**Writing for political science**

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Part One:

Students often believe that they should be judged solely on the basis of what they write and not how they write. While it is true that styles differ, clear and precise writing is necessary in order to articulate sophisticated arguments. Good writing clarifies, while poor writing obscures. Essays are designed to not only demonstrate how well a student understands material, but that he or she has the ability to filter out less relevant information and present a strong thesis that can be defended by analytical proof.

There are three basic types of papers that you might be asked to write in a political science class: 1) a discussion or exploratory paper; 2) an argumentative paper; and 3) a research paper. Most papers in political science fall into the second two categories. I explain the structure of research papers in “How to Read” (see attached) and I will concentrate here on the argumentative paper.

**Writing Tips**

The argumentative paper is centered around the argument which is presented in the form of the thesis and then developed in the rest of the paper. The single most important element of the paper is the thesis. This is not the type of paper that you write stream-of-consciousness ideas and then later try to tighten up. The vast majority of the time you spend will be thinking of how to address the problem and what the thesis will be. Once you know what the thesis is, you will know exactly how to make organize your essay.

**Thesis statement**

The thesis statement is an argument which should appear at the end of the first or second paragraph of your essay. The thesis statement should contain three elements: context, argument, and methodology.

Context: What is going to be discussed?

Argument: What is the argument of the author?

Methodology: How will the argument be proved?

“Democracy has been rare in Latin America because constant threat of military intervention in politics has undermined the legitimacy of government institutions, which has had the effect of increasing popular support for non-institutional means of removing a government. This can be seen by examining how military involvement in politics eroded citizen support for both democratic institutions and democracy itself in Argentina and Brazil, between 1930 and 1983 and 1930 and 1985 respectively.”

**Some comments on the thesis:**

An argument differs from opinion in that opinion is not substantiated by evidence. This is fundamental. Professors do not want just facts, but they also do not want opinion alone. They want essays in which opinion is driven by evidence in the form of a coherent argument.

Students should be very careful to include methodology. This is normally the part that students do not include and that is largely because students do not place enough connection between the mechanism of proof and the argument itself. Including the methodology forces the writer to think about how exactly a claim that A causes B will be substantiated. The absence of methodology is often linked to an lack of confidence, proper use, or quality of data.

If a thesis has all the elements listed above, it provides a clear blueprint for the rest of the essay. This is necessary as it both helps give structure to the author’s argument and it makes it easier for the reader to understand what exactly is being argued.

**Causality:**

Every day, students in a particular class are drowsy and inattentive. One conclusion could be that the professor is boring. A second conclusion is that it is not the professor, but the time of day (say, after lunch) that is causing the drowsiness. In an argumentative essay, it is unlikely an author will ever prove a thesis with the certainty of a natural science experiment; at the same time, the author should try to argue that A causes B. There may be multiple causes for high unemployment, but the author should try to identify the most important one. Once this causal relationship is hypothesized, the author needs to prove the relationship. Thus, A causes B because of C, D, and E. This part can be a bit tricky as the C, D, and E might be interesting in their own right, but should be analyzed primarily in the way that they prove how A causes B.

**Description versus Analysis**

One of the most significant challenges for students writing political science papers is distinguishing between description and analysis. Describing a political party, system, etc, is important, but the author must go beyond this and explain the relevance. Saying that the US differs from the UK because the former has a presidential system and the latter is parliamentary is not enough. Students must analyze how the different architectures produce different results, encourage different forms of political behavior and organizations, etc. Often students make a valuable observation but do not go into depth about why the observation is important.

**Depth not Breadth**

Going back to the idea of analysis and not description, it is more important that the author address one or two issues in depth, as opposed to naming all of the possible issues. A question like “why has democracy been so rare in Latin America?” can be tackled by looking at many different variables. Listing all possibilities does not amount to a good essay. Recognizing that some are more important than others, selectively choosing one or two, and proving by citing evidence, will produce a good essay.

**From Data to Evidence:**

Students often do a good job researching a topic and have a strong opinion about the question asked. There is, however, a very real challenge of turning the opinion into a compelling argument. This requires evidence. Evidence and data are not the same thing.

Students often list information as though the information constitutes proof. Saying that Latin American economies have grown by only X% after neoliberal reforms does not tell the reader whether neoliberal reforms are responsible for the low growth, nor whether the previous economic policies would have been better.

