

## STRUCTURE (CONTINUED)

When you give historical background, provide specific dates whenever possible, don't confuse different historical periods, and give only what is necessary in order to frame and support your argument. If you're writing about the persistence of the FARC insurgency in Colombia, we don't need to know that Colombia gained its independence during the Bolivarian revolution. Focus on historical details relevant to your argument.

Beware of relying too heavily on any one source throughout your paper or in any one section of it (six consecutive citations from the same source is too much).

Avoid citing class notes- if you find something useful, get it from the original source, often in the coursepack (but cite the original work, not the coursepack). Also, avoid restating at length points that have been amply covered in class; the point of your research paper is to venture beyond the course material, so a paper relying heavily on it is less impressive.



## STYLE

- "Most scholars consider the turning point in the struggle to have been in 1976..." Cite these scholars, then! Cite consistently and properly.
- Don't write, "T.V. Paul, a noted professor of political science at McGill University, writes that..." Just write, "Paul argues that..." and cite. It is useful, though, to point out when an argument comes from a scholar in another discipline, such as anthropology. In that case, explaining the relevance of the concept you've borrowed can enhance the originality and depth of your work.
- Avoid long quotations, no matter how juicy they may be- don't let another author do your writing for you. Use your own words. And if a lengthy quote is so perfect that you must use it, format it *properly*.
- Paragraphs — You should have at least two paragraphs per double-spaced page. On the other hand, indenting after every two or three sentences breaks your momentum and makes you look like you have little to say.

## STYLE (CONTINUED)

- Don't trust your computer's spell-check to catch everything; beware of refugees fleeing across "boarders," militaries "fazing out" obsolete technologies, and global powers "loosing" the race to win clients. And learn the difference between the definition of "economic" and "economical."
- Avoid colloquial language, such as: "Lately, Brazil's economy has been growing pretty quickly," or "Colonialism was tough on a lot of African people." Also, don't use: "When you think about...," "When it comes to...," "When you look at..." Write like a scholar.
- On the other hand, don't be verbose. Use big words only when they provide the most accuracy.
- Hemingway distrusted adverbs and so should you. Words like "arguably" or "understandably" weaken your essay. And use "incredibly" only to describe situations that are truly difficult to believe, never as a synonym for "very."
- Be thorough: never use "etc."
- Be absolutely clear about when and when not to use apostrophes.
- For further tips, *The Elements of Style*, Revised Edition, by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 2000) remains one of the most concise and best books on writing in English.



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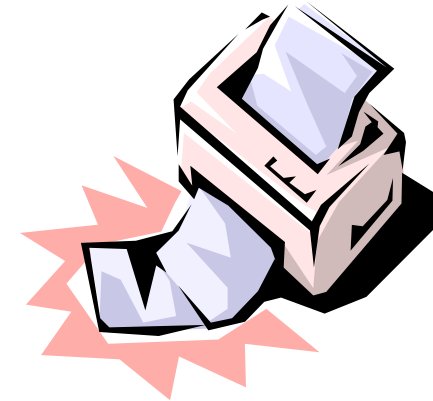
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## POLITICAL SCIENCE ESSAY WRITING GUIDELINES

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## INTRODUCTION

It is a commonly held fallacy that essay writing is an inborn ability possessed by some students and not by others. Students who are very confident in their writing skills or in the course material may assume that they can write a very strong essay with minimal preparation. Conversely, students who are not very confident in their writing skills or who hail from a different discipline may feel discouraged by an assignment and aim low. Both approaches represent a tragic waste of potential.

As anyone with essay-grading experience will tell you, there is no substitute for investing time in developing a solid, clear thesis and a well-argued essay.

The best essays are often simple. Choose clarity over flashiness, quality over quantity (within the page limits, of course, i.e., an 8-page paper, no matter how good, will not meet a 10-15 page requirement). In general, the more sources the better, but it depends on how you use them: a powerful, original essay using six sources is better than a muddled essay using 15. Don't cite Wikipedia, and beware of web sources that are not widely known or cited; stick to academic sources and credible news outlets as much as possible.

