

## Writing Political Science Papers: Some Useful Guidelines

Peter Liberman  
Queens College Political Science Dept.

January 2015

A good paper informs and persuades. To accomplish this it must be logically organized, clearly argued, and well documented. The great 18<sup>th</sup> century British writer Samuel Johnson put it, "What is written without effort is in general read without pleasure." Although following the rules of thumb below will take effort, they will also help you write better papers and do so more efficiently.

### Substance

1. Answer the assigned question and write on the assigned topic. Even if you are uncertain about the answer, it is better to argue that the available information is too thin or too contradictory to justify taking a position than to duck the question altogether. This is not to say that there is always a single right answer to every political-science question. But even when intelligent, informed people disagree, they must focus on the question at hand in order to advance the debate. Be sure to follow any instructions on the assignment, e.g., drawing on particular course readings or sources found through research.

2. Make an argument, supported by evidence and logic. It need not be an extreme or all-or-nothing argument; you should qualify your bottom line as you see fit (see #1). Make sure that your claims and support for them are clear in your own mind, and articulate them clearly to the reader. You must provide factual evidence and logical reasons for your claims, rather than simply giving opinions, yours or anybody else's. Explain why the evidence and reasons you present support your thesis, and do this for your sub-claims as well.

3. Find and use relevant research when required. If the assignment asks you to do research, find sources or other information that is as directly relevant and useful as possible for your argument. Then draw on the research and cite the sources in the paper; research that you don't use in your paper is not very useful.

4. Minimize unsupported opinion and arguments from authority. An argument from authority is a claim that something is true because a particular expert says so. A variation on this is relying on your own undefended opinions: "X is true because I believe X." How do we know that the expert is right, or if your opinion is well founded? Sometimes we have to rely on experts' opinions on esoteric matters, but it is always better to provide supporting evidence and logic yourself. If you must rely on authority, justify the credibility of the source—explain why we should believe him or her.

5. Address counter-arguments and counter-examples. Put yourself in the shoes of a skeptical reader and ask yourself how they might object to your argument and evidence. If these objections can be refuted, do so; otherwise qualify your position (e.g., "X is usually true" or "X is more true than Y").

6. Always cite the sources of others' phrasing, ideas, arguments, or facts. These citations should always include an unambiguous source reference and page number (or numbers), unless you are referring to the general findings of an entire book or article. This includes required readings in your courses. Often, a single citation at the end of a paragraph is sufficient, if the material from that paragraph can be traced to a single source. Citing your sources demonstrates the work you have put into researching your paper, distinguishes your ideas from those of others, informs readers where to find out more about particular points, and strengthens your argument by providing authoritative sources for your factual claims. Cite only the sources you yourself have

consulted. Citing the source of your source, as if you had consulted it yourself, is misleading and deceptive, unless you explicitly acknowledge it (e.g., source X, as quoted in source Y, p. Z). For further suggestions on citations, including formatting tips and a discussion of plagiarism, see the Dartmouth website on sources: <<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~sources>>.

7. Avoid plagiarism. Submitting other people's ideas or language (i.e., more than a few consecutive words) without appropriate acknowledgement implies they are your own, which is intellectual theft and cheating. You must put in quotes, or in indented single-spaced format, any text found in other sources, and the text must be followed immediately by a citation to the source. Of course, you may not submit all or part of a paper written by someone else as if it were your own work. You also may not turn in a paper—or even part of a paper—for one class that you wrote for another, without the explicit prior permission of the instructor.

To avoid plagiarism, be careful in your note taking and writing to mark all ideas, detailed facts, and exact wording taken from other sources, so that you can properly cite and quote them in your paper. For a useful discussion of plagiarism, see Northwestern University's "How to Avoid Plagiarism" website: <http://www.northwestern.edu/uacc/plagiar.html>.

The Political Science Dept. policy is that plagiarism can result in automatic failure and referral to the Dean of Undergraduate Studies. In some cases, plagiarism and other forms of cheating is punishable by dismissal from the college. You should consult the department policy (included at the end of the memo), as well as CUNY's academic integrity policy:

- [http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/political\\_science/plagpolicy.html](http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/political_science/plagpolicy.html)
- <http://web.cuny.edu/academics/info-central/policies/academic-integrity.pdf>

8. Use space efficiently. Anything that does not contribute towards your argument, or the reader's understanding of it, dilutes the effectiveness of an essay. Thus do not waste space on material that does not advance your main argument, such as:

- historical background, digressions, or other facts that, however interesting in themselves, do not help develop your argument;
- basic definitions unneeded by informed readers (a good rule of thumb is to imagine that your reader is a fellow student in your class);
- passages written early on that, because you have altered your argument, no longer contribute to it;
- repetition.