**Develop cases, do not give examples:**

There is a very big difference between giving an example of a kind of activity and developing a case which shows under what conditions that activity emerges. There is a temptation to make a lot of general statements and then to throw together a few examples in one sentence. This does not constitute evidence, nor is it likely to persuade your reader. What will, is when you know the case you are analyzing.

Students often say that they do not write more about a case because they do not know enough ‘because that was all it said in the textbook.’ The challenge here is to find information beyond the textbook.

**Use peer-reviewed journals for data not newspaper articles or textbook chapters:**

Newspaper articles and textbook chapters aim to introduce readers to an issue. They rarely enter into real depth in any of the cases they examine. They should spark your interest in a subject but you should seek deeper information in peer-reviewed journal articles. These articles are written by scholars who perform long-term field work and are expected to meet a much higher burden of familiarity with their subject.

For example, a textbook chapter looking at social movements intends to introduce students to what social movements are and what kinds of effects they may have. In doing so, it may have a few mini-case studies. But if students would like to use those cases to address a specific theory, say ‘Why are some social movements dangerous for democracy,’ they will need much more information about the social movement than the textbook can give. For this, they should look in peer-reviewed journals and scholarly books to find more information.

**Do not ‘discuss’:**

Discussion and exploratory papers offer a means for people to think through ideas and concepts. The writer in this style of essay does not so much make an argument as he or she surveys a landscape. In the process, his or her own opinion appears and analysis occurs, but there does not need to be a sustained and clear argument. Sometimes, the author’s ‘point’ is revealed only in the end of the essay.

These papers are not the norm in political science and students should assume that professors do not want a discussion/exploratory paper unless explicitly told otherwise. An argumentative essay should not use words like ‘discuss,’ ‘review,’ or ‘talk about’ in their thesis.

e.g. I am going to talk about the way the parliamentary system works in England and how it came to be.

This sets up an essay which is likely to describe a situation and list historical events/facts, but it does not seem to have a direction let alone argument. Returning to the difference between description and analysis, you should not be ‘painting a picture’ but analyzing why something works or does not, why it happens in one place or one way, but not another.

*Better* This essay argues that the essentially two party system in England produces policy stability but that this comes with a loss in policy innovation. This will be shown by comparing British economic policies over the past thirty years with more multiparty parliamentary systems in France and Germany.

**From Broad Statements to Data**

“The peasants were very poor and unhappy with the monarchy. The wars of the 18th century and taxes from the Crown and the Roman Catholic Church made them more poor.”

“French peasants bore an increasingly difficult burden as a result of the demands of the Crown and the Roman Catholic Church. SOMEONE calculates that between 1720 and 1780, the cost imposed by these two institutions on peasants increased by 50% while profits from production remained virtually stagnant (SOMEONE 2002, 17-20)”

**Staccato writing- or a fast paced movie.**Write smoothly so that your readers can follow you. Do not write for an extended time with short sentences. This can be effective in creative writing or to make a specific point. But overdoing this can be irritating.

*e.g.* The US government needed to change its perspective. The Cold War had ended. At least, the Soviet Union was gone. It was not clear to the people in the Department of Defense what would come next. They invited specialists to figure out the next big threat. Some thought it was old Soviets in the new governments. Some said Russia and other former Soviet republics with nuclear weapons were more dangerous now. Others said the US should worry about rogue states, governments that were operated largely outside international law. Samuel Huntington argued that a clash of civilizations was the biggest danger. Each author supported his or her argument with different evidence. A few years after the end of the Cold War, Communist Parties won back many seats in the former Soviet Union. The people seemed to want to have Communists in charge again which meant that maybe the Cold War was not really over. At the same time, Communists in charge was worrying because they still had access to nuclear weapons. Maybe it was worse since we might be able to influence the Ukraine but not Russia, or Russia but not Belarus. Without the big enemy of the Soviet Union, Libya and Iraq and North Korea, who flaunted international law were important. Without having two powers to hold together the system, something else was needed and some people thought it should be international law. Finally, oil prices and fast growth of Muslim populations in the world made thinkers in the West concerned about increased power of Islamic terrorist groups. Big ticket terrorist activities, capping off with September 11, brought this fear home to everyone. Changes since the Cold War could only be ignored at big risk to governments and citizens of all countries. No one was safe. Having peaceful neighbors and oceans for borders was not enough to make peace in the US and the US needed to worry about lack of peace beyond its borders in new ways.  
  
