it helped me think how I would apply the acts mentioned in real life. It was difficult to clearly explain my train of thought for some of the strategies but I think that can be fixed easily.

S5 Again I believe it improved my arguments and as well the clarity of my essay with coherence.

S6 The revision handout definitely improved the quality of my final paper. They were helpful and effective.

S7 I think both helped when creating my final draft. I was able to restructure some thoughts and generate a clearer argument for the reader.

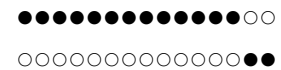
S8 I liked having a little bit more guidance than usual to influence my revision.

Only one of the students did not see the value of the Handout for Revision, stating:

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S1 I would say the Handout was not as helpful as the Cover Letter. All the suggested approaches seemed quite intuitive to me. However, the Handout did not complicate the revision process either.

In relation to type of feedback, 13 *out of* 15 students would like detailed feedback on what they need to do to improve their paper. The rest of the students would prefer brief feedback that can be discussed in person.



In relation to the question on what the instructor should have done to help students be more successful in this assignment, the answers were diverse. Some of the students wrote:

S1 I am not sure what could be done better in this case. I think instructions were clear and feedback was also good enough for me to continue writing without having any issues.

S2 I think the instructor has already provided the necessary help to make this assignment successful.

S3 Maybe go through the citations and what needs to be footnoted or cited.

S4 Give students the possibility to go through classmates' essays, plus show perfect examples of essays.

S5 Perhaps evaluate each part of my essay specifically - sentence for sentence.

S6 Overall, the assignment asked for the explanation of too many aspects of the doctrine in a short essay. A clearer prompt or question moving forward would be better. Additionally, I would prefer to not have the requirement to use a cover letter and handout of revision. They may be helpful to some, but making them a requirement for all is not necessarily helpful.

S7 Nothing, I think you did the perfect amount of assistance and freedom.

S8 Maybe more in class time to work on the revision techniques that were described in the handout.

S9 Nothing! Her feedback was great especially considering that she has so many students to give feedback on. :)

When asked what would they do differently if they could go back and do the assignment again, students answered as following:

S1 I would probably spend more time researching more information, essentially could have done a better job on the cover letter.

S2 I wish I had focused less on the examples at the start and more on the argument.

S3 I would have written cover letter after my research.

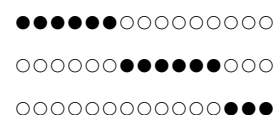
S4 I would make the cover page more organized as it was just a mess of my thoughts and points I wanted to include.

S5 Reading more of my classmates' essays.

S6 I would have made more of a concrete draft so I could get more feedback on it. But other than that no!

S7 I would have created a better first draft so I could get even more accurate feedback.

Finally, 6 out of 15 of students stated that they would use the Cover Letter and Hand-out for Revision in the future, 6 out of 15 of them stated that they might use them and the remaining 3 out of 15 stated they would not use these documents in future assignments.



4.2.3 *Interpretation Summary*

Summarizing, the results of the direct and indirect data show that this type of assignment, namely, a multi-draft essay, accompanied by formative feedback, peer feedback, a Cover Letter and a Handout for Revision was new to almost all students. Upon introduction of the assignment and all its elements, the first group of students displayed visible distress. Meanwhile, the second group of students displayed a calmer attitude. I believe this difference in reaction to the assignment is due to two factors. First, most of the students in the second group were familiar with one component of the assignment, namely, the Cover Letter, while the latter was an entirely new concept for the students of the first group. Second, the second group of students received the instructions in stages as opposed to the first group of students, where instructions were provided in full when the assignment was announced. In light of these facts, providing instructions for each stage separately seems to be a wiser choice. The majority of the students found the assignment difficult or very difficult at the beginning but changed their opinion on the degree of difficulty of the assignment once they had completed it.

In relation to the Cover Letter, almost every student filled in the document. The answers of students fall in one of three categories, namely, very positive evaluation, negative evaluation, moderate evaluation. The majority of answers fall within the very positive category. The students found the Cover Letter useful and reported a positive influence of the latter on their writing, in particular in relation to organizing their paper and identifying the main arguments. A few students answered negatively by not seeing a value in the use of Cover Letter, with some pointing out that the Cover Letter actually complicated the writing of their essay. The last category of answers was the most interesting one. A couple of students stated that while the Cover Letter did not help them personally, they could see how this document could help students who struggle with essay writing. My impression is that this last group of answers belongs to students who are experienced writers and as such do not need support at the initial stages of writing.

