HANDBOOK FOR
WRITING BETTER
POLITICAL SCIENCE PAPERS

PREPARED BY THE
POLITICAL SCIENCE DEPARTMENT
A Note To Readers

While good writing is important across all academic disciplines, it is especially relevant to the world of politics. Political leaders and thinkers ranging from Thomas Jefferson to Karl Marx have used the power of the pen to shape events and change the way people think and behave. At all levels of government, struggles over “who gets what” often involve persuading others. Cogent and powerful writing is an essential element of the art of persuasion.

Of course, effective written communication is indispensable no matter which career you eventually choose. Writing well is a key to success. The ability to write clearly and effectively is one of the most important skills a college education can provide.

One aspect of effective writing is following the "rules of the game"; that is, proper form regarding presentation, citation, punctuation, spelling, and organization. This guide has been prepared by the Political Science Department to help you apply these rules when writing papers in Political Science courses. It is the expectation of the Political Science faculty that students will carefully read and utilize this guide. Of course, faculty members may alter these guidelines to suit specific course requirements.

Be sure to check with the instructor in each course regarding which sections of this document are relevant. This guide is designed to help you meet the minimum requirements necessary for papers in Political Science. Your grade for written work is determined by content and form as it relates to a particular assignment. This manual is concerned exclusively with form and proper citation.

Good writing is ultimately rewarding, but it requires hard work, discipline, and revision. We hope this guide serves as a valuable tool in the writing process and a handy reference when writing papers for Political Science courses.
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Basic Presentation

One aspect of a research paper that students often overlook is the presentation of their work. While presentation takes a back seat to substance, it is very distracting, and may even border on frustrating, when the reader has difficulty following the argument of the paper because the print is too light or the font is unusual. The following points are basic elements for a good presentation:

- The print should be dark enough to read easily, and only white paper is acceptable.
- Margins should be 1 inch on all sides.
- Font size should be 10 or 12 point and safe choices for font style are Times New Roman or Courier.
- The font style should not distract from the substance; e.g., do not italicize the entire text.
- Staple multiple pages at the top left hand corner.
- Double spacing is the norm.
- Do not skip an extra space between paragraphs when using double spacing.
- Two spaces should follow the period of every sentence.
- If you find an error in grammar or spelling, reprint the entire corrected page.
- Do not start a new paragraph or new heading with less than three (3) lines at the bottom of the page. Begin the next page with either a new paragraph or heading.
- If your work is being sent electronically to your professor, be sure to follow the rules established for submission. Always include your name, the name and section number of the course, and the title of the assignment at the beginning of the paper.
- Page numbering for a paper is a must. The body of the paper is numbered consecutively in Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3, etc.) placed at the bottom center of each page. Pages containing notes and references continue the Arabic numbering of the body of the paper. However, some professors may prefer pages to be numbered in the upper right hand corner.
Style and Spelling

Although every author must develop his or her own unique style, social science typically rewards authors for being logical, precise, and concise. The basic unit of writing is the paragraph. The progression of paragraphs in a paper should flow logically from one to the next. Just as a good paper needs a strong introduction, a good paragraph needs a strong topic sentence. The sentences which follow in the paragraph must be related to the same topic and the sentences within a paragraph should flow naturally. It is rare that a sentence can stand alone as a paragraph. When an idea is introduced it needs to be developed. That is the function of a paragraph.

Along with poor presentation, poor grammar and misspelled words are the most distracting features of many undergraduate papers. While we are not English professors, we are knowledgeable about the mechanics of good writing. The following is a list of the most common mistakes made by students:

1. **Spell Checking**: ALWAYS use spell check. Be aware, however, that spell check cannot help you if you do not know the difference between ‘their’ and ‘there’, ‘its’ and ‘it’s’, and ‘to’, ‘two’, or ‘too’.