*Better* The end of the Cold War necessitated a reevaluation of the US government's security priorities. The US Department of Defense commissioned its own analysts and outside scholars to identify the most pressing security concerns which might emerge with the collapse of the Soviet Union. While there were many different threats identified—return of old Communist guard, oversight of nuclear weapons, disciplining of rogue states, large scale conflict based on meta-culture—all analysts highlighted the precarious and unpredictable nature of the new order and how each threat was generated by a sense that the old system had broken down without being replaced by an obvious order. Regardless of how imperfect the Cold War had been, it had produced a predictable world which reduced uncertainty and conflict, and nostalgia for it was apparent in many commentaries on peacekeeping in Africa, the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and the spread of terrorism as a global threat.

**Logical progression**

This is something that is very important, but is often overlooked. Each sentence should be clearly and logically connected to, and should in some way modify or further the observations made in, the previous sentence.

e.g. “The money pays for the benefits of retired people. As the years move on, the retired people are receiving less and less money. The government, in order to ensure that a minimum amount of money is paid to workers, establishes a minimum wage.”

*Better* “Workers pay for the benefits of retired people, who currently receive more money than they put into the system.

The government also regulates the private sector by establishing a minimum wage.”

**Spelling and grammatical mistakes**

Students should have at least one person look over their essays, at least once, to make sure that there are no such mistakes.

**Be more authoritative and concise:**

When you are stating facts, be aware that they are facts (they need no justification, but also know that a fact is not an argument). Similarly, do not prove the obvious.

e.g. “India can be described as a developing country”

*Better*  “India is a developing country…..”

e.g. “I am going to argue that US-Cuban relations worsened after the Cuban Revolution”

*Better*  “This essay will show that the deterioration of US-Cuban relations after the Cuban Revolution was more harmful to the Cuban economy than was previously thought”

**Awkward phrasing and lack of precision:**

Meaning in every sentence must be clear. Awkward phrasing and lack of precision can muddy an otherwise important thought. Why is it that every odd meat tastes like chicken? Basically because it does not taste like beef and we do not know how to articulate that in a way that makes sense. Take the example of the person who eats grilled Portobello mushrooms and says “they taste like steak.” The truth is that they do not taste like steak. But the texture of the Portobello mushrooms and the flavor of the grill create an impression that is more like steak than a mushroom. The problem in this case is a problem of precision, choosing the correct word or phrasing to accurately capture an experience, phenomenon, or relationship.

e.g. “within these systems tyranny would be far from thought”

*Better* “the system was designed, through its decentralization of power, to prevent tyranny”

e.g. “The industrial revolution had a tremendous impact on Britain as a powerhouse nation in the eighteenth century”

*Better* “The British government was able to reach an unprecedented level of great power status as a result of the economic growth and expansion it experienced from the industrial revolution.”

**Formal language**

Written language differs from spoken language. Students should use formal language when writing a political science essay. Avoid using the first person (I, we, us), contractions (don’t, shouldn’t) and colloquial expressions.

e.g. “ I believe that the economy isn’t as important as federalism for understanding US politics”

*Better* “Although some scholars argue that US economic policy is important, federalism plays a much more fundamental role in determining US policymaking, and, therefore, US politics.

e.g. “argued that Japan’s nationalism isn’t all it is cracked up to be”

*Better* “argue that nationalism is not especially significant in Japan”

**Questions**

Students should avoid using questions to make a point. Rephrase the question as a statement. Questions can be reflective in presenting a puzzle which the author hopes to solve. But used inappropriately they can render an argument too informal. Questions should also not be overused and should not be flippant or sarcastic.

e.g. “Why should the US intervene only in countries where there is oil?”

*Better* “US intervention should not be limited to countries which possess considerable oil reserves.”

e.g. “Why would the Iranian state want a democracy? Why let people say what they think?”

*Better* “There seems to be little incentive for Iran’s governing class to allow a broader freedom of press or expression.”

