

# Writing a Political Science Paper

The advice here is meant to help you with any long writing assignment in this class, but the lessons are largely applicable to any college paper in the social sciences. Following these instructions will make it very unlikely that your essay will earn less than a B.

## Step 1: Understanding the Prompt

You will primarily be graded on whether or not your essay fulfills the requirement of the given prompt. Almost all prompts in political science will take one of three basic forms:

- **Argumentative:** The prompt identifies some dilemma, disagreement, conflict, etc., and asks you to use your paper to make an argument to convince a theoretical audience to take a clear position on the matter. Examples:
  - “Should the United States abolish the electoral college, or keep it?”
  - “What is the best way to regulate the use of money in American politics?”
- **Research:** The prompt asks you to conduct research on a given topic, usually with the purpose of explaining to a theoretical audience how something works or happened, either in theory or in practice. Examples:
  - “Complete research on a major policy and explain how it got passed.”
  - “Explain a candidate’s campaign strategy, and evaluate its success.”
- **Expressive:** The prompt asks you to relate an experience you have had, and/or your thoughts/feelings about a given topic in a somewhat informal fashion. The purpose is generally to help a theoretical audience to better understand you, people like you, or people in general. Examples:
  - “What is something you have changed your mind about over time?”
  - “What do you think explains why you have the beliefs that you do?”

Make sure that you understand which of these forms your prompt takes, as the expectations for your work will differ accordingly. On the other hand, be sure to avoid the following common misinterpretations of prompts – many students think this is what we are looking for as graders, but working in these frameworks will earn a lower grade:

- **Show What You Know:** The purpose of an essay is usually not to simply demonstrate that you are paying attention in class. While it is usually a very good idea to relate your arguments back to concepts/examples from class, you don’t have a good paper unless these references are *in service* to a thesis statement.

- **Historical Recounting:** Political Science is *not* History. The purpose of writing in History is usually to describe a specific event (and/or its causes) as accurately as possible. In political science, we are more interested in using a number of specific events to make accurate generalizations about the world. While relating history may be helpful for making your argument, it will almost never be the central focus of the prompt.
- **Moral Demonstration:** Your paper should not sound like a sermon or a polemic, even if you are responding to an argumentative prompt. The purpose of having you write essays is never to test you on whether you've adopted the "correct" views about something, or care a sufficient amount about it. The fewer adjectives and adverbs you use, the better, in most cases.

In addition to understanding what the prompt is looking for, you should also make sure that you pay attention to key mechanical and content requirements for the paper:

- Pay attention to the page minimum/maximum. The minimum reflects the number of full pages that must be written. If it says "5-7" pages, that means you must write at least until the bottom of the fifth page. You will likely be penalized, perhaps significantly, for writing an insufficient amount of content. In fact, *this is the single most common reason for losing points*. Typically, when a range is given, you are expected to write an amount closer to the *maximum*, so the minimum should be treated as an *absolute minimum*.
- Do not mess with the mechanical requirements. The font size means *that* font size. One-inch margins mean *one-inch*. Any attempt to deviate from these requirements will likely be interpreted as a lazy trick to pad for length.
- Unless explicitly requested, *do not include header information* (name, class, date, semester, school, astrological sign, etc.). This is completely unnecessary, looks like padding for length, and prevents us from blind grading.
- Unless explicitly requested, *do not include a title page*. Your paper should be titled using a single line centered at the top of page 1, and that's it.
- There is a very good chance that your prompt will mention a variety of things that you should discuss in your paper. These are not "suggestions" – you will want to spend significant time discussing most or all of this content.
- Alternatively, you probably should *not* spend much time discussing things that are not either directly requested in the prompt, or that wouldn't directly support the thesis statement that you develop in response to the prompt. If you think it feels extraneous, it probably is.