2. **Proof Reading**: ALWAYS proof read your paper. For the reasons cited above, and because many people sometimes cannot see their own mistakes after extensive re-reading of their own manuscript, it is always helpful to have someone you trust proof your paper one time. Also, reading the paper aloud once can clear up many awkward phrases and sentence fragments.
3. **Define** all terms you are using early on in the paper. For example, if you are discussing communism, tell the reader what its main tenets are and any other information that would help the reader understand the term or concept. If you are explaining the dangers of factions, as does *Federalist #10*, be sure to explain what a faction is. Do not assume the reader has the same familiarity with the terms in your paper as you do.

4. **Use of Numerals:** Do not spell out dates or other serial numbers. Write them in figures or in Roman notation, as appropriate. For example:

   August 9, 1918
   Chapter X
   Rule 3
   5th Division

5. **Parentheses:** A sentence containing an expression in parenthesis is punctuated outside of the marks of parenthesis, exactly as if the expression in parenthesis were absent. The expression within is punctuated as if it stood by itself, except that the final stop is omitted unless it is a question mark or an exclamation point.

   I went to his house yesterday (my third attempt to see him), but he had left town.

   He declares (and why should we doubt his good faith?) that he is now certain of success.

   He is an only child and an orphan. (Both of his parents died when he was very young.)
6. **Quotations:** Formal quotations, which are used as documentary evidence, employed as a complete argument, or a stated fact, must be introduced by a colon and enclosed in quotation marks.

   The provision of the Constitution is: "No tax or duty shall be laid on articles exported from any state."

All quotations require a citation which follow at the end of the quotation. This is more fully explained on page 13 in the discussion of referencing quotations.

Quotations used to continue a thought or argument, or a quote that is the direct object of a verb, are preceded by a comma, and enclosed in quotation marks. To illustrate:

As Winston Churchill once said, "I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma..." ([www.quotationspage.com/quotes](http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes), 1 October 2002).

Ronald Reagan said, "My fellow Americans, I am pleased to tell you I just signed legislation which outlaws Russia forever. The bombing begins in five minutes.” (Ibid.)

**Long quotations**, which are those over forty words, are blocked off and single spaced, but not enclosed in quotation marks.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the great Russian dissident, said:

Do not pursue what is illusory-property and position: all that is gained at the expense of your nerves decade after decade can be confiscated in one fearful night. Live with a steady superiority over life-don’t be afraid of misfortunes, and do not yearn after happiness; it is after all, all the same: the bitter doesn’t last forever and the sweet never fills the cup to overflowing. ([www.quotationspage.com/quotes](http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes), 1 October 2002).

Proverbial expressions and familiar phrases of literary origin require no quotation marks. For example:

These are the times that try men's souls.

_Or_

He lives far from the maddening crowd.
7. **Punctuation**: The following is a brief overview of the most commonly used and abused articles of punctuation. As you may see in some examples, the use of punctuation can greatly change the meaning of a sentence.

   a. *The Comma*: Just as pauses and variations in voice pitch help to convey the meaning of spoken sentences, punctuation helps to convey the meaning of written sentences. Commas signal a small interruption in a sentence. Let the following sentences serve as examples to guide your usage of the comma:

      After the professor answered, Martin Keith left the room.
      After the professor answered Martin, Keith left the room.

      "This silence is not surprising, for in those circles Marxism is still regarded with suspicion" (Turabian 1996, 53).

      "Attending the conference were Farmer, Johnson, and Kendrick" (Turabian, 53).

      "Many people feel resentful because they think they have suffered an unjust fate; that is, they look on illness, bereavement, or disrupted domestic or working conditions as being undeserved" (Turabian, 55).

      The melon was pink, sweet, and juicy.

   b. *The Semicolon*: The semicolon is often a great mystery for college students. Its job is to link closely related clauses or to separate sentence elements that contain internal commas. The semicolon is common in formal or literary works. Here are a few examples to illustrate its usage:

      Politicians may refrain from negative campaigning for a time; but when the race gets close, they can’t seem to resist trying to dredge up personal dirt to use on their opponents.

