



An Introduction to Writing in Political Science

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1.1 Introduction

Writing is a diverse form of expression. As such, it is sometimes difficult to express one's thoughts when purposes and audiences vary. One might then be inclined to believe that a writing guide for a single discipline – in this case, Political Science – would avoid these problems. Unfortunately, things are not so simple: purposes and audiences vary widely within disciplines, not simply between them.

The Political Science curriculum demands many distinct forms of writing. Even within a single class, students can be expected to write for different purposes or audiences. The resources in this writing guide provide some useful (we hope!) assistance to students, whether they are attempting to find their way through unfamiliar assignments or hone their papers for maximum effectiveness.

1.2 Goals of Writing in Political Science

The Political Science curriculum is diverse; accordingly, the goals of composition within it are similarly diverse. Despite these differing goals, there is a simple and intuitive way to classify the goal of the assignments you will face as a Political Science student. Put simply, assignments vary by their level of analysis: some call for description, others demand explanation, while still others require prescription.

1.2.1 Some assignments ask you to do only one thing: describe. In writing briefs for a Constitutional Law course, for instance, your only goal consists of describing the facts of a case and the issue at hand, the legal rule or principle in place, the application of this rule to the case, and the finding of the case. Though description is often thought of as the simplest task, it does not follow that it is always the easiest. Consider again the legal brief assignment: the facts of cases are sometimes extremely complicated, as are the legal principles being applied to these facts. Nor should students take lightly the task accurate description: describing information is often important in its own right; moreover, description is the foundation upon which explanation and prescription rely.

1.2.2 The next level of analysis in writing is explanation. Assignments with this goal ask you to go a step further to begin analysis. The question often associated with this goal is, "Why?" In a public policy research paper, for example, a common paper assignment is to explain the success or failure of a policy. Beyond describing the policy as a success or failure, you are asked how and why this outcome occurred. Explanation can also be thought of in terms of causation: "The policy failed because it failed to address..."

1.2.3 The final level of analysis is prescription. As the name implies, these assignments call for prescriptions about policies, theories, courses of action, or similar topics about which you are likely to write. These assignments, also called "normative," ask, "What should be?" rather than, "What is?" In these assignments, you still describe the topic, explain how it came about, but then go on to use these two previous levels to formulate a course of action.

1.3 Characteristics of Writing Especially Valued in Political Science

Although the following qualities of writing are valued across many disciplines, Political Science assignments and faculty stress these characteristics with particular emphasis.

1.3.1 All – or nearly all – Political Science assignments call for persuasion of some kind. While this is most apparent in prescriptive assignments where you are asked to advocate a theory or policy, one should not neglect the persuasive element to descriptive and explanatory assignments. The scientific aspect of Political Science, for instance, puts strong emphasis on data and measurement.

If you are asked to describe the number of people in poverty on an assignment, you will undoubtedly refer to measurements of poverty. But what measurement of poverty is one to use? Because there are divergent measurements of poverty, the use of one is a choice that must be justified. Why is X think tank's measurement of poverty superior to Y's? Similarly, there are competing explanations for poverty. Why is one explanation

superior to another? For some assistance with evaluating explanations, refer to [Errors in Causation](#). These evaluations are made at all three levels of analysis.

1.3.2 Clarity in expression is similarly important to Political Science writing. Many assignments in Political Science classes – whether the class is Political Theory, Constitutional Law, or Research Methods – deal with complicated subjects. Moreover, a well-researched paper often includes the perspectives of many different authors. It is all too easy for these factors to cloud a student's writing.

There are several distinct aspects of clarity. First, previewing is essential. In an [introduction](#), the scope and purpose of a paper should be explicitly identified, as well as the general structure of the paper. And throughout an assignment, it is important to use strong topic sentences to preview [individual paragraphs](#). Concisely writing about a topic is similarly important. Unnecessary details and facts should be omitted. Writing in simple, direct sentences is also part of concision. One very effective way to improve concision is [Lanham's Paramedic Method](#).

Even students with strong writing skills sometimes write in unclear ways. Often, their problem is to be found not in their writing process, but in their pre-writing process. Approaching an assignment with a clear understanding of the topic is one of the most essential parts of writing a strong paper. To assist in the pre-writing process, it may be helpful to consult our resources on [Effective Reading Strategies](#) and keeping a [Pre-Writing Journal](#).

1.3.3 When combining the varied perspectives of authors in your own writing, displaying synthesis and evaluation of ideas is a central part of writing a strong paper. Using [this chart](#) may be helpful in moving away from mere understanding of an author and critically apply the author's ideas in your own work.

1.3.4 Dispassionate analysis is also an essential element in a strong Political Science papers. What exactly does it mean to be dispassionate, though? Put simply, being dispassionate means that you approach a topic impartially; opinions are not wrong (and are often expected), but these opinions are the ending point, rather than the starting presumption, of your analysis.

While one can easily recognize the value of dispassionate analysis in descriptive and explanatory assignments, such analysis is no less necessary in prescriptive assignments. Even when asked to make a policy recommendation or to advocate a theory, one must remember that this conclusion should be supported by [cogent arguments](#) and is the product of an impartial consideration of relevant information.

1.3.5 A final element to writing good papers in Political Science refers to a number of concepts that one can put under the collective label of transparency. Transparency includes, but means far more than, merely citing the sources you use. Clearly identifying sources of arguments has important substantive implications for your paper. As such, a few things are important to remember. In Dr. West's class, for instance, you must include the page number every time you cite a source's ideas, regardless of whether it is a direct quote or paraphrase. This requirement enables your instructors to hone in on the basis for your statement and quickly identify any misinterpretations in your writing.

Correct citation is, of course, an essential part of transparency. Guides to citing sources can be found at the [library's website](#) as well as in [Writer's Web](#). Some papers call for a "Social Science Reference Format," which can be found [here](#).

Many Political Science papers involve data you collect and analyze yourself. Transparency means a great deal here, so that readers are able to understand the process by which you gathered and analyzed data. If your methodology is unclear or not repeatable, your analysis will be anything but convincing.

Some issues can arise with the use of footnotes and endnotes when composing papers. Instructions will vary from instructor to instructor; always be sure to follow their requirements. Left to your discretion, though, a few pieces of advice are helpful. On many papers, a point you make may require further explanation or elaboration. Nonetheless, for some reason you feel it shouldn't be in the text of the paragraph – for instance, it may distract the reader from the point you're really trying to address. Using footnotes can provide an easy solution to this problem.

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