

Writing an Argumentative Political Science Paper

Most political science essay assignments will be argumentative in nature; that is, you are shown a **conflict** via a prompt, and asked to **argue** on behalf of one or more positions that could be taken regarding that conflict. In order to successfully make an argument, you must adopt a clear position on the aforementioned conflict, provide a number of sub-arguments that each support that position, and address at least one *strong* argument that the other side might make. Many students, especially when writing a political science paper for the first time, will misunderstand the purpose of the writing assignment in one or more of the following ways:

“Show What You Know”: Often, students interpret the essay assignment as an opportunity to take all the information they’ve learned in the class thus far and dump as much of it into the paper as possible. This is *not* the purpose of an essay. We are interested in evaluating whether you have absorbed a certain amount of raw info from lectures/discussion/readings, but we do so via the midterm and final exclusively. An essay is an opportunity to demonstrate that you are able to *synthesize* the information you’ve used, and wield it to make a particular point. You should only include information in the paper if it directly or indirectly supports your main argument.

Historical Recounting: Students often confuse political science with history. The latter focuses on describing *what* has happened as accurately as possible, while the former deals with *why* things happen the way they do. Furthermore, when historians do grapple with “why” questions, they are usually trying to explain a *specific* occurrence in history. Political scientists typically want to *generalize*; that is, we try to look for patterns across many events to determine what generally causes X to happen. Therefore, papers organized chronologically and that primarily describe what happened are unlikely to meet the expectations of political science.

Moral Demonstration: Some students believe that they must devote space in their paper to show that they have the “correct” views on the topic at hand; we are uninterested in your personal views, regardless of what we think of them. For instance, papers about slavery and the struggle for suffrage often are peppered with sentences reinforcing how horrible and inhumane these things were. While inarguably true, this serves no purpose in supporting your argument. By limiting your use of emotional appeals, often in the form of unnecessary adjectives and adverbs, you will write a stronger paper.

Step 1: Do You Understand the Prompt?

This is, by far, the most important step in the writing process. If you misunderstand the purpose of the assignment, earning good marks on the paper will be impossible. Read the prompt to yourself multiple times. You should be asking yourself, “what is the conflict in this prompt?” Remember: **an argument is something that someone else could reasonably disagree with**. We will never ask you to choose between two or more positions when one of them is obviously right.

Write out what you imagine to be the two opposing sides of this conflict, and all the best arguments you think these two sides might make. Does one of these sides seem, on face value, to be ridiculous? If so, *you do not yet understand the prompt*. Let’s look at the following prompt:

“The eventual successes of voting rights movements are less a testament to the American political system’s capacity to incorporate excluded groups than a reminder of how much that system advantages those defending the status quo. What is truly striking is how long reform generally took, and how partial and fragile it often was when it finally arrived.”

Could anyone plausibly argue that these excluded groups won their rights quickly, or that when they did, these rights were robust and immune from outside disturbance? No, they could not – these are essentially statements of fact. Therefore, you know that you should not be “arguing” that reform took long or was fragile, because that position is inarguable.

Instead, the conflict seems to come from the first sentence, which first describes one viewpoint, SIDE A: *“The American political system possesses features that allow excluded groups to gain full rights, as evidenced by their eventual successes.”*

Then, it offers the other, SIDE B: *“The American political system possesses features that hinder excluded groups from gaining full rights, as evidence by how long their successes took, and how weak they were.”*

Notice that the conflict is **NOT** about whether or not excluded groups had to struggle to gain these rights. That is, again, not a contestable assertion – of course their path was arduous. The conflict is not even about these groups or their struggles *at all*. The conflict is over whether, on balance, features of the American political system help or hinder excluded groups in the pursuit of voting rights. Any argument that does not take one of these two sides, and then devote the paper to identifying the *specific features* that help or hinder these groups, is not an argument that addresses the prompt.

Step 2: Are You Making An Argument?

We already discussed that an argument must address a conflict over which two reasonable people could plausibly disagree, but once you've taken one of the available positions, how do you defend that position? When making your argument, you should take all of the following into account:

- Your introductory paragraph is the most important paragraph in the paper. In just a handful of sentences, you will need to 1) establish the conflict, 2) clearly identify your position, and 3) preview the sub-arguments you will be making in support of your overall argument. By the end of this paragraph, your grader should have no doubt that you understand the prompt, and be able to predict what you're going to say in the remainder of the essay.
- Your argument should take a clear position. Typically, this means you want to avoid "fencesitting", or simply acknowledging that both sides make good points. *Of course they do - that's why we gave you the prompt.* Even if you feel conflicted, you should come down strong on one side or the other.
- If you are feeling brave, you could take a *nuanced* position. For instance, you could argue that both sides are wrong, and advance a third position. Alternatively, you could argue that Side A is correct under certain specific conditions, but that Side B is correct under different conditions. However, whether this is even possible depends on the prompt itself. Successfully arguing a nuanced position is likely to earn very high marks, but it is also difficult and risky. Learn to walk before you run.
- You may feel compelled to include claims in your paper that are only tangentially related to the prompt, but allow you to demonstrate that you were paying attention to information we have given you in class. Do not do this. It will not help your argument, and it will not help your grade. Essay assignments are not used to evaluate whether you are absorbing class content (that's what tests are for), but rather whether you understand how to advance an argument using a selected portion of that content.
- Similar to above, if you personally care about a topic related to the prompt itself, you may feel like devoting one or more paragraphs to a tangent that advances said personal argument. Do not do this. The prompt is not an invitation for you to get on a soapbox, no matter how correct, persuasive, or eloquent you may be. If you want an opportunity to reflect on why the topic at hand matters to you, at most, you should save this for the concluding paragraph.

Step 3: Are You Supporting Your Argument?

Once you've figured out the conflict and taken a clear position, you now must devote the rest of your paper to successfully defending your position. Here are some things to consider in order to make your argument stronger:

- The first sentence of every paragraph should indicate what the main idea of that paragraph is, and every sentence of that paragraph should provide evidence or logic that reinforces that idea. The main idea itself should directly support your main argument. If the main idea does not do this, you should strongly consider eliminating the entire paragraph. If any sentence in the paragraph does not strengthen the assertion in your first sentence, strongly consider deleting it.
- As previously mentioned, it is almost always the case that you should organize your body paragraphs around *concepts, not chronology*. If your paper tracks something from the beginning to the end of its history, there's a really good chance that you've just written a history paper. Organizing around concepts gleaned from that history will force you to write a paper that is more generalized and analytical in nature.
- The order in which you present your points is extremely important – arguments are not a “KFC Famous Bowl”, for which it is acceptable to simply dump all the key ingredients into the paragraph without regard for order. Each paragraph should start with theoretical support for the argument you are advancing. Then, once you have spent several sentences fleshing out your claim, you should provide several sentences that offer empirical evidence that backs your claim up. If you begin with your evidence, your main point will often become lost entirely.
- Also as previously mentioned, normative statements (i.e. *value statements*) should almost always be eliminated. At best, they will not contribute to the strength of your argument. At worst, your frustrated grader will interpret them as pandering or attempts to pad the paper for length.
- You will typically benefit more from making a *simple and deep* argument than a *complex and shallow* one. Usually, you can defend your chosen side using any of a large number of sub-arguments. Papers that provide a laundry list of *all* of these arguments, typically marked by a large number of small paragraphs, are usually weak, as they do not allow you to really explore any one claim for long enough to demonstrate that you understand the point you're making. Instead, you should choose 1-3 of the strongest points available, and write about these points in great detail. This has the added advantage of making your main argument more nuanced and interesting - not only did you choose a side, you separated the high quality sub-arguments on your side from lower quality ones.

Step 4: Are You Using Good Evidence?

By this point, you will have solved most of the problems that result in low essay grades. Still, the vast majority of the actual work is in front of you, as you now need to defend the points you make in each paragraph. What follows is advice on how to marshal your evidence effectively:

- Make sure you know whether or not this is a research paper. Are you being asked to seek out new information, or simply utilize information you've been given in class? If the latter, you'll want to be very careful about introducing evidence that comes from sources other than lecture/discussion/readings. We typically provide all the material required to argue a side; over reliance on outside sources may be another hint that you misunderstood the prompt. If you do use outside sources, use them sparingly and thoughtfully. Using a single outside source effectively may improve your essay; using many will likely weaken it.
- Use direct quotes sparingly. In most cases, the specific words used by an author will be of little value to your argument – the value is usually in the overall point they are making. If this is the case, strongly consider paraphrasing the author, then crediting them immediately after with a parenthetical citation. If you do need to use the author's language, use as little of the quote as possible. Not only will this make your paper more sophisticated, paraphrasing demonstrates that you really understand the author's point, and it also avoids quote overuse. Graders sometimes interpret quote-heavy papers as an attempt at padding for length.
- Do not reference works just to reference them. Your grader is considering the quality of your evidence, not the quantity or breadth of evidence. A paper that uses a single source in a reliably thoughtful manner will be much stronger than one that uses ten sources haphazardly.
- Unless stated otherwise, you should reference outside works in your paper using parenthetical citations, like so (Freeder, 67). Do not use footnotes, as this may appear to be an attempt to pad the paper for length.
- That said, using parenthetical citations does not absolve you of the need to include a works cited page at the end of the paper. Unless the preferred format is directly stated, choose a format style (MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.), and use it consistently. As long as your grader can find the evidence you're drawing from himself or herself if necessary, you should be fine.
- Do not plagiarize. Given the use of plagiarism detection algorithms, it is trivially easy to uncover plagiarism now. Any time you directly quote or paraphrase heavily from a source, you should cite it.

