

Writing a Successful Essay: Political Science

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The Basic Elements of an Academic Essay in Response to a Prompt

Before You Write

- Re-read the assignment. Take special notice of any bolded, underlined, or italicized direction
- Note any specific direction given in terms of organization and structure, or what you should (and potentially should not) cover
- Read the criteria on which you'll be graded, if provided
- Think about and write several possible thesis statements. Think about how you would support each one. Consider visually mapping possible responses.
- Freewrite; make an outline

An Effective Introduction

An introduction needs a clear thesis statement, but what else?

- What is the purpose of an introduction?
 - Introduce your topic; create interest; identify your main argument; preview your essay (roadmap)
- You are seeking to create a compelling, clear, and convincing paragraph drawing your reader into the rest of the essay

Main Paragraphs

Your paragraphs should support the main argument (thesis) of your paper.

- Development and details in each paragraph should support your thesis
- At the end of each paragraph, re-read it and ask yourself, 'Does this connect to and develop my argument?'

Each paragraph will have *its own main idea* that must be supported

- There should be a topic sentence early in the paragraph that works as a mini-thesis statement for that paragraph
- The argument of each paragraph should support your thesis (develop one aspect of argument, respond to counterarguments, introduce supporting evidence, etc.)

Some 'moves' you might make within a paragraph

- Develop and connect different sub-points of your main argument/thesis
- Provide supporting details for paragraph's main ideas
- Synthesize course material with your own argument and perspective
- Put readings in conversation with one another through your argumentation
- Respond to potential counterarguments

Conclusion

This is the last chance to make an impression on your reader. Try to accomplish three objectives: 1) restate the main argument of the essay; 2) briefly summarize the main subpoints of your arguments, in relation to your main argument; 3) leave reader with interesting sense of your argument in response to problem

Revision (suggested: do this on a paper copy, not on the computer)

- Re-read the assignment! Did you: answer the question?; follow the specific directions?; meet logistical/formatting requirements?
- Start your revision from the conclusion: you often have a better idea of your argument at the end of a paper than at the beginning
 - Revise thesis, introduction, organization, sub-arguments, etc. from this perspective
- How would you write a critique of your paper? Revise based on this

Editing: read for mechanics – grammar, syntax, etc.; reading paper aloud to yourself or friend, colleague, classmate, etc. will catch most errors

Thesis Statements

Thesis statements are more than a vague and general statement about your main idea. They are active statements that establish a clear, yet arguable, position that can be supported by developing related sub-arguments.

- Can be one or two sentences

Good thesis statements are...

- Unified: have a singular purpose, and if there are multiple points they are connected to an overall idea
 - Not unified: Detective stories are not a high form of literature, but people have always been fascinated by them, and many fine writers have experimented with them.
 - Unified: Detective stories prove popular with readers because of the emotional responses they generate as well as the vivid imagery of the text, which work together to establish a relationship between the writer and the text.
- Specific: directly responds to prompt/problem, making a particular argument
 - Not specific: James Joyce's *Ulysses* is very interesting.
 - Specific: James Joyce's *Ulysses* helped create a new way for writers to deal with the unconscious by utilizing the findings of Freudian psychology and introducing the techniques of literary stream-of-consciousness.
- Arguable: someone could argue against your thesis statement; it is not a self-evident statement
 - Not arguable: This essay explores the politics of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.
 - Arguable: This essay contends that political arguments about class and morality in early 19th century England are the primary influence in Austen's characterization of Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Making Arguments and Critical Evaluations

Writing as joining an academic conversation:

- Sources are not just providing content and information, but making an argument in the context of an ongoing scholarly conversation built around critical analysis and evaluation of arguments
- In writing, you intervene to make an argument in these conversations
 - Doing this successfully requires providing warrants, justifications, and explanations for the arguments being made – your arguments, and the argument with which you work
 - You must evaluate competing arguments

SOME types of evaluations of arguments, with example argumentative moves (Graff and Birkenstein 2014, 60-64)

- Missing factor: A overlooks _____
- Unexamined assumptions: A relies on the question assumption _____, however _____
- More current events and research: As recent research X has shown, A's argument _____ is insufficient for explaining _____
- Contradiction: A's argument contradicts itself: one the one hand, _____; on the other, _____
- Confirmation: More recent research confirms A's contention that _____
- Extrapolation: A's argument _____ is helpful because it illuminates problem _____
- Mixed evaluation: A's argument is correct on _____, however it fails in the area of _____
- Combine arguments: A provides ample evidence that _____, however B's argument _____ must be considered to fully explain _____

Portions of this handout adapted from:

Anderson, Steph M. 2012. "Elements of Successful Argumentation and the Drafting Process," Hunter WAC Program.

Bean, John C. 2011. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Graff, Gerald and Cathy Birkenstein. 2014. *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*. 3rd ed. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company

Zitani, Ellen. n.d. "Mechanics of a Paper" Hunter WAC Program