In relation to the Handout for Revision, almost everyone used at least one of its strategies. Those who did not make use of any revision strategy reported finding them too complicated. Similarly to what was described earlier, here as well students' reactions fall within three categories. The answers of students fall into one of three categories, namely, very positive evaluation, negative evaluation, moderate evaluation. The majority of students pointed out the effectiveness of the Handout for Revision, in particular in relation to refining arguments and improving the quality of the final paper. Only one student evaluated the Handout for Revision negatively, stating that it made the revision process more complicated. Finally, one

student provided a moderate evaluation stressing that while the Handout did not complicate revision, it did not help much either, given that the suggested strategies were “quite intuitive.”

Almost all students stated that they would like detailed feedback that indicates the problems with a paper and provides concrete suggestions on what to do in order to solve them. Around 77% of students found the feedback clear or very clear. Moreover, 80% of them found the instructor’s feedback useful or very useful.

Last, the majority of the students stated that they would use or might use the Cover Letter and the Handout for Revision in relation to future papers.

5 CONCLUSIONS

This paper presented the results of a case study on the joint use of the Cover Letter and Handout for Revision, as tools for formative feedback, in relation to a multi-stage essay in the field of law. The pilot assignment was completed by two groups of students. The majority of students in both groups recognized the value of the Cover Letter and stated that it helped them organize their research so they could come up with a structure for the paper, which influenced their writing positively. The feedback regarding the Handout for Revision was similar. Most of the students evaluated it positively, stating that it improved the overall quality of their essay and it helped them refine their arguments. Some students did not see any value in the Cover Letter and Handout for Revision. On the contrary, they found that these documents complicated the writing of the essay. Interestingly, a few students managed to look at these documents in an objective way. Despite not finding them helpful, they recognized the potential of the Cover Letter and Handout for Revision in relation to inexperienced writers or students who struggle with starting to write.

In relation to feedback, the majority of students indicated a preference for detailed feedback. Around 77% of students found the feedback clear or very clear. Moreover, 80% of them found the instructor’s feedback useful or very useful.

In regards to the first group of students, when comparing the quality of writing in the pilot assignment, with the quality of writing of the same students one year before, a jump in quality is obvious. However, it is not clear what portion of this improvement is to be attributed to the formative assessment and the joint use of the Cover Letter and Handout for Revision.

Finally, the data shows that in their present form, the Cover Letter and Radical Revision prompts, help students write better papers. At the same time, students appreciate and value detailed formative feedback in written form. The results of the case study indicate that when taken together, the Cover Letter, teacher’s formative

feedback, the peer review and the Handout for Revision, constitute a good multiple modal system of feedback.

The pilot assignment will continue to change based on the result of each application. When using this type of assignment in the future, I will apply the following changes:

- In order to avoid overwhelming students, I will provide instructions per each stage separately, as opposed to all at once.
- I will plan time in class to introduce the Cover Letter and Handout for Revision. This will give students the opportunity to ask questions about the meaning of the prompts in each of these documents.
- If time permits, I will try to provide formative feedback in person, either through face to face communication or through online conference.
- I will plan time in class for students to practice the revision techniques suggested in the Handout for Revision. This will allow them to use these techniques correctly when revising the rest of their drafts at home.
- I will create a map of comments that suits my feedback style better than the map initially used for this pilot assignment.