## Step 2: Developing a Thesis Statement

Once you have correctly identified the prompt format, you should start by figuring out a good thesis statement for your paper. The thesis statement is the main idea around which your entire paper will be organized. It will differ depending on the prompt format:

- **Argumentative Thesis:** You must take a clear position on the conflict identified in the prompt. Here are some argumentative styles, and their pros and cons:
  - *Identify fully with one of the “sides” mentioned in the prompt:* This is a safe bet, as there are no “wrong” sides by definition in these prompts.
  - *Do not identify with any one side, but explain each side’s positions:* Do not do this. Of course each side is reasonable but also potentially flawed, or otherwise we wouldn’t be asking the question. An argumentative paper must pick a side and defend it.
  - *Identify with a nuanced position not directly mentioned in the prompt:* This is high risk, high reward. If this comes across as uncommitted and wishy-washy (see above), it will hurt your grade. If it comes across as thoughtful and creative, it will significantly help your grade. If you want to do this, you may wish to talk with your instructor first.
  - The thesis statement is *far more important* in an argumentative paper than in the other formats. An argumentative paper simply cannot succeed without a clear thesis and could not possibly earn higher than a C.
- **Research Thesis:** You should develop a short statement that summarizes what you have learned about the given topic.
  - The thesis is less important in research papers, as the value of the paper is mostly in the quality of the information you provide.
  - Still, you should find some way to develop a 1-2 sentence conclusion about what you have researched and learned. Think of it like this – if someone only read these sentences in your paper, they should come away with a general idea of what you found in research.
- **Expressive Thesis:** You should identify a general conclusion that could be supported by the experience(s) you relate in the paper.
  - Often, this thesis might take the form of a “moral of the story”.
  - A good expressive thesis prepares the audience for what they are likely to encounter in the essay, and what they are likely to learn from it.

When writing your thesis statement, be sure to keep the following in mind:

- A thesis is almost always something that someone else could reasonably disagree with. Therefore, a simple statement of fact cannot be a thesis.
- Your thesis should be clearly revealed within the introductory section (usually the first paragraph) of your paper, towards the end of that section/paragraph.
- Once crafted, your thesis is the beating heart of the paper. Every new paragraph you introduce should have the clear purpose of, in some way, supporting this thesis. If something you write does not support the thesis, either by contradicting it or by being unnecessary, you should probably remove it from the paper.
- When in doubt, a thesis can always begin with “In this paper, I will...”, but these are kind of “training wheels”. As you get comfortable with writing your thesis, try to convey it to your audience in a less rigid manner.

## Step 3: Organizing/Outlining Your Paper

Now that you have a clear thesis, you should start to develop an outline for a paper that will successfully support that thesis. Here are some tips for outlining and organization:

- Start by just getting as many related ideas onto the page as you can. You can decide how to organize these ideas later. Starting with these “building blocks” will help you to figure out the overall structure of the paper.
- Organize your work using bullet points. Each main bullet point should represent a rough topic sentence; the sub-points should represent the ideas that support that topic sentence; all further sub-points should represent specific evidence supporting those ideas.
- If you are responding to an argumentative prompt, your paper should first make your own case in several stages, and then leave room later to address counterarguments. It may therefore be useful at this stage to draft a short “shadow outline” – that is, the outline that might be developed by someone arguing for a different position. This will help you to think about potential weaknesses in your own argument, and to draft good responses to their own.
- If you are responding to an expressive prompt, your paragraphs should be organized in a way that makes sense (e.g. the topic sentence summarizes the main idea of that whole paragraph), but your organization can be much looser. It may be valuable to structure your narrative chronologically, but it also could be interesting to go out of order, or mix your analysis and description together, etc.
- A paragraph should be centered around a single idea, and should almost never be longer than three-quarters of a page in length.

## Step 4: Writing your Introduction

The introduction is the most important portion of your entire paper, as it establishes the reason why the audience should continue reading, and lets them know what to expect as they read through the body of the paper. It can also be the most difficult portion of your paper to write. Here are some tips on crafting a strong introduction:

- The length of an introduction depends on the length of the paper. Typically, if the paper is less than 7 pages in length, your introduction should be a single paragraph, perhaps  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a page in length.
- A good introduction spends several sentences establishing a *set up* for the paper. This portion of your introduction is primarily designed to generate reader interest. A good set up may involve establishing the prompt as an interesting puzzle, relating a specific example of the general case, pointing out the greater impact of this issue to the public, etc.
- The thesis statement should then be offered directly afterwards as a response to this set up. By this point in the essay, your reader should understand the topic and your general take on it, and have a bit of an idea of the logic behind it.
- All introductions should conclude with a “road map” previewing the rest of the paper. In one or two sentences, you should write enough that the reader will have some idea of how the rest of your essay will be organized, and what it will say.

