

Guide for Writing in Political Science

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About Writing in Political Science

Political science writing asks “**why**” or “**how**” questions that help us analyze various kinds of political problems, questions, and puzzles, and to advance informed, well-researched, and substantive arguments.

Political science essays are not always written about the same kinds of topics. They do not all employ the same kinds of evidence. “Data” means different things in the different subfields of political science, and your essays for different classes might draw from very different kinds of sources. Generally speaking, **political science uses quantitative forms of analysis as well as qualitative forms of analysis, and it can analyze empirical questions (What happened?) as well as normative questions (What should have happened?).** The discipline is not defined by one particular style of writing, or one particular kind of assignment, or one type of argument.

Political science also draws heavily from a number of different disciplines, such as economics, philosophy, sociology, history, and law, to name a few. There are four subfields to the discipline of political science: American Politics, Comparative Politics, International Relations, and Political Theory. All of the subfields are part of the social sciences, though American Politics sometimes models itself more on the natural sciences while Political Theory models itself more on the humanities. Because of its highly interdisciplinary nature and because of the differences between the four subfields that make up the discipline, political science essays for different classes and subfields can look very different from one another.

So, what **does** define the discipline, across all these differences? First, **political science is fundamentally about the analysis and critique of various forms of power**, when we understand the term broadly. Power takes many different forms and the various branches of the discipline explore the various manifestations of political power and their consequences. Second, **political science is primarily defined by a way of thinking that we call “political analysis.”**

About this guide

This guide contains
the following sections:

- About Writing in Political Science
- Types of Writing in Political Science
- Finding & Using Evidence in Political Science: The Steps of Research Writing
- Conventions of Writing in Political Science
- Citations & Formatting

The Disciplinary Writing Guides are designed to provide an introduction to the conventions, or rules, of writing in different subjects. These guides have been designed by Southwestern professors to help you understand what will be expected of you in your classes.

Political analysis is neither descriptive writing nor opinion-based writing. Writing in our discipline aims to explore, explicate, and elucidate. It is not writing that stops at summary, nor does it make unfounded assertions. Political analysis is rigorous and systematic. It explores a wide variety of political problems and questions to test various claims against a balanced and informed field of relevant secondary scholarship and primary sources. The goal of political analysis is to analyze evidence in order to do one of two things. It either aims to make a careful argument for a position that reasonably deals with counter-arguments and evidence (as is characteristic of the social sciences generally) or it works to test a scientifically derived claim or hypothesis (as is more typical of the natural sciences). Both forms are acceptable in the profession. Your professor will clarify which approach they employ, although the basic outlines of this guide speak to both approaches.

Types of Writing in Political Science at Southwestern

To succeed in political science classes, you need to work with your professor to become attentive to the differences between subfields while also appreciating the things they share in common (the analysis of power and method of political analysis described above). Always listen carefully to your professor's specific instructions and pay attention to what a specific assignment is asking you to do.

The common core of basic research methods laid out in this guide defines the practice of political analysis. All introductory, 200-level, 300-level, and 400-level political science classes assign essays that will help you develop the skill sets described below, in part or in whole. Some of your essays may be called “critiques,” some may be called “talking papers,” and other assignments may ask you to stop and focus on one particular element along the way of conducting research (asking you to research and analyze two different sides of an issue so you learn how to make informed claims and

arguments, test hypotheses, or write a research proposal, perhaps, or a literature review). What these assignments have in common is that all are asking you to engage in evidence-based political analysis, and to practice one or more of the steps of research.

At Southwestern, 100- to 400-level classes aim to give you the basic analytical skills you will need to conduct the more fully-developed research projects that you will undertake in the 500- and 600-level “craft of research” courses and in the senior capstone seminar. A fully developed research paper—the kind you will write in “craft of research” classes and in capstone—will represent the culmination of the skills sets described below. These papers will be about 20 pages long. In both “craft of research” and capstone classes, you will write formal research proposals and literature reviews, and you will engage in some type of original research that draws from primary materials as well as secondary sources.

Finding and Using Evidence in Political Science: The Steps of Research Writing

Despite surface differences, all of the essays you write for political science classes will ask you to walk through at least one of the following steps. These assignments will ask you to think in ways designed to help develop your capacity for political analysis. Below, you will find the basic elements of conducting research and engaging in political analysis. Remember that some assignments will ask you to focus in particular on one step of the process, while others (like the research paper) will ask you to undertake each of these steps.

Determine a Research Question

The first step of conducting research in political science begins before you start drafting your essay, with formulation of a research question, puzzle, or problem. You should begin with an interesting and relevant question that is neither obvious nor self-evident, but is contestable and needs to be researched, tested, and analyzed. Whether you develop it yourself or your professor gives you the research problem as part of the assignment, all research begins with an interesting and relevant question.