Questions can be used to present intellectual puzzles or to stimulate thinking about an issue.

e.g. Can cultural theories explain changes in attitudes within developing countries?

e.g. If modernization theories show a very strong correlation between economic development and democratization, why is Singapore not more democratic?

**How and when to quote:**

In short essays, especially when you are not doing an analysis of discourse, do not use long quotes. Use quotes when they advance your argument either because they contain evidence necessary for your argument or because you want expert validation of your basic argument. Do not present someone else’s argument and add one or two sentences saying that you agree.

e.g. Many people talk about China becoming more important in world affairs, especially as it continues to grow at breakneck speed. In the textbook, Joseph writes “The controversy over the Beijing Olympics reflects the fundamental contradiction that defines contemporary Chinese politics. The People’s Republic of China is one of only a few countries in the world that is still a communist-party state in which the ruling party claims an exclusive monopoly on political power and proclaims allegiance (at least officially) to the ideology of Marxism-Leninism. At the same time, the country has experienced dramatic economic and social liberalization—and even considerable political relaxation since the bloodshed in Tiananmen—and is more fully integrated into the world than at any other time in its history. But the Chinese Communist party (CCP) rejects any meaningful movement toward democracy, and the rift between a tyrannical political system and an increasingly modern and globalized society remains deep and ominous” (627-628).” China is still not a democracy.

*Better* The rapid growth of the Chinese economy over the last thirty years has attracted considerable scholarly attention. The growth is not only impressive for the sheer numbers of people lifted out of poverty, but because scholars have long associated economic development with democracy (Lipsett 1960). President Bill Clinton used a similar argument in supporting Chinese entry into the World Trade Organization. But development in China has not yet brought democratization and is not likely to do so as long as it is led by the Chinese Communist Party. The CCP recognizes that accountability and rule of law are fundamental for further economic development but it believes that both can be had without liberal democracy. An examination of CCP discourse on these themes shows that ‘democracy with Chinese characteristics’ is a party-led form of government which increases the accountability and reduces arbitrary market and political behavior, but which does not increase citizen participation in government formation and decision making.

**Citations**

When information is directly quoted, the reference should be noted in the form of a footnote, endnote or internal citation. Also, students should cite information that is not common knowledge, such as social security payments amount to X% of US GDP. Block quotes (where the quotation is single-spaced and left and right margins are adjusted) should be used when quotations are longer than three full lines in length.

**Constraints**

Students must be aware of the constraints placed upon them by the assignment. The most obvious limitations are that of the topic of the essay and the page length. The essay must address the topic assigned directly. For example: if the question is “what best explains politics in a particular country” and the essay describes the history of the country without showing how the history “explains politics” in that country, the essay does not really address the topic assigned.

Another important constraint is length. The length chosen is not arbitrary. If the assignment asks for a 5-7 page paper, the teacher wants to see the topic addressed in 5-7 pages. Therefore, do not choose a topic that can be proven in 2 pages, or one that requires 15 pages to make the argument.

**Part Two:**

The first part of this document was originally written in 2000 as a guide to give practical tips for students writing political science assignments. Between 2000 and 2010, I edited the document numerous times. Over the last few years, I have found myself spending more classroom time building critical reading and writing skills for my students. I have also found myself giving additional pre- and post- paper writing instruction. Part two of this document is an attempt to put these ideas down into text. The issues I address here are technical and conceptual and so the document does not follow any specific organization. I ask the reading to forgive me this and I hope that whatever of value may be found wherein is not limited by this.

*Why do we write?*

Students largely *do* or *complete* assignments because the assignments are a compulsory component in their coursework. Because of this, they often miss some very basic elements of writing that are rather important to consider when writing an essay. For example, why do we professors want you to write? There are a number of reasons for this. First, it is easier to evaluate the quality of a written argument than an oral argument because the standard for judgment of the former is much higher. Our aim is always to push you to the highest standard. Second, writing is the standard form for argument in our field (political science). Third, and most important, you are writing for the same reason that we write, and that everyone else writes for that matter.

You write because you have something interesting to say and can express it, in written form, in a manner that is persuasive. That said, you are not writing a blog post where you can throw unsubstantiated generalities around or use provocative adjectives to cover up an absence of research. The goal, in your writing an essay, is for you to become not just a writer but an author. An author is, or ought to be, an ‘authority.’ This may be intimidating to some, but it should not be. Rather, it is a challenge.