## Step 5a: The Body – Argumentative Papers

Tips for organizing *argumentative* papers:

- It may be useful to use the first couple paragraphs of your body to provide some basic background information about the topic, but you should only include information that is directly relevant to the argument you’re going to make. You also should probably not spend time explaining things that would be considered common knowledge. If you are explaining a class concept, you should do so only very briefly. In many cases, you may just want to get directly to your argument.
- One common form for organizing your argument is to build on a chain of logic throughout your paper. In this case, each paragraph advances and defends a point that then logically connects to the point made in the next paragraph. By the end of the paper, if your audience accepts both the logic and empirical premises of your argument, they would therefore have to agree with you. This is potentially very powerful, but can also be fragile in that a single weak link will break the

chain – if a reader identifies a flaw in your chain, then they may lose interest in anything you say from this point on. If you use this style of organization, you should probably make use of counterarguments consistently as you go along.

- The other major organizational style is to advance a series of points that all support your main argument, but are not necessarily reliant on one another. Such an argument may take the general form, “*here are four reasons why you should think X*”. The paper then presents each of these reasons, and the evidence that supports them, separately. This is less risky than the above strategy, given that a reader who doesn’t buy one claim will still have to deal with several other claims. However, you may want to be careful to identify which of your various points you think are more and less critical to leading one to adopt your overall position.

Tips on making arguments in these papers:

- Every time you make an empirical claim about the world that would likely be contested by a significant portion of your audience, or that is simply not common knowledge, you should include a citation to at least one outside source. For more tips on using citations, see below.
- The tone of an argumentative paper should be lacking in emotion. It is almost always a good idea to minimize the use of adjectives/adverbs, and “extreme” action verbs. These tend to be a distraction from your main argument, and may unnecessarily alienate readers who have not already accepted your conclusions.
- A good argumentative paper will always make thoughtful use of *counterarguments*. You should anticipate what a skeptical reader might be thinking, and do your best to plan against it. Some tips on counterarguments:
  - You should address the other side’s *strongest* points, not its weakest points. Responding to its *weakest* points is referred to as a “straw man fallacy”, and is poor form.
  - Beyond identifying these strong arguments, you should spend significant time *rebutting* them. If you don’t, you’re just hurting your own side by introducing their point at all! Also, simply saying “this is a good point, but the other points I’ve made in this paper are better” is not a valid rebuttal.
  - Counterarguments can be addressed anywhere in your paper, but should be done so strategically. In some cases, it is best to address counterarguments frequently as you move through your paper. In other cases, it may be smarter to present your entire case, and then leave the last couple pages to deal with counterarguments.

## Step 5b: The Body – Research Papers

Tips for organizing *research* papers:

- Because you are not necessarily making an explicit or strong argument, you have more freedom to organize your essay than in argumentative papers. Still, each paragraph should be grouped around a common theme, with the topic sentence clearly stating the main idea of the paragraph. It may be useful to use sections of 2-3 paragraphs each, depending on the length of the paper, to organize your ideas even further.
- Research papers should be more than simple summaries of facts – that’s what Wikipedia is for. A good research paper provides information, but also connects that information together for the audience in a way that will help them to remember and understand it. You will also want to mix your own analysis into statements of fact from time to time.
- Research papers should be heaviest on the use of outside sources of these various forms. You will want to make frequent use of citations. That said, the paper should not just be a collection of cited facts.

## Step 5c: The Body – Expressive Papers

Tips for organizing *expressive* papers:

- You have the most freedom in organizational style with expressive papers, but you should still make sure that you are organizing your paragraphs such that each topic sentence clearly relates to the main idea of the paragraph.
- You have the most freedom in setting a tone in expressive papers, but you should make sure you are still writing in a professional manner. See below for tips on writing professionally at the college level. That said, you should feel more free in using adjectives and charged language (though, doing so *carefully*).
- It can be easy to get carried away with your writing in expressive essays. It is always a good idea to write a draft and then revise that draft over several sessions, but this is especially true for this style of writing. Write for a while, stop writing for a while, and then come back to what you have written, and see what needs to be added, and (more importantly) what needs to be subtracted.

## Step 6: Using Citations and Evidence

Now that you have a working thesis, and a clear idea of how you can structure your paper to support it, here are some tips on using evidence to support your paper:

- Do not cite sources just to cite them. Present evidence from outside sources only when that evidence can be used to improve your argument.
- Unless otherwise requested, there is no “correct” number of *citations*. In an expressive paper, you may not need many, if any, at all. In a research paper, you will probably need a lot. There is such a thing as too many citations, especially if it seems outside sources are being used as a substitute for your own effort.
- Unless otherwise requested, there is no “correct” number of *sources*. It is better to rely upon a few high-quality sources than many low-quality sources. Academic publications, newspaper articles, online databases and government reports are typically the best sources to cite in argumentative and research papers.
- Avoid these sources:
  - *Wikipedia*: A great source for information, but a poor citation. Use this to begin research, but cite/read the sources linked at the bottom of a page.
  - *History.com*: This is not the professional website for historians – this is the website for the History Channel, which is *not an authoritative source*.
  - *Dictionaries*: There is almost never a situation in which citing the dictionary definition of a term is useful in any way whatsoever.