NOTES

- 1 Henry & Marshall, 2013. P 190
- 2 Brookhart. P 2
- 3 Hillman & Stalets, 2019. PP 45–48
- 4 Id. PP 64–71
- 5 Id. PP 62–63
- 6 Ryan & Deci, 2000. P 70
- 7 Knoblauch & Brannon. 1981
- 8 Hillman & Stalets, 2019. PP 41–42
- 9 Id. P 44
- 10 Black & Wiliam, 2010. PP 13–14
- 11 Burke & Pieterick, 2010. P 23
- 12 Id. PP 3–4
- 13 Institute for Writing and Thinking Handout on Informal Writing: Uses and Kinds, Connolly. 2012
- 14 Wallack in Vilardi, 2019. P 28
- 15 Carrillo, 2017. P 197
- 16 Institute for Writing and Thinking Handout on Effective Revision as Radical Revision, Wallack. 2012
- 17 Moore in Vilardi, 2019. PP 122–123
- 18 Moore & Wallack in Vilardi, 2019. PP 134–135
- 19 Carrillo, 2017. P 205
- 20 Haswell, 1983. PP 600–604

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APPENDICES

- 1 Pilot Assignment
- 2 The Cover Letter
- 3 Handout for Revision
- 4 Color coded feedback map
- 5 Questionnaire
- 6 Informed Consent Form

Written Assignment No. 1
LAW OF THE WTO

A1 PILOT ASSIGNMENT

TOPIC: The crisis of the WTO Appellate Body

The work of the WTO Appellate Body has stopped since November 2019. Currently, the Appellate Body has no Members and, as a consequence, cannot review appeals of panel decisions.

Please discuss the causes of this crisis, its consequences, and propose possible solutions to it.

Length of the essay: 7 – 10 pages, double space, properly footnoted.

Citation style: It does not matter, as long as you use the same citation style throughout the paper.

Bibliography must be included!

Deadline to submit the first draft on Moodle is December 10, 2023 at 23:59.

Deadline to submit the second draft on Moodle is December 17, 2023 at 23:59.

Instructions:

This assignment consists of two stages.

Stage 1: You prepare a rough draft of the essay. The assumption here is that your first draft will most likely be revised heavily. In order to help you organise your work and your thoughts, please answer all the questions in the Cover Letter (please see below).

Within **December 10, 2023**, you will upload your **first draft** on Moodle, together with the filled **Cover Letter**.

Within December 12, 2023, I will send each of you my comments regarding your drafts, as well as concrete tasks for you to carry out in order to revise/re-write your paper.

Stage 2: Once you receive my comments, stage two of your assignment

begins. **You need to revise your draft – paper on the basis of my comments.** In order to help you reflect on the changes you will need to make to the first draft of your paper, following my feedback, please use the Handout for Revision. You will receive this Handout together with my feedback to your first draft.

Within **December 17, 2023 at 23:59**, you must submit your **final paper on Moodle**. Please make sure you use 1-2 of the approaches that appear in the Handout for Revision.

Assessment of the paper: Only the final paper will be graded! Both cover letter and handout are mandatory to use but they will not receive a separate grade. They will however, influence your final grade, given that they are evidence of your thinking process and of your serious work on the paper, or lack thereof. Your final grade is based on how you reflect to my feedback when writing the final paper, and on the content and quality of the essay itself. Extensive individual research is essential for a high quality paper!

For an idea on the minimum amount of sources needed in order to get specific grades, please refer to the assessment policy in the course description for Law of the WTO (you can find it in the general section of the Moodle page for this course).

Cover Letter: Filling the cover letter is mandatory! There is no required length for it. You do not have to respect the order in which the questions appear on the cover letter but you are obliged to respond to all of them. Some questions require separate answers, some others require you to respond by inserting comments in your draft – paper. Your answers to the questions in the cover letter should be your own thoughts/words and as such, there should not be any footnotes or citations in the cover letters.

Please refrain from copy-pasting in the cover letter parts of materials you have read. The purpose of the cover letter is first and foremost to help you organize your work and help you write the best paper you can.

COVER LETTER

A2 THE COVER LETTER

Preferably you would answer these questions after having conducted your research but before you start writing your draft:

- 1 Please identify your assumptions regarding your paper. These are facts/ ideas/concepts you are not going to dispute but rather accept them as such.
- 2 Please identify the main arguments in your paper.
- 3 What is the centre of gravity of your paper? This is the most important idea/your hypothesis.
- 4 Take a look at question 2. Are there any of these arguments that you think should be discussed earlier in the paper, in order to help the reader follow your logic better? In what order would you present these arguments?
- 5 Are there any preliminary concepts that need to be defined and/or explained, before you present your arguments?