      "There are those who think of freedom in terms of social and economic egalitarianism; thus, reformist governments of the Left are inherently viewed with greater favor than the regimes of the Right." (Turabian, 57)
c. *The Colon:* The colon can serve several purposes. The first is to call attention to the summary, series, or quotation that follows it. For example,

> Surprisingly enough, my first impression of Nairobi was that it was just like any American city: skyscrapers, movie theaters, discos, and crime.

The colon may also introduce a second independent clause that explains or amplifies the first independent clause.

> For I had no brain tumor, no eyestrain, no high blood pressure, nothing wrong with me at all: I simply had migraine headaches, and migraine headaches were, as everyone who did not have them knew, imaginary.

A third use of a colon is between figures in time references and between titles and subtitles.

> At 12:15 a.m. the phone rang.

> I just read *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition.*

It is also customary to use a capital letter to begin a quoted sentence that follows a colon.

> Claire Safran puts out two of the things that cannot be explained: "One of them is poltergeists. Another is teenagers."

For a complete discussion of the correct usage of punctuation, see Harcourt Brace Publisher's *Harbrace College Handbook*, 12th edition.

8. Never use contractions in a paper. Use the complete set of words that the contraction conveys, such as “it is” for “it’s”, “they are” for “they’re”, and “there is” for “there’s”.


9. Learn the difference among, and how to use, the following groups of words:

affect, effect
two, to, too
their, there, they’re
it’s, its, its’

These are the mistakes most commonly made in student papers. Being mindful of these errors, and proof reading your paper to eliminate them, will go a long way in improving the effectiveness of your written communication.

**Design for Short Papers**

This section provides the basic outline that should guide students when writing short papers in Political Science courses. A short paper is seven pages or less in length and deals with a limited topic. All of the basic guidelines discussed above apply to short papers as well as long papers. Short papers generally consist of three sections; an introduction, the body of the paper, and the conclusion.

The introduction to your paper presents the topic you are going to explore. It tells the reader what the paper is about and advances your thesis or main argument in brief. The introduction is the first part of your paper that the reader (in this case, the one who will be grading your assignment) will see. Try your best to make the introduction well written and engaging. If there is a powerful quote or statistic that raises the issue discussed in the paper, use it in the introduction to pique the interest of the reader. In addition, the introduction usually provides the reader with a brief outline of the rest of the paper. Still, keep the introduction short, as most of the information should be covered in the body of the paper.
The body of the paper is the home for the main arguments and/or evidence of the paper. Each main point, or argument, should be presented in a different paragraph. It is generally a good idea to lead each paragraph with a topic sentence that indicates the major thrust of the paragraph. The body of the paper should flow from one paragraph to another with smooth transitions tying them together.

The conclusion of a paper does not present new material, rather it serves to bring closure to the paper as a whole. It is not necessary to restate every idea discussed in the paper, but the major points should be reviewed. If you pay close attention to the introduction, body, and the conclusion, you will write with greater effect in your Political Science classes.

Design for Research Papers

This section will discuss the format of a research paper which usually is at least twelve (12) pages in length. The organization of a research paper is usually divided into several major sections which are discussed in some detail below. While this format is generally accepted in the discipline, it may not be used in its entirety by each faculty member. Therefore, it is your responsibility to check with each faculty member concerning which sections you are to include for a particular assignment.

*Major Sections of the Paper*

Normally, a major research paper contains at least the following major sections: Introduction, Literature Review, Procedures (or Methods), Findings and Discussion, and Summary and Conclusion.
One of the best ways to keep both yourself and the reader on track throughout the paper is to divide the major sections of the paper using headings. Some faculty may demand that you do so and it is wise to ask what each faculty member expects. If so, label the literature review section, the procedures section, the findings section, and so forth. In addition to dividing your paper with major headings for each section, you may also wish to subdivide sections with subheadings. The use of headings and sub-headings is discussed on pages 10 and 11.

a. Introduction: The introduction contains a general description of the problem or issue to be addressed. A clear statement of the paper's topic is essential in every paper and should be stated early so that the reader knows the theme of the paper. This is a serious omission in many papers and one that is easily avoided.

