Writing in Political Science

Writings in political science examine the political landscape, both how it should be and how it actually is. Writing that you may be required to do spans from historical analysis reaching back to past centuries, to modern day examinations of functional or dysfunctional institutions, to the implications that historical and current patterns and trends may have for future political policies. Writing in this discipline will require students to think critically, draw connections, and evaluate past and current political changes.

At UVM, the Department of Political Science is divided into four sub-fields:

- **American political systems** focuses on the political system and governance in the United States. Classes will focus on the system as a whole as well as examine in more detail the particular institutions of the American political system.
- **International relations** examines the interactions between countries, past and present. Topics range from international political grievances to interstate commerce to international security concerns.
- **Comparative politics** concerns itself with the domestic policies of a country and compares them to various other systems of rule. It considers each country as a case study in the larger context of a specific regime type.
- **Political thought** is distinct from the other three sub-fields because it examines how states should be instead of how they actually are.

These tips will focus most heavily on the social science sub-fields (American Political Systems, International Relations, and Comparative Politics). Political theory writing, because it concerns itself with normative studies and theory, tends to be structured more like a philosophy paper than a social science paper.

Getting Started

How to Prepare for an Essay in Political Science

Most of the information on how to write for political science concerns structuring and formatting essays, deciding what types of evidence to use, and how to coherently integrate all of your information into the essays.

However!
There is a great amount of preparation that needs to be done before beginning to write the essay. Starting by carefully considering the prompt, you will need to use relevant sources to collect the pertinent information, while paying attention to citations and bibliographic information as you take notes.

Read through the assignment or prompt thoroughly

Topics are rarely straightforward and simple. Often there will be various parts to a question, so make sure you understand all parts of the question before beginning to brainstorm. Understanding the question fully will ensure that you do not spend hours working on an essay that in fact may not answer the prompt at all.

Pay attention to terms like describe, explain, compare, etc. These are called directives. Each directive has a different meaning and will require a different essay structure.

When writing in Political Science, the professor will sometimes give a broad prompt and sometimes give a very specific prompt. It is very important to answer any and all components to the prompt. Pay attention to each part of the prompt, because many professors ask several questions that need to be answered. In other prompts, there aren't as many questions and so there are fewer components that need to be included in the paper. This doesn't mean that the paper with fewer questions will be shorter than the paper with more questions. Some prompts with fewer components are actually meant to be longer than ones that have more components. This just means that you need to give more specific information and more examples for the prompt.

For each of the four sample prompts below, you can link to an example of how one might structure the essay, based on what the prompt asks for. Each is merely an example; there are many additional ways to structure the paper. Unless specifically instructed not to, use your notes and any readings done for class. In each of the examples given, the information and readings should come only from what was done for the class. The professor will indicate if you need to use outside research.

You may notice that each of the prompts requires you to make an argument. This will always be true. The argument that you are making should compose the thesis statement, and each paragraph of the paper should support your argument in an important way.

Research: Class Sources & Outside Sources

Whether to use class sources or outside sources depends on the level of the class and the professor's expectations. Make sure to check with the professor what the expectations are so that you can correctly and fully use all of the resources that are available to you.

- **Class sources:** There is a reason that professors assign readings for class! If there is a class reading that has to do with the essay topic, it would be smart to use this information in your essay. In addition, you will have likely discussed the reading in class and will therefore have class notes to draw on for information.
• **Outside sources:** These are any sources that are not part of class readings. If the literature of a specific topic seems overwhelming to you and you don't know where to start, ask your professor. As the expert in this field, the professor can help you find the most relevant source pertaining to your topic. You can also find very useful guide points to key resources in Political Science and related fields on the UVM libraries webpage, at [http://researchguides.uvm.edu/politicalscience](http://researchguides.uvm.edu/politicalscience)

• **Do not use Internet sources unless they are from a database or a verified website.** For links to websites for research in political science that are recommended by the reference librarians at UVM, go to [http://researchguides.uvm.edu/content.php?pid=8809&sid=59067](http://researchguides.uvm.edu/content.php?pid=8809&sid=59067). Always be sure to acknowledge the source of information, especially from the Internet, because the source could be biased. Political issues often have a lot of discussion/information out there about them, and a lot of it contains bias or has a certain agenda. Look at that when deciding whether or not to use a source.

