

A ‘Real-World’ Assignment for History Students

In the last issue of the *Bulletin* I wrote something of a polemic on the need for history departments to do more to encourage better employment outcomes for our students, both undergraduate and graduate. Among other things, I suggested that professors could give assignments that more closely reflect some of the different types of work that our graduates can expect outside of academia. This is, after all, where the overwhelming majority of them will end up.

The practical benefit of getting students to do these types of assignments is that it can make them more “hireable” in the eyes of potential employers. Specifically:

1. By doing these assignments, students are shown how the skills they develop in a history degree relate to the work world – it gives them something tangible to cite in an application or interview.
2. By giving these types of assignments, professors and history departments become better equipped to make the case to employers that they should be hiring our students.

What is more is that writing about history through a different medium can open up new possibilities for analyzing and interpreting the past.

Well, if I’m going to preach it, I might as well live it.

This semester I have been teaching an evening class to third-year students on the history of Anglophone-Francophone relations in Canada. In addition to a term paper and exam, and in lieu of a historiography paper or book review, I am having the students write two Briefing Notes. A Briefing Note is a two-page single-spaced document that is used to advise senior managers on specific issues, often issues that require a prompt decision. It’s a popular medium of information in government, and I chose it because, well, I work in government and it’s familiar to me. And besides, if what we publish in academia can reflect our worldly experiences, then why not the types of assignments that we give, too?

It varies, but a Briefing Note is normally structured along the following headings: subject (or object); background and context; key partners; strategic considerations (sometimes framed in terms of risks and opportunities); recommendations; key messages. (See template at right, and do free to plagiarize.)

The template is fairly self-explanatory, but allow me to elaborate on a few points. The “recommendations” section is usually brief. It’s what you think your decision-maker should do, and the “key messages” are how you think your decision-maker should

explain to people why they’re doing what you think they should be doing. There should only be a few key messages, and they should be short, tactical and strategic.

The meat of the briefing note is in the “background and context” and “strategic considerations” sections. The first contains information that your decision-maker needs for a basic grasp of the situation, and the second is your analysis of the situation in light of your decision-maker’s priorities or the priorities of your organization. In theory, after having read the “strategic considerations,” your decision-maker should already have reached the same conclusion that you have drawn, *i.e.* your “recommendations.”

In terms of writing style, a Briefing Note should be concise and to the point, and the presentation of information and analyses should be neutral in tone and avoid undue speculation. Including strategic considerations that might appear to go against your recommendations is to be welcomed – it demonstrates that you are an “honest broker” of information and advice, that you have weighed the possibilities, and that your ultimate recommendation, even if imperfect, is the best available option.

Now, if you’re looking at the “key messages” bit, for instance, and thinking that this type of exercise is ahistorical or that it will

NOTE DE SYNTHÈSE – [TITRE DESCRIPTIF]	
SUJET :	
[Une à trois phrases.]	
HISTORIQUE ET CONTEXTE :	
[Explication factuelle du contexte pour faire comprendre la situation, les enjeux, etc. du dossier. Cinq phrases maximum par paragraphe.]	
PARTENAIRES CLÉS :	
[S’il y en a – les personnes/groupes avec/pour qui votre patron travail sur ce sujet.]	
CONSIDÉRATIONS STRATÉGIQUES :	
[Votre analyse stratégique de la situation, des enjeux, des partenaires, etc. Cinq phrases maximum par paragraphe.]	
RECOMMANDATIONS :	
[Les actions que votre patron devrait effectuer – les prochaines étapes. Soyez bref.]	
MESSAGES CLÉS :	
[Ce que vous recommandez en tant que lignes de communication, sous forme de points.]	
Deux phrases maximum par point.]	
Auteur	Date
[Votre nom et position]	[La date historique]

turn our students into a bunch of sophists, then you'd be missing the point. In addition to the benefit of helping students build a practical skillset by writing in a 'real-world' format, an equally important objective of this exercise is to encourage students to understand history from the perspectives of those who lived it, and not simply from our twenty-first century hindsight.