NOTE: Instead of answering questions 4 & 5 separately, you can draw a map/chart/scheme from “HERE” to “CENTRE OF GRAVITY”.

HERE – Represents your starting point, your assumptions as identified in question 1.

CENTRE OF GRAVITY – Represents the main idea of your paper, as identified in question 3.

In what order should you present your arguments so that the reader goes from “HERE” to “CENTRE OF GRAVITY”?

If you choose to draw a map/scheme, instead of answering questions 4 & 5 separately, please take a picture of your map/scheme and upload it on Moodle together with your draft-essay and the Cover Letter.

- 6 Please identify terms that are specific to WTO Law and that you need to use in an essay in this field of law.
- 7 What are the sources you are going to use in your research?

After you write the first draft of your paper, please read it carefully and:

- 1** Identify your claims/research questions and insert a comment with the word “claim” or phrase “research question” attached to it.
- 2** Identify your conclusion (underline them and comment “conclusion”).
- 3** What is the best part of your draft-essay?
- 4** What needs more work?

A2 THE COVER LETTER

HANDOUT OF STRATEGIES FOR REVISION OF ESSAY

A3 HANDOUT FOR REVISION

The purpose of this hand-out is to help you revise your draft-essay. **You do not need to fill separately or submit anything related to this hand-out!**

Each of you has received written feedback by me, with concrete tasks to perform. In order to help you revise your essay, please consider the following approaches:

- 1 Note what your instructor has given you as a feedback on your draft, and consider what concerns you may have about it, then try **only 1-2** of these approaches. You can choose whatever you want, depending on the feedback you have received but also your writing style. Please choose at least 1 of these approaches.
- 2 Write an entirely new beginning. Please make sure that in addition to new ideas/arguments, your introduction states the problem (your assumptions as identified in question 1 of the Cover Letter will fit in this part) and provides a brief summary to the structure of your paper.
- 3 Go to a place in your draft where you need to say more. Write to explain. Exhaust yourself (write as much as you can).
- 4 Go to a place in the draft where you seem to be getting at your idea. Write to explain what that idea might be.
- 5 Revise by way of working on how you use evidence/claims. Write to introduce, cite, explain and connect your evidence.
- 6 Write a clear and concise summary of one of the materials or of one relevant part of a material you are working with. Find a place in your essay, for what you just wrote.
- 7 Use a passage from one of your sources to resist or doubt something you are writing about. Write to explain the counterargument. Find a place in your essay, for what you just wrote.
- 8 Write a paragraph in which you incorporate two texts that connect to the same issue. How do these texts extend, confirm, contradict, correct, complicate or debate one another?

- 9 Print out your first draft and cut it up into sections (a section can be as small as a sentence) that contain a piece of thinking/an argument/an idea. Ask a friend to reassemble the sections in a new order that makes sense and glue it into blank sheets of paper, leaving black space between ideas that are not explicitly connected. If you like this new order, consider what you might need to write in the blank spaces to make transitions or clarify ideas. Throw away the pieces of text that repeat one another in essence or in fact.

A3 HANDOUT FOR REVISION

Map to instructors comments:

- Parts highlighted in green are good points/paragraphs that should be present in the final paper. Absent any comment from the instructor, these parts of your essay do not need revision.
- Parts highlighted in yellow need to be revised in accordance with the instructor's comments.
- Parts highlighted in red should not be present in the final paper. These parts contain serious mistakes or discuss issues that are not related to the topic.
- Parts highlighted in blue should appear in a footnote, as opposed to the main text.

A4 COLOR CODED FEEDBACK MAP

QUESTIONNAIRE

A5 QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Students,

I am asking for your help with my research on the topic of teaching and learning in the field of Legal studies.

Please reflect back on the essay that was your first written assignment for the subject of WTO Law. To complete the first stage of the assignment I requested you to fill in the Cover Letter and submit the first draft of your essay. For the second stage of the assignment, you got feedback from me, together with a Handout for revision. Based on the feedback and one of the approaches in the Handout, you wrote your final essay. With this two-step approach, I tried to help you make substantive improvements in your final draft. This assignment applies the Radical Revision method.