In lower-level political science classes, your professor may provide you with the research question in the form of a prompt. Other times, you may be asked to develop your own question, problem, or puzzle. In “craft of research” classes and in capstone, for example, you will develop your own research question, puzzle, or problem as part of writing your research proposal.

If you are developing your own research question, begin by deciding what general topic you want to explore and identifying a relevant, compelling, question of appropriate scope to research within this larger topic. Your question should have more than one possible answer, and these answers should not be too obvious, self-evident, or simplistic. **In other words, you want to identify an important question that is open to various perspectives and that you can adequately and manageably explore by drawing upon evidence appropriate to your class.** You don’t want to choose a question whose answer you already know; otherwise, why do the detective work of conducting research at all? You can choose a question for which you have a working claim or hypothesis (based on your research so far), but your research question must be framed in a way that is open to various kinds of evidence.

In the introduction to your paper, you should demonstrate the significance of your research question by explaining its relationship to pressing contemporary problems or to existing debates within the discipline. Your research question might be worthy of your readers’ time and your own research and analysis because of the way it speaks to existing problems in the world today or because of the way it speaks to scholarly debates, or both. Address the “so what?” question: why is this a worthy and important area for research?

Review Existing Literature

The second step of the research process (and political analysis specifically) requires you to have a good grasp on how other scholars would answer your question. How do different schools of thought in the discipline answer your question? How is it answered by the conventional wisdom of the day or in a particular field of study? What does existing scholarship have to say about your question? Has it been asked before? How has it varied in formulation and in the answers given? How is your question different from other formulations of this question and why? **Please note: in our discipline, demonstrating your awareness of perspectives that disagree with you strengthens your paper rather than weakens it.**

Your consideration of existing scholarship may take the form of a “literature review” section in a longer essay. But even if your essay isn’t a fully developed research paper with a literature review, any essay must do the work of setting the context for your own argument and distinguishing it from conventional wisdom or existing or existing approaches. This sometimes called the “They Say” vs. “I Say” distinction.¹ The “They Say” part of an essay summarizes the answers to a research question provided by conventional wisdom or previous scholars. All essays need a “They Say” gesture to highlight the significance of their thesis. The “I Say” part of an essay is your original answer to your research question, the thesis that you will analyze and/or advance by exploring relevant evidence.

A formal literature review or literature review section of a research paper consists of a short bibliographical essay, summarizing and analyzing works that address with your central problem, puzzle, or question. Note that a literature review is not an annotated bibliography of everything that has been done in the field. Instead, the literature review serves to explain to readers what others have said about your question, claim, and/or argument, and to put these researchers into conversation with one another.

If you are writing a fully developed research paper, the literature review section should also demonstrate a clear grasp of different schools of thought in the discipline. Depending on the subdiscipline, you might be asked to explain how different schools would answer your research question, or you might be asked to focus more closely on one school of thought and analyze different competing perspectives and varying arguments within this one school of thought.

¹ Graff, Gerald and Cathy Birkenstein [2009]. *They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*. New York: WW Norton.

Consult the Data and Develop your Working Hypothesis

Once you have a good sense of your research question, you need to consider what kind of data you will consult. In other words, what kinds of source material will help you answer the question, puzzle, or problem that you have developed? In political science, “data” can mean any type of relevant source material that will help you analyze your question: surveys, historical material, interviews, newspapers, or specific texts. You may also draw source material from existing scholarship such as political science journals and books (though using secondary literature in this way is not the same as drawing from secondary literature in your literature review).

In lower-level political science classes, the data that you draw from may be the specific readings you are studying together in the class. In this case, you may consult your data by analyzing specific aspects of the readings that help you explore your question. In higher-level classes and in capstone, though, you will need to find your own source material and figure out what kinds of data are most appropriate for helping you research your question. As you decide what evidence and sources will help you research your chosen question, be sure you focus on reliable scholarly evidence that is appropriate to your class. You might consider the following questions: What is your concrete plan for data collection and what will count as evidence in your project? What kinds of “data” will you collect and how will you access this data? Will you be consulting primary texts, will you be conducting qualitative interviews, doing a content analysis of existing laws, and policies, newspapers, or engaging in a statistical analysis? How is this kind of data and evidence useful for exploring your particular research question?

In political science, there are various ways of collecting data and various methods of analyzing evidence, including statistical methods, comparative case studies, rational choice analysis, sociological methods, close readings (rhetorical and textual analysis), process tracing, qualitative interviews, content analysis. Different methods tend to be used more or less in different subfields. You will get a sense from your professor of the types of primary sources and data most typical in a particular subfield and most useful for your particular essay or project.