The introduction also explains why this topic is important or interesting. Explain your reasons for studying the topic. One way to approach this is to place the topic into a social, historical, or an academic context. Finally, the introduction should contain a preview of the paper's sections and their sequence. A paragraph which serves as a "road map" to the paper can be extremely helpful to both the writer and the reader.

b. Literature Review: In the literature review, you must articulate carefully what is already known about your topic area. What has been done in this area by previous investigators, scholars, historians, or other “expert” authors? More ambitious literature reviews go beyond summarizing what has been said about a topic; you may wish to evaluate previous studies and say how your approach to the subject will be an improvement. The amount and complexity of the material presented in this section depends upon the topic and your goal. While it may be true that there is “nothing new under the sun”, it is your job to investigate and acknowledge what is out there.
c. Procedures: The section on procedures explains your research in detail. What exactly are you looking at? How do you intend to proceed? What are the advantages and the limitations of the procedures you have selected? Make absolutely clear to the reader what it is you are trying to explain and what you think will help explain it.

d. Findings and Discussion: The findings section is where you present the results of your research. It is in the discussion section that you make your major contributions to the paper. Discuss and evaluate your findings, particularly in light of the previous findings discussed in the literature review. This is the “body” of the paper and is usually the longest section.

e. Summary and Conclusion: The summary and conclusion summarizes your findings and suggests implications for future research. This is also the appropriate place for recommendations or personal evaluations. As a general rule, it is best to exclude opinions and advice from the findings and discussion sections. However, they need not be eliminated from research altogether. If you believe that the personal touch adds to the paper, the conclusion is a good place to add this material.

f. Headings and Subheadings: One of the best ways to keep both yourself and the reader on track throughout the paper is to divide the major sections of the paper using headings. Every section should be labeled from the introduction through the conclusion. Remember to number your abstract section in small roman numerals as page ii. The title page is considered p.i, but is not numbered.

In addition to dividing your paper with major headings for each section, you may also wish to subdivide sections with subheadings. The following will both explain and illustrate proper use for headings and subheadings.
g. Main Headings: For main headings, start a new page. Type the heading using both upper and lower case **bold-faced** 17pt lettering and center it at the top of the page. This is just an example, otherwise a main heading would go on top of the next page.

**Example:**

**Main Heading**

Main headings refer to the major sections of the paper, i.e. introduction, findings and discussion, etc. Two lines should always be skipped between a main heading and the start of the first paragraph.

*Sub-headings* For sub-headings, do not start a new page. Skip a line between the last line of text and the sub-head; sub-head at the left margin, using upper and lower cases, and italicize. Leave one line blank after the sub-head and indent the first line of the new paragraph under the subheading as usual.

Sub-headings refer to different aspects of the main heading. If you were writing about **Economic Relations with Developing Countries**, a subheading could be *Bilateral Trade*.

*Sub-sub-headings:* For sub-sub-headings (ss-head), do not start a new page. Leave one line blank between the last line of text and ss-head. Then, tab in and type your ss-head as you would a normal sentence. Italicize it and follow it with a colon. Skip two spaces before beginning a paragraph. For example, after your sub-heading of *Bilateral Trade*, a sub-sub-heading could be *On the export side*.

The following is an example without text:
Referencing

When doing scholarly work, it is critical to include the sources of your information for two major reasons. First, it gives credit to the people who did the initial research. To copy someone else's work from any source, including the Internet, without citing that work is stealing the work of others.

Second, citing sources is to help others in the future. A clear citation allows other researchers to identify and find those materials of interest to them. This is also a good clue for research of your own. Check the footnotes of your sources and follow their citations to other sources. This can also help tremendously in preparing a Literature Review.