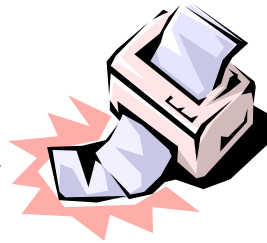
## FIND WHAT WORKS FOR YOU

Have your own system. Writing notes by hand in a notebook can be a good way to avoid getting completely sucked into your computer for days on end; other people swear by their computers the whole way through. Where you work also matters: you might want to do your whole outline by hand in a café and come home to type it up, or vice-versa. You might love the library, or find that you can't stay awake there. You might love your friends but be unable to get work done around them- even if they're in the same class. Also, remember that you need regular breaks, water, food, air, and sometimes a change of scenery.



## CHOOSING TOPICS AND CASES

Make sure you pick a topic that interests you! Hopefully, the course material has attracted or intrigued you in some way. Do you have a question that none of the readings have been able to satisfy? Do you have a personal attachment, for any reason, to a particular issue, country, region, or period in history? Now is your big chance.



It's usually simplest to use one case in your paper: one country, one civil war, one ideology, etc. One case helps you avoid trying to cover too much material in 10 or so pages. Nevertheless, comparing two cases can be very interesting and make for a very good paper. If you're comparing two cases, choose them carefully. It is best to choose two cases that provide an interesting contrast: either cases under similar causal conditions (what social scientists like to call the *independent variable*) with different outcomes (*the dependent variable*), or cases under different conditions with similar outcomes. Then you can write a strong, interesting comparative essay.

### Fig. 1: Similar Causal Conditions, Different Outcomes:

"Kenya and Tanzania gained their independence at the same time, from the same colonizer; they have similar ethnic compositions and similar natural resource endowments; but Kenya has been unable to stop corruption and ethnic strife, whereas Tanzania has largely avoided ethnic strife and is gaining economic strength. Why?"

### Fig. 2 Different Causal Conditions, Similar Outcomes:

"Compare the civil rights movement in the US South with the anti-apartheid resistance in South Africa." OR "Compare Ethiopia-Eritrea and India-Pakistan, two pairs of states in different parts of the world with very different histories that have been locked in protracted conflict punctuated by war."

Comparisons between two cases that are nearly identical do not usually contain any puzzle and are best avoided. Similarly, choosing two cases that have very little in common makes for a weak comparative paper.

## OUTLINE

Write an outline. Outlines help you to organize and focus your thoughts and the points you want to make. Some people spend so much time organizing their outline that by the time they have finished it, the essay has practically written itself. You don't need to be that meticulous, but you should have a system that keeps your research and writing organized. This will save you a lot of time, make your essay clearer, and will help you think of points that might not otherwise have occurred to you, and to incorporate those points seamlessly instead of cramming them wherever they happen to fit.



## STRUCTURE

You need an argument. Simply put, what causes what? What puzzle are you trying to solve? Don't just "describe" or "examine" something; *argue* something. Your argument should privilege a certain explanation of a given event or phenomenon over others. It won't do to argue historically obvious causalities, like, "This paper will demonstrate that after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia could no longer compete with the US as a global superpower"- no one would dispute this.



Show, don't tell - *demonstrate* your points. For example, it's too vague to write that Bolivia and Venezuela have become allies in recent years. Instead, mention their recent economic cooperation, emphasize the close relationship between Evo Morales and Hugo Chavez, and highlight the leftist populism and foreign policy outlook that both leaders have employed since taking power.

The above point is especially useful when writing an introduction. Your essay's first paragraph should dispense with embellishment and list your main arguments in detail.

Another note about your introduction - avoid opening with platitudes. For example, "In considering Africa, many of us will contemplate the issues of poverty, war, famine, and AIDS without really understanding the root of these issues on the continent," or "When we think of the Middle East, we tend to think about the Arab-Israeli conflict, which for the past 60 years has proven to be one of the most intractable and difficult to solve on earth." Instead, begin with a precise, hard-hitting sentence. For example, "Since gaining independence from Portugal in 1975, Mozambique has found a way to resolve its civil war and hold relatively free and fair elections, while Angola has remained mired in corruption and strife." Or "The 1969 Sino-Soviet border skirmishes and the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese war represented important turning points in US perceptions of communism as a unified global force." Sentences like that immediately indicate where you're going, and grab the reader's interest. Another effective way to open your essay is with a question, such as: "Why do rivalries between ethnic groups trigger violence in some cases, while remaining contained in others?"