Test your Claim and/or Develop your Argument

Once you have consulted your data and developed a working hypothesis, your job is to weigh, assess, and analyze the evidence. Your goal is either a) to make a careful argument for a position that reasonably deals with counter-arguments and evidence (as is characteristic of the social sciences generally), or b) to test a scientifically-

derived claim or hypothesis (as is more typical of the natural sciences). For both modes of writing, though, you need to ask yourself the same questions. What evidence supports your claim? What evidence contradicts it? How will you deal with and respond to contradictory evidence? How will you deal with counter-arguments? In your essay, you will want to be able to address and respond to both kinds of evidence and avoid “cherry-picking” (i.e., only selecting/discussing evidence that supports your claim). Balanced and informed research evaluates, weighs, and responds to a wide range of relevant evidence.

In the course of your research, you may encounter evidence in a primary or secondary source that contradicts your starting thesis or claim. If you cannot address or make sense of this contradictory evidence in light of your thesis or claim, then you need to go back to the start of your essay and rework your initial claim to more accurately reflect all the evidence and then revise your essay accordingly.

If you have done a good job developing a specific research question, consulting the right kinds of data and figuring out which evidence supports your working hypothesis and which evidence contradicts it, your overall claim or argument should become clear. What conclusion can you draw from all this evidence? What does it say? What is the general lesson that your research teaches you? Answering these questions will help you figure out what your paper finds, concludes, or argues.

The introduction to your essay should lay out a well-developed claim that addresses your initial research question. Based on your research and your weighing and analysis of the evidence, you should develop a thesis statement that you can persuasively explore or advance—drawing on appropriate textual evidence—through the course of the essay. The thesis statement should be clearly stated and fully developed to give the reader a full sense of the claim you will be exploring or the argument you will be advancing throughout the essay.

Use Evidence to prove your Thesis

In the body paragraphs of the essay, you will be analyzing and assessing the evidence you’ve marshaled that helps you fully explore your claim and/or advance your argument. Remember to tie your evidence back into your central claim or argument at every point along the way. Be sure to discuss opposing or contradictory evidence as well, situating this evidence in relationship to your argument and relating these discussions back to your thesis statement. You want to analyze your research question and test your claim or advance your argument with informed references to the evidence to present a persuasive, clear, and coherent overall essay.

Revise

In the research process, revision is not just about going back through your essay to correct typos. Once you've written a first draft, you probably need to go back to the beginning of the essay and clarify and refine your thesis statement. After you’ve gotten to the conclusion of your first draft, you should have deeper insight into your central claim or argument. This is the time to revise your introduction to refine and develop it accordingly. Or, as discussed earlier, you may have encountered contradictory evidence that requires you to revise your starting claim to more fully reflect all of the evidence and then carry that revised thesis throughout your essay.

Conventions of Writing in Political Science

Writing in this discipline is not opinion-based, subjective, or rooted in personal narrative or personal bias. **Your essays should strive to achieve the evidence-based and informed type of political analysis described throughout this guide.** Writing in political science is based on research of primary source materials and research into existing scholarly views (or secondary literature), and it takes into account, considers, and addresses contradictory evidence and counter-arguments in its testing of claims and/or the formulation of arguments.

Political science writing generally is not personal and the author is not overtly inserted into the writing. (Though many professors consider it generally acceptable to include sentences such as “in this paper, I argue that...” when outlining your thesis statement, it is always advisable to ask your individual professor before using the first person “I” in your essay).

Terms should be defined at the outset of your essay. You should draw your definitions from authoritative texts in the discipline or dictionaries such as the Oxford English Dictionary (available online through the library).

Political science writing **avoids generalizations and platitudes.**

Writing in our discipline is formal. You are not writing to your diary or posting on Facebook when you are writing a political science essay. You are engaging in political analysis and conducting research, so the writing should be correspondingly formal.

The active voice is standard for political science writing, and you should use active verbs to convey the action in your sentences, without overly relying on “to be” verbs such as “is.”

Sentences should be clear, concise, and simple.

Good political science writing avoids jargon and words and phrases that may sound sophisticated but convey little meaning.

A final note: When we say that writing in political science is not opinion-based, that is not to say that your analyses and critiques are not shaped by your own standpoint and position in the world. We strive for informed, evidence-based analysis and argumentation in this discipline. But your experiences, interests, and passions inevitably shape your writing in various ways that can be valuable: we all see the world from different perspectives that can valuably inform our analysis. While your worldview necessarily influences your writing, it is never a substitute for careful research and balanced analysis. Your personal perspective is only ever a starting point for research, and it should motivate your search for more data, your search for evidence, and your attentiveness to evidence that contradicts this perspective and must also be considered and addressed.

Citation and Formatting

In our discipline, the **Chicago Manual of Style** is the standard citation format. In all classes in our department, we use Kate Turabian's Guide to the Chicago Manual of Style as a source-book for how to conduct research in the discipline as well as proper citation. Guidelines and models for Turabian style are available in the [“Student Resources”](#) section of the Debby Ellis Writing Center website. Within this style of citation, though, you should always check with your professor to see whether they prefer in-text parenthetical citation or footnotes for the citing of sources.