Some tips on integrating cited sources into your paper:

- Use direct quotes sparingly, especially if they are long. 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. Therefore, it is best to paraphrase the author in your own words, and then cite them parenthetically. If you do need to use the author’s language, use as little of the quote as possible.
- Don’t “airdrop” quoted material (e.g. copying and pasting a quote without integrating it into an actual written sentence you have written).
- Unless stated otherwise, you should reference outside works in your paper using parenthetical citations, like so (Last Name, Year/Pg#). Do not use footnotes, as this may appear to be an attempt to pad the paper for length.
- If you use any parenthetical citations, you need a Works Cited page, and a corresponding citation for each unique source. Simply choose a preferred format style (MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.), and use it consistently.

**Plagiarism constitutes passing off someone else's intellectual work as your own.**

Getting caught plagiarizing will result at minimum in a zero on the assignment, and could result in an F in the class, and possibly even expulsion from the university. Online software makes plagiarism extremely easy to catch. In order to avoid these consequences, as well as making both us absolutely miserable in a very uncomfortable meeting, avoid doing any of the following:

- Using someone else's exact wording in your writing without attribution, regardless of the length of passage you use.
- Taking someone else's wording, then modifying some of their writing with synonyms or similar language, and failing to attribute it. This *is plagiarism*, and in fact looks *worse* than using exact wording because it looks like an attempt at evasion. This is essentially paraphrasing without citing – still plagiarism.
- Turning in someone else's product as your own: Simply copying another person's paper, or paying someone to write a paper for you, is the most serious form of plagiarism. Getting caught doing so will result in automatically failing the class and possible expulsion.

If you are nervous about whether or not you are doing something that constitutes plagiarism, you should talk to your professor about it.

## Step 7: Writing a Conclusion

Conclusions are the least important part of your paper, but should be included nonetheless. A good conclusion is no longer than a page in length, and usually significantly less. The conclusion should re-summarize your thesis and the arguments that you have used to support it. It is usually good practice to provide some additional content in your conclusion – something that is interesting, but minor enough that it doesn't require introducing new information or argumentation. You might, for instance, make a brief call to action based on what you've written, make a comparison to a related topic, or offer suggestions for what people should study about the topic next.

## Step 8: Voice and Editing

Now that you've written the paper, you should go back and edit what you've written. Here is some advice on making your writing sound more professional:

- Avoid emotional language. Use adjectives and adverbs sparingly. Choose verbs that are the least charged of their related synonyms. Even in expressive writing, it is usually best to reserve emotional language for moments that you want to pop.
- Indent each paragraph, and don't leave spaces between paragraphs. This will almost certainly be interpreted by your grader as padding for length.
- *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 clearer writing is better writing.
- 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). This is one of the most common mistakes in student writing. Some things to avoid:
  - Slang or highly informal, casual language. Your paper should not read out loud like YouTube captioning. An essay is not like a conversation.
  - Use of the second-person and/or rhetorical questions (e.g. "Have you ever had this problem? What do you think we should do about it?")
  - Exclamation marks!
- Avoid awkward phrasing. This is best done by re-reading your paper multiple times, and looking for passages that sound strange or confusing. Don't be charitable – start with the assumption that your work needs improvement. Most of the time, you can increase clarity by *decreasing* the number of words you use.
- Read the paper several times for spelling and grammar mistakes. Spell/grammar check algorithms can often miss obvious mistakes, so it is best to do this manually. A few mistakes aren't important, but consistent errors are distracting and will likely result in a lower grade.
- Try to avoid direct references to the assignment, prompt, or class. Strong writers avoid these "meta" references. Pretend you have been hired by a newspaper.
- Contrary to what you may have heard, there's nothing wrong with writing in the first person (using "I"), at least occasionally, and especially if avoiding the use of "I" would result in awkward phrasing. That said, you should use "I" sparingly outside of expressive papers, and especially so in research papers.