It would be important for my research if you could please answer the questions below, in relation to this assignment. It should take you around 5 minutes to do so.

Your feedback will help improve the assignment for future students. Thank you!

Section 1

- 1 Had you ever done an essay with a Cover Letter and a Handout for Revision?

Yes

No

Other _____

- 2 How would you describe the work you had to do with regard to this assignment?

Very difficult > > > > > *Easy*

3 How did you experience the assignment at the beginning?

I felt anxious! > > > > > I did not have any problem with it!

4 What is your impression of it now that you have already completed your assignment?

Very difficult assignment! > > > > > Easier than what I initially thought!

5 Did you complete the Cover Letter?

Yes

No

Section 2 – Cover Letter

If Yes: How did the Cover Letter influence your writing process? Please reflect on whether the Cover Letter helped you write a better essay (Whether it helped you come up with a structure, identify the order of presenting arguments, or alternatively, if it only made writing the first draft more complicated, took a lot of time to complete but did not help you write the first draft, etc.)

Section 3 – Reasons

If No: Why did you not complete Cover Letter 1?

- *It looked too complicated so I did not try to answer any of the questions in it.*
- *I did not understand what was I supposed to do.*
- *I did not have time to answer the questions on the Cover Letter. I focused on the draft essay.*
- *Other reasons:* _____

Section 4 – Handout for Revision

Did you use the Handout for Revision?

Yes

No

Section 5 – On the Handout for Revision

If Yes:

- 1 Which one of the approaches suggested in the Handout, did you apply when revising your essay?

- 2 How did the Handout for Revision influence your writing process and the quality of your final paper? Please reflect on whether the strategies in the Handout for Revision were helpful and/or effective, if they made your writing better or easier, or if the Handout made the revision of the essay more complicated etc.

Section 6 – Reasons

If No: Why is it that you did not use any of the approaches suggested in the Handout for Revision?

- *It looked too complicated.*
- *I did not know how to apply the approaches suggested in the Handout for Revision.*
- *I did not have enough time.*
- *Other:* _____

Section 7: Instructions & Feedback

- 1 How clear were the instructions you received in relation to this assignment?

Very clear! 1 2 3 4 5 *Not clear at all!*

- 2 How clear was the feedback of the instructor?

Very clear! 1 2 3 4 5 *Not clear at all!*

- 3 How helpful was the instructor's feedback?

Very helpful! 1 2 3 4 5 *Not helpful at all!*

- 4 How did the instructor's feedback influence your writing process?
Please reflect on the quality of your final paper, on whether the feedback helped you write a better paper, or the feedback did not influence your writing process at all etc.

Section 7: Instructions & Feedback

- 1 What type of feedback do you find more helpful:

- *Brief! I need to know what is the problem with my paper. I can find by myself what is the best way to solve it.*
- *Detailed! I need to know what the problem is and what do I need to do in order to solve it.*
- *Other:* _____

- 2 What should the instructor have done to help you be more successful in this assignment?

Section 9: Final reflections

A5 QUESTIONNAIRE

- 1 What should the instructor have done to help you be more successful in this assignment?

- 2 Do you think you will use the Cover Letter and the Handout for Revision in your future papers/thesis?

Yes

No

Maybe

- 3 How did the instructor's feedback influence your writing process?

Informed Consent Form

Subject: Law of the WTO

Lecturer: Neda Mullalli

Dear Students,

As part of the process of making this course and your experiences of it as effective as possible, I study and reflect on student work and other evidence of learning in the course. After the semester, I plan to further study and write about my and your experiences in this course, particularly as it is reflected through our use of writing based teaching and learning methods, and in some of the writing you produced for the course. Thus, I am asking for your acknowledgement that I have made this clear and for your consent to make use of your work products from the course in the presentation and publication of my scholarship.

Please select all that apply:

____ I acknowledge that my written work may be used by Lecturer Neda Mullalli for the purpose of her own research and scholarship.

____ I grant permission to Lecturer Neda Mullalli to use excerpts of my work in her scholarship on the use of radical revision in legal education.

Please select one option:

____ Lecturer Neda Mullalli may use only my first name in any work for publication.

____ Lecturer Neda Mullalli may not use my name in any work for publication.

Name of the student: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____