## **Organization**

9. Organize your major points in logical order. This sounds easier than it is, especially when you don't see the whole structure of your argument before starting to write. Papers ten pages or longer should be divided by section headings, which tell the reader where you are going, making the argument easier to understand. Present major arguments first, followed by supporting or subsidiary ones. One good organizational structure is to lay out and defend your main position, then turn to alternative explanations or counter-arguments and deal with them in turn. Preparing an outline first helps. If you're like me and you end up thinking of new arguments in the writing process, you will probably have to go back and edit your paper later to give it a logical structure. It is always better to structure your paper around main ideas rather than a sequence of authors or sources, unless you are specifically asked to write a review essay.

10. Begin your paper with a summary introduction that tells the reader briefly what the paper's main points are. This is an abstract of the whole paper, which tells the reader the question or questions you will address, why they are significant, how you are going to answer them, *and what your answer is going to be*. Don't just raise questions or topics and leave the reader in

suspense about your conclusions until the end—this makes it harder for readers to digest and evaluate your arguments. Avoid obvious or digressive preambles (e.g., "People throughout the ages have studied the causes of war") and historical "background" in your summary introduction. A single paragraph should suffice to summarize a short (5-10 page) paper; longer and more complex arguments require more detailed summary introductions. Because you can't write a summary introduction until you know what the paper is going to say, you should compose it after the outline—or even the body of the paper itself—has been written.

11. End your paper with a summary conclusion. Conclusions remind the reader of the main points that have been argued and explain their implications. The summary of main points should echo the summary already provided in the introduction, but can more easily refer to specific details or complex issues discussed in the body of the paper. Conclusions are also better than introductions for explaining the implications of your argument or findings. Readers will be more interested in the implications—e.g., for governmental policies, theoretical debates, or for future research—once they have already been persuaded of your basic points.

12. Explain the significance to your larger argument of your facts and assertions as you present them. Facts often don't speak for themselves, and unless you explain how they advance your overall argument, readers may have difficulty grasping their significance. Ideally, you should state the main point in the first sentence of every paragraph.

13. Stick to just one point in each paragraph. Paragraphs should ideally be made up of 5-10 sentences focused on a single point (preferably stated in the first sentence). Page-long paragraphs usually include multiple distinct points that can be more easily digested if they are given their own paragraphs. At the other extreme, a sentence-long paragraph typically either lacks sufficient explanation or supports a larger point made in another paragraph, to which it should be joined.

### **Style and Formatting**

14. Write concisely and plainly. You will be able to say more in less space if you minimize unnecessary prepositional clauses, obvious or meaningless comments (e.g., "It is important to bear in mind that..."), and passive voice constructions (e.g., use "Hillary kicked Bill" rather than "Bill was kicked by Hillary"). Convoluted and run-on sentences are hard to follow. Also, save space by confining article or book titles in the footnotes or bibliography, rather than mentioning them in the body of the paper.

15. Use quotations sparingly. It is better, both for readability and for building writing skills, to paraphrase others' facts and ideas in your own words than to rely on quotations. Of course, you must still provide citations to others ideas, even if you have put them in your own words. Quotations are useful when the specific language of the author matters, or when you need to prove that an important source made the point expressed in the quotation. If you must use quotations, the text (and not just the citation) should make clear who is being quoted.

17. Use correct grammar and spelling. This is not an old-fashioned, pedantic requirement. Errors here will muddle the clarity of your argument and lead readers to suspect you have been as sloppy in your research and analysis as with your grammar and spelling. Note: word-processing spell-check programs can catch most spelling errors, but will not find all; e.g., "My spellchecker wood knot ketch any of the miss steaks inn hear."

18. Use simple and correct formatting. All papers should be typed, double-spaced, and stapled together. Use normal font styles and size (around 12 pt) and normal (around 1.25") margins. Do not include extra spacing between paragraphs. Include a page number on each page after the first. Keep an extra copy of the paper just in case the submitted one gets lost (they're not called "absent minded professors" for nothing!).

19. Use standard citation and bibliographical formats. When citing in footnotes, use the same format as the first footnote below the first time you cite a source.<sup>1</sup> For subsequent citations to the same source, use abbreviated citations (see the examples in the footnote to this sentence).<sup>2</sup> A somewhat easier citation method is to provide a parenthetical reference at the end of a sentence (Snyder 1991, 42). If you use parenthetical references, though, you must provide complete citations for every work cited in a bibliography at the end of the paper. Avoid wasting space by repeating bibliographic details such as book or article titles in the body of the paper; that is what footnotes and bibliographies are for.

### **Revise Your Paper**

20. Re-read and revise your writing. To improve your writing you will want to read it critically, like most people and your professor will. But it is hard to read your own writing objectively, and writers are naturally very attached to words they've just put on the page. Taking a break will help you to get a clearer perspective on your own ideas and prose, to read your own draft as critically as if someone else had written it.

Try to finish a first draft at least a few days before the paper is due. After taking a break from it, review these guidelines (or the editorial check-list below), and re-read and revise your draft.

### **Getting More Help**

Some excellent general sources on writing are William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White, The Elements of Style; Kate Turabian, A Student's Guide to Writing College Papers; Richard Lanham, Revising Prose; and William Zinsser, On Writing Well. Great on research papers is Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams, The Craft of Research, and on formatting see Kate Turabian, A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations.