The professor is not asking you to write an essay, but to become an authority on the subject that you are addressing. As a result, you are not going to simply talk about a subject, but you will make an argument that reflects your expertise.

But, if you are only taking your first class in the discipline, you may wonder how you can be an authority. First, you need to be familiar with what other authorities have written about that subject. This is where you will need to do research, particularly looking at scholarly books and peer-reviewed articles. Second, you will need to read peer-reviewed articles so that you can understand the form used by authorities. Understanding how and why scholars write, will help you write in a similar style. Third, you will need to find an argument which you can support with evidence. Finally, you will need to have responsible peers who can read over what you have written. They will tell you how effective you are at making your argument.

These points are especially important for undergraduate students who are often good at writing one page responses which reproduce what another author discusses or that extract definitions or facts from an article, but struggle developing their own argument, shaping data into evidence, and then extending an essay over 6-8 pages (crossing the 4-5 page threshold is particularly challenging).

*How to Read*

Scholarly articles can be long and difficult to read, particularly for non-specialists. But like all persuasive essays, they contain three components and should be evaluated by you the reader along those. Specifically, whenever you read a scholarly argument, whether a short piece or a book-length treatise, always ask the following four questions:

1) what is the context? (why is the author so interested in this? Is there a puzzle being solved? Is there some scholarly debate on the issue?)

2) what is the argument? (what solution to the puzzle presented is being made? Are there a few hypotheses being tested? Which is most powerful as an explanatory tool?)

3) what is the methodology? (how is the author proving the argument? What sort of evidence is being used? Why should this evidence be considered credible?)

4) Is the argument compelling? (Does the argument have logical consistency? Does the evidence support the argument? Does the argument address the context identified?)

When reading scholarly papers, give particular attention to the following questions:

*Context/Puzzles*

1) How does the literature set the context? Is there a gap in the literature? Is there a puzzle being solved? Why have previous articles not been able to address it in a fully convincing way?  
2) How do the footnotes/endnotes and the sources set the context for the argument? Is the author citing the right sources? Is the author leaving out important authorities in the area?

*Argument/Hypotheses*

1) How does the author’s argument differ from existing arguments in the field? Does it make sense logically? Are there cases for which it obviously appears accurate or inaccurate?

2) Are there theoretical or logical reasons that the thesis argued by the author appear more compelling than alternatives?

3)

[*Use of Evidence*](http://blackboard.montclair.edu/webapps/discussionboard/do/forum?action=list_threads&course_id=_43577_1&nav=discussion_board_entry&conf_id=_50824_1&forum_id=_53720_1)  
1) what sort of data is being used by the author and how is it being shaped into evidence?

2) Does the evidence prove directly the causal argument made by the author? Are there inconsistencies or gaps in the chain of evidence?

3) What types of cases are being analyzed? Are these the most appropriate ones to make the larger theoretical and analytical claims that the author wants to make.

*Exercises:*

1)Identify the thesis on a separate piece of paper and read it as you read through the paper.

2) Read the thesis before reading the evidence section and then after every paragraph.  
For each section answer:  
What information was communicated in this paragraph?  
How did it advance the information in the previous paragraph?  
Was the author simply giving me information or was the information directly linked to a specific argument or the general argument of the paper? Was this article an important part of the process of proving the thesis? What would you add or remove anything?

*Why not use ‘dictionary’ definitions*

You are an authority and you are writing to other authorities. When you are dealing with concepts, you need not worry about how they are commonly defined (unless you are analyzing popular perceptions of X). Rather, you should be concerned with how scholars understand a concept. Democracy means something very different in normal colloquial usage than what it means to political science scholars.

*Wasting Space*

Sometimes an assignment may seem intimidating because of its length. The best way to deal with this is through thorough research not by playing tricks. For example:

Do not write names of articles-

According to John Smith and Mildred Wang in their 1989 article entitled “IOIOIOIIOOI” in Comparative Political Studies, ….

Write Smith and Wang (2007) argue…

Do not include website urls in the text.