A citation should be used whenever the information presented is not your own work, including ideas, facts, or language. When you are relying on someone else's work, always cite the source. For many of your papers, you will be relying on arguments from in-class reading or lecture. Normally, mentioning the author of the book assigned in class is sufficient. Citations for works not on the class reading list are placed in parenthesis, and include the author's last name and date of publication, page or pages, e.g. (Janda 1990, 12). The citation should be placed at the end of the sentence or paragraph in which you have used the ideas or arguments. Multiple sources are cited using the same format, e.g. (Janda 1990, 12; Wright 1992, 10).
Quotations: Any quotations used must be exactly the same as in the original. Normally you will preserve the form and content of the quotation, including punctuation and emphasis. As a general rule, every quotation needs a citation, or reference, that defines the source of the quote.

The source of direct quotations should normally be identified in the text, rather than in a footnote, and should include, in parenthesis: the author's name, year of publication, and page number. For example, in a paper about the President of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Havel, first introduce the subject and then quote from one of his works, as follows:

Vaclav Havel, the acclaimed playwright and defender of human rights, has written about his experiences in the 1970s and remarked:

John Lennon once said that the 1970s weren’t worth a damn. And, indeed, when we look back on them today-- I’m thinking now in the world context-they seem, compared with the rich and productive 1960s, to be lacking in significance, style, and atmosphere, with no vivid spiritual and cultural movements. The seventies were bland, boring, and bleak. (Havel 1990, 119)

Always frame the significance of the quote after it is made so that the quote is not the end of the paragraph.

In well known sources, or sources where the author and work are known to the reader, cite only the page number or location of the specific quote. For example:

The Federalist argued that, "If men were angels, no government would be necessary" (Federalist #51).

Footnotes: Footnotes are normally used only when there is additional material not discussed in the text. For example, a footnote might define a term or identify someone referenced in the body of the text. Check with your professor on whether footnotes are required; it may be a part of the research paper assignment for that class.
Paraphrasing: Paraphrasing is restating an author's ideas or arguments in your own words. Since they are not your own ideas or arguments, a citation is required. Normally, the citation will follow the paragraph in which the ideas are discussed and are cited as those illustrated on page 12.

Bibliography: The bibliography should include full citations, listed in alphabetical order, for all sources cited in the body of the paper. It should not include works that were not cited in the paper. Examples of different kinds of citations are provided below. As a general rule, it should include the following:

1) The author(s) or editor(s) of the work.
2) The title of the work, including any subtitles that appear on the title page.
3) Publisher or medium through which the work was procured and the location where it was published.
4) The date on which the work was published, written, or accessed.

Examples:

Books:


Edited Volumes: Edited volumes are composed of articles by a number of authors. The editor(s) of the book is not necessarily the author of the articles within. Make sure you cite the particular article in the edited volume, such as:

**Journal Articles:** Journal articles are those articles that have been "peer-reviewed". This means that they are subjected to review by experts in the field and judged to meet the standards of the discipline. Normally, research papers will rely on journal articles rather than newspapers and magazines, e.g.:


**Newspapers or Magazines:** Generally, newspapers and magazines should not be used for research papers, except for factual information. But, if these sources are used, cite them as follows:


It is best to check with your professor on the advisability of using newspapers and magazines as scholarly references. Some paper topics may be so timely as to require citations of this nature.

**Abstracts, Reviews and other Summaries:** In your research, you should normally read the original sources and not rely on summaries or abstracts. Summaries and abstracts can be biased, and by citing a source, you are indicating that you read and understood the source itself. Reviews are occasionally appropriate if you want to cite the reviewer's opinion.
Using and Citing the Internet

The following APA guide for citing all types of electronic resources (Web pages, E-mail, discussion lists, CD-ROM) is available on the Web at

http://www.uvm.edu/~xli/reference/apa.html. A printout of this information is also kept at the library reference desk inside the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 4th ed. If you would like to review it, ask a reference librarian.

Basic Format:

Author/editor. (Year, month date). Title (edition), [type of medium]. Producer (optional). Available: Supplier/Database identifier or number [access date].