Your college may provide individual tutoring and workshops on writing, as does Queens College's Writing Center at 229 Kiely Hall (997-5676; <http://writingatqueens.org/the-writing-center/>). Note: the Writing Center needs time to schedule tutoring/editing sessions, and should be scheduled in advance.

It can be helpful for fellow students to critique each other's papers in the rough-draft stage, or in assigned peer-review exercises, though you should generally not ask a fellow student to do more than identify the weak points of a paper or make general suggestions. And keep in mind that students tend to go easy on each other's writing, and probably are not expert editors. Do not assume your paper needs no further revisions beyond the problems identified by a fellow student.

---

<sup>1</sup>Theresa Pelton Johnson, "Writing for International Security: A Contributor's Guide," International Security (Fall 1991), p. 171; William Strunk Jr. and E.B.White, The Elements of Style, 3rd ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1979).

<sup>2</sup>Johnson, "Writing for International Security," pp. 172-78; Strunk and White, Elements of Style, p. 48.

## Queens College Political Science Department Policy on Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty

The Political Science Department policy is that incidents of plagiarism, cheating, or other forms of academic dishonesty will be penalized. Penalties will vary from an F in the assignment to a grade of F in the course, and will be reported to the Dean of Students. Students should be aware that the College may impose additional penalties, including requiring special coursework on intellectual honesty, temporary suspension, or dismissal from the college.

Plagiarism is the act of presenting another person's ideas, research or writings as your own. The following list, drawn from the CUNY *Policy on Academic Integrity*, includes examples of plagiarism, but it is by no means exhaustive:

- Copying another person's actual words without the use of quotation marks and footnotes attributing the words to their source.
- Presenting another person's ideas or theories in your own words without acknowledging the source.
- Using information that is not common knowledge without acknowledging the source.
- Failing to acknowledge collaborators on homework and laboratory assignments.
- Submitting downloaded term papers or parts of term papers, paraphrasing or copying information from the internet without citing the source.
- "Cutting and pasting" from various sources without proper attribution.

Cheating is the use or attempted use of unauthorized material, information, notes, study aids, devices or communication during an academic exercise. The following list, also drawn from the *Policy on Academic Integrity*, includes examples of cheating, but it is by no means exhaustive:

- Copying from another student during an examination or allowing another to copy your work.
- Unauthorized collaboration on a take home assignment or examination.
- Using notes during a closed book examination.
- Taking an examination for another student, or asking or allowing another student to take an examination for you.
- Changing a graded exam and returning it for more credit.
- Submitting substantial portions of the same paper to more than one course without consulting with each instructor.
- Preparing answers or writing notes in an exam booklet before an examination.
- Allowing others to research and write assigned papers or do assigned projects, including use of commercial term paper services.
- Submitting someone else's work as your own.
- Unauthorized use during an examination of any electronic devices such as cell phones, palm pilots, computers or other technologies to retrieve or send information.

## Editing Abbreviations

agr	agreement missing between pronoun and referent, or between verb and subject	red.	redundant or repetitive
awk	awkward phrase or sentence	run-on	sentence is too long, or has too many clauses
coll	colloquial—words or phrases better spoken than on paper	source	citation needed
filler	unnec. digression	sp	spelling
frag	sentence fragment	stet	ignore editor's correction
NSI	Need Summary Introduction	ub	unnecessary background
non seq	non sequitur—"does not follow" from what came before	unpack	break up paragraph into component ideas
¶, para.	divide an overlong paragraph	wordy	excess verbiage
		ww	wrong word

## Editorial Checklist

### Substance:

1. Answers the question and follows instructions in the assignment \_\_\_\_\_
2. Makes a clear argument, supported by logic and evidence \_\_\_\_\_
3. Finds and uses relevant research when required \_\_\_\_\_
4. Minimizes reliance on opinion and on arguments from authority \_\_\_\_\_
5. Addresses counter-arguments \_\_\_\_\_
6. Cites sources of ideas, arguments, and facts \_\_\_\_\_
7. Avoids plagiarism and re-use of material from other coursework \_\_\_\_\_
8. Uses space efficiently \_\_\_\_\_

### Organization:

9. Presents main points in a logical order \_\_\_\_\_
10. Has summary introduction \_\_\_\_\_
11. Has summary conclusion \_\_\_\_\_
12. Calls attention to main points in body \_\_\_\_\_
13. Focuses paragraphs on single topics \_\_\_\_\_

### Style and formatting

14. Uses concise, plain language \_\_\_\_\_
15. Uses quotations sparingly \_\_\_\_\_
16. Clear and correct sentence structure \_\_\_\_\_
17. Uses correct grammar and spelling \_\_\_\_\_
18. Has proper format including page #s \_\_\_\_\_
19. Has proper formatting for citations and bibliography \_\_\_\_\_