And that's what we do as historians anyways, right? We put things into context. In analysing history, we are trying to understand why people did what they did at the time that they did it – why it would have seemed reasonable from the vantage point of someone with a particular set of available information (ahem, "background and context"), and whose relationships ("key partners") and personal or organizational priorities would have influenced how the available information was considered ("strategic considerations"), to take a particular set of actions ("recommendations"), and how they might have rationalized those actions to themselves or to others ("key messages").

For the first Briefing Note, I gave students a scenario that went something like this:

"It's March 1865. You are an adviser to a member of the Assembly of the Province of Canada (either an Anglo-Protestant from Canada-East or from Canada-West, or a Franco-Catholic from Canada-East or from Canada-West). The Assembly is about to vote on a set of 72 resolutions that was negotiated at Quebec in October 1864. These resolutions will form the basis of the terms of union for the colonies of British North America. As your MP was not present at the negotiations, it is up to you to inform him and to advise him on whether to vote 'for' or 'against' the project of Confederation, and to suggest some 'key messages' that he can use to explain his decision to electors. Note that your MP has a particular interest in issues pertaining to language and culture." (Caveat: There were no Franco-Catholic MPs from Canada-West, *i.e.*, Ontario, in 1865, but I wanted to give students the option to write for that vantage point if they chose.)

Some students were clearly intimidated by this unfamiliar type of assignment. Out of a class of thirty, only one student said that she had ever written anything like it (another said that he'd once seen a Briefing Note that his mom wrote). After being taught what a Briefing Note is and how to write one, working through some examples together (using a scenario that I based around the *Quebec Act* of 1774), and having a group discussion on the 72 resolutions, students seemed much more comfortable with the task.

I'm as susceptible to confirmation bias as the next guy, but I must say that the results were both interesting and encouraging. Here are a few observations:

- Most students did a good job situating themselves in the historical context – as one student remarked, he felt like the exercise had made him put himself "dans le peau et les sou-

liers" of the politicians of the day. I did have to remind a few others, however, that the Fenian Raids, which began in 1866, would not have been used as a reason to vote for Confederation in 1865.

- Most students did a good job providing the necessary and pertinent "background and context" information on the events leading up to the 72 resolutions and the important points of the resolutions themselves.
- Most students provided a strong analysis with "strategic considerations" that reflected the hypothetical priorities of their MP and that led to a logical recommendation and a corresponding set of "key messages" that would resonate with the target audience, *i.e.* local voters. A few missed the mark, however, writing statements of information for their MP instead of attributing meaning (*i.e.* messages!) to that information.
- Students' writing was more concise and less wordy and repetitive than what I am used to from essays, although breaking out of that mould was clearly a challenge for some.
- A number of students had trouble distinguishing between what constitutes "background and context" information, and what constitutes "strategic considerations," *i.e.* analysis. In academic writing, we often mush the two together within the same paragraph or even the same sentence, which is fine for writing nuances inside of nuances in lengthy and layered pieces in the *Bulletin* or the *CHR*. But it doesn't work when trying to tell a Deputy Minister, CEO, or NGO Director quickly, efficiently and intelligently, "this is what's going on, this is what it means for us, this is what we should do about it, and this is what we should say about it."
- Some of the stronger writers had trouble respecting the page limit. They included too much tertiary detail (admittedly, a sin that I have committed on several occasions). Making hard choices about what information and analyses to include and what can be left out is a skill in and of itself, and we need to develop that skill in our students.

To summarize, I came out of the experience convinced of two things:

1. We can do this! History students have a built-in capacity to do this kind of 'real-world' work.
2. They just need some practical guidance on *how* to do this kind of work.

In other words, our students may be better suited to the modern work world than they realize, and more than some employers, parents, university administrators and (dare I say it?) departments and professors realize. By the very nature of Cleo's craft, history students have developed the brains and the brawn to do the job – we just need to give them more opportunities to flex their muscle.

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