**Prepare your citations as you research**

As you are taking notes, keep track of all of the relevant information about the source that you will need to write proper citations and reference entries when you are writing your actual essay. It is much harder to go back to find the information while you are writing your essay if you don't write it down while researching! You can keep track of your sources in your own notes or you can electronically keep track of your sources with programs like EndNote or Zotero. The library has a explanations and downloads for these programs here: [http://library.uvm.edu/guides/manage/index.php](http://library.uvm.edu/guides/manage/index.php)

In your notes, be very careful to indicate when you have taken the exact words from a source: put quotation marks around those words, even when you're not quoting an entire passage. Come up with a method for distinguishing between your own words and words taken directly from a source. For example, when you've paraphrased or summarized text from a source or are reflecting on a source and how it might prove useful for your paper, put those words in brackets. This will help you avoid accidental plagiarism.

There is no set citation format in political science, so be sure to read the assignment carefully. If the assignment does not say to use a specific citation style, you can either check with your professor or just pick one. If you pick one, be consistent and make sure you cite everything taken from sources. Just because a specific format is not listed does not mean professors don't want you to cite things. They do. Otherwise, that's plagiarism. Some common citation styles to use in political science papers are

- [MLA](http://library.uvm.edu/guides/citation/mla.php)
- [Chicago Style](http://library.uvm.edu/guides/citation/chicago.php)

**Constructing an Argument**

When asked to give advice about writing political science papers, Professor Ellen Andersen explained that most papers written for political sciences classes are arguments. “However,” she
said, “do not write a persuasive essay about your opinion on the subject. Instead, take evidence and use it to support an academic argument. Use this academic argument to show your learning. Do not decide on an argument you want to make and then make it, regardless of what the evidence says. Be sure to engage with the other side of the debate honestly. Rather than dismissing it, think about it. That is how real growth happens.” For most assignments, you can follow a very [basic format for an academic argument](#). Begin the process by organizing all of your information in a manner that works best for you. You can then start to construct your [thesis statement](#).

**The basic format of a political science essay**

I. **Introduction**
   A. The Intro should articulate a clear argument and outline the paper’s structure explicitly. It can be a couple of sentences or a couple of paragraphs, or even a couple of pages for a really long paper. Make sure that your thesis responds to all aspects of the assignment.
   B. To show how your argument builds on previous research on your topic, include a literature review. You can do this as part of your introduction, in a section immediately following your introduction, or within each of your body sections, whichever seems most appropriate for your paper.

II. **Body Sections**
   A. You can have as many body sections as you need.
   B. Body sections just mean you’re making a point about one aspect of your topic. They can have just one paragraph or as many as you need to make your point. For example, if you’re talking about the process of a bill becoming a law, you’re going to have subtopics within those over-arching sections, like what happens in the House, what happens in the Senate, and then what happens when they both finally agree on a version of the bill—and that's okay. Just be aware of staying on-topic and transitioning smoothly from one to the next.
   C. How to set up your body paragraphs
      a. Small thesis: what is this paragraph about? It should be your starter sentence, and also tie neatly into the last sentence (flow is important)!
      b. Evidence and analysis. The important thing to remember here is that you're not going “Quote 1,” “Quote 2,” “Quote 3,” and then analysis of quote 2, analysis of quote 3. You should be giving your evidence and analyzing it as you go; tell us what it means that the House is mad about an amendment the Senate added to a bill before you assault us with a quote about how the President feels.
      c. Summarizing/transition sentence. Finish up what you’re saying, and then in the same sentence or another sentence, explain the train of thought that leads to your next point/paragraph.

