

Political Science Paper Writing Suggestions

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Writing:

1. Make an argument. Above all, this paper should *not* be a summary of readings. That is not to say you can't use quotes and evidence from the reading – you certainly should – but it should not be simply a regurgitation of what others have said. Take a position on a topic.
2. Be creative. Originality is the paragon of academic work. It is far better to make a counterintuitive argument than to rehash what others have already said, and said well. This does not mean that you have to totally rethink standard ideas. But it does mean you should think carefully and critically about what we're studying, how standard ideas may be paradoxical, how mainstream arguments may actually undermine one another, or how a minor aspect of a common idea has been overlooked. It is better to have a creative idea about an obscure topic than to be unoriginal about a major claim. That does not mean that you have to disagree with a widely accepted conclusion. You could, for example, think of an original way to justify democracy, even though many believe that democracy is justifiable.
3. Start with a question. Choosing an interesting and original question makes researching and writing easier. You may want to follow other authors in including the research question in the first paragraph or at least in the introduction so the reader knows the parameters of the paper. If you are trying to answer two different research questions, you should probably write two separate papers.
4. Choose a single, narrow thesis. This is closely related to choosing an appropriate question, and generally the narrower your claim, the easier it is to defend. If you find yourself addressing two questions in your outline, you are trying to do too much for one paper. Choose a single question and a single topic. If you plan to write a ten-page paper and your research question is, say, "how is morality related to politics?" you'll have to significantly narrow your question before you can hope to make any meaningful contribution. Don't worry that by choosing a narrow topic you won't have enough to say.
5. Be logical. Do your conclusions follow from your premises? Does your evidence support your claims? Are you presenting the correct type of evidence for the type of claim you are making?
6. Consider alternative arguments. Your paper will be much stronger if you explicitly consider and explain why other arguments are not as convincing as the one you present. Think about how people who disagree with you might undermine your claims.

7. Pithily tell the reader what you're writing about in the introduction. By the end of your introduction, the reader should know what your topic is, what your main argument is, and how the paper is laid out. It is fine, and even encouraged, to use the first person in the introduction. E.g.: "In this paper I will argue that..." Ideally, you should be able to state your main argument in a single sentence.
8. Be clear. Be as direct as possible, and where you have a choice between flowery language and dry but clear words, choose the latter. Don't use a fancy word where a simple one works.
9. Exclude extraneous information and words. Be sure that your writing is focused and you don't include useless sentences or quotes just to fill space or because you don't have something to say. Ask yourself such questions as, "how does this relate to my main argument?", "is this evidence convincing, and why?", "how do different parts of my paper and different arguments relate?", "are my arguments consistent?", etc. Everything in your paper should clearly relate to your thesis.
10. Use subheadings and paragraphs. Flip through any book or article, and you will almost always see subsections. Even though this paper is short, you should do the same where it helps both you focus your writing, and the reader understand the next topic.
11. Generally, use the active voice. This means that the subject does the action of a sentence. "She voted" is active voice. "Voting occurred" is passive voice. Using the active voice makes your writing punchier.

Editing and Miscellanea:

1. Talk to your professor and TA. Often paper proposals are too broad, so before beginning to write I encourage you to discuss your topic.
2. Have a friend or colleague critically read your paper. Choose someone who you think will be honest with you, not someone who will brush over it, saying it's excellent work. Don't take criticism as failure. Writing is a process, and it's as important to edit your work as it is to write a first draft.
3. Go to the writing center. It doesn't take long, and having a professional assist you with your writing will be immeasurably helpful for this paper, and for your general writing habits. For more information, visit <http://www.colorado.edu/pwr/writingcenter.html>
4. If you have time, read about how to write well. Read, reread, and reference Strunk's and White's *Elements Of Style*, and Orwell's [*Politics and the English Language*](#).

5. Read your draft out loud to yourself. You may and probably will feel awkward doing this, but your writing should be less so after you hear, and correct, what you've written.
6. Include a clear, descriptive title. A reader should know what your paper is about, and, if possible, what you are going to argue from your title, and subtitle (if a subtitle is included).

Citations and Organization:

1. You must cite ideas as well as all quotes. If you rephrase what another person wrote, you still have to cite her.
2. Cite material from outside of class. JSTOR, accessible through the CU library at [Find Articles & More](#), then under J, is a good place to start for this class and for future research. It allows you to search numerous peer-reviewed journals at once. Peer review is a process by which fellow academics assess a paper or a book for its merit, and generally you should rely only on peer-reviewed work for your paper. If you are looking for popular press articles, however, LexisNexus is one of the better sources for newspapers and the *Economist*.
3. Cite the actual source. That is, don't include the link from, e.g., cionet.org or JSTOR.
4. Alphabetize the bibliography by the author's last name. In *Word* you can do this by highlighting the bibliography, going to "Table", and then "Sort". Make sure if you use the author's last name of any chapter in any edited books, not the editor's last name of book as a whole since.
5. Include page numbers. In *Word*, you can do this by going to "Insert" and then "Page Numbers".
6. Include relevant information on the first page. On the first page of the paper, include a title, your name, your professor's name, the date you turn in the paper, and class number and section.