Author-When no obvious author or editor is on the page: If the element of a web page lists an e-mail address, and no other information is available to suggest the author of the page, the e-mail address should fill the author’s position of the reference. Generic aliases (e.g. webmaster, maintainer) are an exception. In these cases, treat the organization that the documents represent as the author (e.g. Frostburg State University). If there is a link on the Web page to another page on the site that may list an author, check it before using an institutional name or e-mail address.

Posting Date: Use the full date the information appeared on the web page.

Title: Use the title listed at the top of the document or on the title line at the extreme top of the screen (above the browser buttons). If they are significantly different, both may be included.

Type of Medium: There are many of these, but the most common are: Online (use for all sites viewed via the WWW, including gopher, ftp, etc.), E-mail, and CD-ROM.
Available: List the exact URL (what is listed in the location box) for the Web page you are referencing.

Access Date: The date (year, month, day) that you accessed the Web page.

Example:

Web Evaluation Criteria

It is also critical to evaluate the material on the web before accepting it as credible. The Political Science Department thanks Randy Lowe, of the FSU library, for sharing his insights on this issue which appears below:

A. Author
   1. Who is the author or producer?
   2. What are the author’s credentials—educational background, past writings, or experience—in this area?
   3. Is the contact information for the author or producer included in the document? Is there a means of contacting the producer for more information?
   4. Is the author associated with an institution or organization?
   5. Is the site sponsored or co-sponsored by an authoritative individual or group?

B. Date of Publication
   On web pages, the date of the last revision is usually at the bottom of the home page, sometimes every page.
   1. When was the Web item produced?
   2. When was the Web item last revised?
   3. How up-to-date are the links? How complete and accurate are the information and the links provided?
   4. Is the source current or out-of-date for your topic?

C. Content
   1. What is the purpose of the Web Page and what does it contain? Is any sort of bias evident?
   2. How valuable is the information provided in the web page (intrinsic value)?
   3. Is the information covered a fact, an opinion, or propaganda?
   4. Is the author’s point of view objective and impartial? Is the language free of emotion-rousing words and bias?
   5. Are there links or citations to find additional information? How reliable are the links; are there blind links or references to sites which have moved?
   6. Does the information appear to be valid and well-researched, or is it questionable and unsupported by evidence?
   7. Is the information presented in a logical manner?

D. Coverage
   1. Does the work update other sources, substantiate other materials you have read, or add new information?
   2. Does it extensively or marginally cover your topic?
   3. Have you explored enough sources to obtain a variety of viewpoints?

Evaluating web resources with these questions in mind will qualitatively improve your paper.
Annotated Bibliography

Sometimes, faculty will ask for an annotated bibliography either as a part of a paper or as a separate assignment. The following is an example of how to annotate, or explain, bibliographic references:


- This is an excellent source of practical exercises and experimentation with classroom assessment techniques. I will use it as source of examples to demonstrate that alternative teaching techniques require alternative assessment techniques.


- This is a good source of theoretical approaches to different assessment techniques in the classroom. Provides useful background information for me to frame the arguments of my paper.


- This provides the underlying definitional materials for this paper: what is good teaching? How can it be assessed? Provides background material for my thesis that teaching does not have to be done the traditional way.


- This provides a good basic introduction to key concepts and history of the modern Middle East.


- This provides a good source for general information about the history of women and politics in the US. It is also a good source of brief articles about the impact of women in legislatures. It will be a basic resource for background information on the historical status of women in politics.


- This provides an overview of the development of the Brazilian political system. It will serve as the primary source of Brazilian political history for my paper.
Bibliography


Paper Format Checklist

Use this as a quick reference to improve the visual impact of your paper. Does your paper:

☐ Have a title page including your name, course, instructor, and paper title?

☐ Have one-inch margins on every page?

☐ Number all pages appropriately?

☐ Have a font size at 10 or 12 point?

☐ Use double-spacing on every page?

☐ Have two spaces between every sentence?

☐ Have a staple in the upper left hand corner?

☐ Have print that is dark and clear?

☐ Not use contractions?