"The best way to understand this is by studying the process by which people join social movements (http://www.socialmovementsforjustice.org/intro//explanatorynote.html)"

This takes up too much space. Just cite the author's last name and a date or insert a footnote.

Do not write "the country of India is argued to be a democracy."

Instead write "India is a democracy" unless you are challenging the idea that it is a democracy. If that is the case, say who (what scholar) argues that India is a democracy.

*So how do you fill the pages?*

Do research. If I write a twenty-five page paper, my bibliography is normally at least two-three pages long. In other words, before I can write 25 pages, I probably should read several hundred pages. You should not read one article (particularly if it is a newspaper or encyclopedia article) and think that you can write a 4-6 page paper. You need to read much more than you will eventually wind up writing. This is one reason that peer-reviewed articles are so important. A twenty-five page paper that argues that the lack of institutionalization in Argentine and Brazilian democracy was responsible for military independence from civilian authorities between 1930 and 1983 and 1930 and 1985 is likely to have about 7-10 pages about institutionalization and military independence in either country during those time periods. A textbook chapter on Brazil will be far less focused and will give you very little information that will be useful towards an argumentative essay.

*Know what you are talking about*

Do not write that communism is the best form of government because of what the ideology espouses without dealing with real world efforts to establish communist government.

Do not analyze countries that are not democratic as though they were. Just because the CIA Worldfactbook says that a country has a ‘republican democracy’ does not mean that it is truly a democracy.

*Cases*

Why are you choosing the cases you are? Explain your selection technique (most similar cases, least likely cases, deviant case, etc).

A defense of authoritarianism by using Singapore and Nigeria seems very unwise since there are many variables other than regime type which could explain differences in performance.

*Sources*

Do not rely excessively on one source. Too often, students find a source and essentially paraphrase that article and make constant references to that source. Always have multiple sources. This helps improve the credibility of your argument. It also is more likely to introduce different arguments and different types of evidence which may be helpful in terms of constructing your essay.

*Use Peer-Reviewed Sources*

In order to make your arguments you will need to have deep familiarity with the cases that you are analyzing. You will not find enough information in textbooks or in newspaper articles. These sources might spark your interest, but they are limited and largely anecdotal. In peer-reviewed articles, you will find detailed and thorough case studies.

Do not use websites, particularly for advocacy groups, as primary sources of evidence. The quality of the data and analysis is inconsistent and advocacy groups have a specific goal, and plenty of incentive to leave out very important data that might challenge their general approach.

*Read the question carefully*

If the question is "Why is democracy not the best form of government," you are not really answering it if you argue "why democracy is deficient in country X." You need to show that it is democracy itself or the way that democracy exacerbates the conditions in which country X finds itself and that a non-democracy would be less deleterious.

*Colloquialisms*

Do not write that a system of government "works for them." You need to be more precise about what "works" means and whether people actively support, accept, or tolerate the system.

*Who cares?*

Always try to show relevance. Students often include basic data which is not necessary. Normally this traps students in the mindset of giving data--describing--rather than making arguments. Do not use historical narratives unless they are relevant to making your argument.

"Country X is the \_\_ largest country in the world, occupying \_\_\_ square kilometers, and having a population of \_\_\_ million people. It was colonized by ..."

Better "Under British colonial rule, the three primary tribes of \_\_\_\_\_ were encouraged to compete and to enter into different professions. The \_\_\_ domination of the colonial military ensured that in post-independence it ...."

*Try to make real arguments and piggyback on scholarly work*

"Connolly (2001) has argued that the Soviet Union collapsed as a result of X and Y but Kirlienko (2003) explains that X did not appear within the Soviet Union until late 1990, once the regime had lost legitimacy. Instead, he argues that Y and Z were fundamental. This paper finds that Kirilenko is correct in highlighting the importance of Z but that he neglects critical developments in X during the 1980s, particularly during the Gorbachev government."

Try to argue against something that intelligent people believe. Do not try to argue something with which everyone agrees. When you are putting together the context for your essay try to develop something counterintuitive.

"Although scholars insist that X is necessary for democratization, X was not present in the democratization of countries A and B."

"Scholars would have expected X to happen under conditions Y and Z, but it did not happen in cases 1 and 2. This paper argues that scholars such as Author (YEAR) and Author (YEAR) overstate the role of ..."