Step 5: Do You Have A Good Counter Argument?

In an argumentative paper, you almost always want to devote at least a little space to addressing the other side's argument. Doing so will reinforce that you understand the other side, and therefore the prompt itself. More importantly, a successful attack on one of the other side's best arguments is an effective way to bolster your own. Here are a couple things to consider:

- You should address the other side's *strongest* points, not its weakest points. If you don't think the other side has any strong points, *you probably do not understand the prompt*. As an example, suppose you are arguing Side B from the prompt on page 2, and you make this point: "The other side might point to the many successes these groups have had, but these successes were often short-lived." Here, you haven't addressed a counter argument, you've demolished a straw man. All sides agree that these groups eventually got rights, and all sides agree that these gains were partial and fragile. A proper counter argument might instead, for instance, identify a feature of American politics that seems to give excluded groups a big advantage, then explain why it does not.
- You *must* rebut the other side's argument once you've identified it; otherwise, you're just harming your own argument! Your rebuttal should directly weaken the other side's claim. You cannot simply say "this is a good point, but I think that the points X, Y, Z I've made in this paper are just better."
- The counter argument should not act as a rebuttal to a point you make that is unrelated or only marginally related to the main argument. For instance, again using the prompt on page 2, imagine you're arguing for side B, and you claim that federalism made it harder for minorities to gain their suffrage rights. You advance the counterargument, "some may say that federalism is good because it allows states to function as laboratories of democracy." This a claim that runs counter to your general point that federalism has had negative consequences, but it has nothing to do with the larger argument about suffrage, and therefore is not a counter argument. You should always ask yourself "if I were arguing the other side, is this an argument I'd use?", and if the answer is no, don't use it.
- Counter arguments can be addressed anywhere in the paper, but placement depends on whether it specifically relates to any of your arguments. If you think the other side might have a strong rejoinder to one of the points you make in the body of your paper, addressing this argument is probably best done right next to the paragraph containing your point. On the other hand, if you are addressing an unrelated, strong argument they might make to bolster their own side, this is probably best done at the end of your paper.

Step 6: Does Your Writing Style Complement Your Argument?

Though far less important than substantive content, tone and voice can affect the strength of your argument. Keeping the following in mind will make your argument clearer and keep your grader happy:

- Avoid emotional statements and words as much as possible. Political science papers will frequently touch on sensitive topics, but there's little value in addressing these emotions in your paper, outside of perhaps opening or concluding paragraphs. At best, they will not serve the argument, and at worst, they will distract from it.
- Deliberate overreliance on the Thesaurus inevitably contributes to obfuscation of substantive textual interpretation, attenuating the magnitudinal effectiveness of suppositions and contentions universally. That wasn't a fun sentence to read. I should have just said that you should use fewer, shorter words whenever possible, because it makes it easier to understand your points.
- Your essay does not need to be rigidly formal, but avoid striking a conversational tone throughout the paper (i.e. if you read it out loud to yourself, someone else should be able to tell you're reading off of a sheet of paper). You also want to stay away from colloquialisms – if you look up the word online and the descriptor says *informal*, it's generally not good for use in an academic paper.
- Your intro paragraph sets the tone for the rest of the paper, and lazy opening sentences can diminish your readers' enthusiasm greatly. Try to find an angle your audience will find interesting, and that establishes a puzzle or conflict. Note: the *worst and most common* introductory sentences make references to the importance of the concept over time (e.g. "since the dawn of time..."; "man has always..."; "throughout history, we've debated..."). Don't do this.
- Avoid cliches like the plague. (This is a cliché. Haha. Seriously though, avoid.)
- Don't include multiple lines of formatting at the beginning of the paper (e.g. name, date, professor, class, etc.). It is unnecessary and looks like padding.

If you stick to these guidelines, there's a very good chance you'll receive high marks on your essay. To close, note that if at any point you feel like you are struggling to successfully accomplish one of the above steps, you should seek out help from your GSI. Many of the mistakes that result in lower grades could be resolved during a simple ten minute conversation, especially if caught early on in the writing process. When you receive the prompt, don't wait a week to start thinking about it; you should make sure you understand the prompt as soon as possible, and if you feel you don't, you'll have early access to someone who can help. Good luck!