III. **Conclusion**
   A. Your conclusion should tie back to your thesis, but DO NOT JUST RESTATE YOUR THESIS.
a. Before writing your conclusion, take this opportunity to review your essay. Does your essay follow your thesis statement? Have you created an argument and provided evidence that supports this thesis? If yes, then go on to write your conclusion. If no, consider changing your thesis (and revising as appropriate).

b. Be careful that the restatement of the thesis doesn't seem like you're copying and pasting your thesis statement from the introduction. Your conclusion needs to be the summation of your entire essay; it’s your chance to state your point strongly and tie up any loose ends.

c. Do not introduce new figures or statistics or evidence to prove your point. You should be done with introducing information. Now you're telling us what it means, why it's significant on a broader scale or in a bigger picture, and why we should care.

**Outlining, Grouping, Mind-mapping, Free Writing…Organize your thoughts!**

Conceptual and factual knowledge is essential in a political science paper–interesting metaphors, grand generalizations, and a lot of “BS” will not lead to a smart paper (and will be quickly recognized by your professor). The key is to develop a solid argument with supportive evidence. It is also essential that you understand your argument in order to convincingly and eloquently present it to the reader—if you're not sure, the reader won’t be either!

There are many different ways to go about organizing a paper. To perfect that crucial organization element, consider using one of the four common approaches illustrated below. Each example is for an essay exploring connections between political power and power over the media.

- Make an outline! Outlines can tell you how organized your paper is, where there are holes in your argument that require more research, or where information may need to be cut.
If you don't like the strict formatting of an outline, try organizing your thoughts through **bulleted lists**.

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**Principle 1:** Political power can usually be translated into power over the media.

- More political power equals more influence in the media
- Presidential office vs. fringe political groups
- "Front door" vs. "Back door"
- Implications?

**Principle 2:** When the authorities lose control over the political Environment, they also lose control over the news

"..."
• If you like diagrams, consider drawing a **mind map or web** that shows the connections between your ideas.

![Diagram of a web association showing connections between political elements such as presidential office, front door vs. back door, principle of power, and different types of offices.

etc. ... etc. ...]

• If you’re more of a puzzler, try **writing your information on separate note cards and then rearranging them to physically build a picture of your argument**. This can also be done electronically by typing up all of your information and then rearranging it on a computer.
If you don’t yet know what sections to break your paper into, try starting with a free write that focuses on the prompt. You can see what ideas you have and start to find some connections between them.

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Write a Thesis Statement!

A thesis is…

- …an arguable statement that will serve as a condensed version of the argument that you make in the paper.
- …NOT a factual statement about your topic.
- …your opportunity to make an assertive claim that you will then back up using your collected evidence in your body paragraphs. In essence, it will provide a “roadmap” for the rest of the paper.
- …not necessarily just one sentence.

How do I construct my thesis statement?

1. After having organized all of the information that you consider pertinent to the prompt, you will have likely noticed some form of argument that all your information is building
to. Investigate this further and determine if there is some sort of claim that your evidence naturally points to.

a. If you did not see a natural argument emerging, dig further, rearrange your information to see if something else emerges, or consider doing more research that would provide you with more information on the topic.

2. Pull out the key ideas from the argument that you begin to see forming and write down what you think you could argue. Remember that a thesis can be rewritten many, many times and what you write down first is in no way set in stone. In fact, you should spend some time rewriting and reevaluating your thesis in order to see if the claim you are making is really what you want to say.

a. You may feel more comfortable writing out your claims and information first and then seeing where the essay takes you. In this case, it may work better for you to come up with a simple thesis first, without tinkering heavily with the meaning or the wording. However, it is important to return to your preliminary thesis after having written the entire paper in order to refine it and ensure its essence is still true to the paper.

American Politics

Below you can find information regarding the introductory course, sample prompts, sample paper structures, sample papers, and tips from professors in the subfield for success.

Introductory Course (021)

Information will be forthcoming.

Sample Prompts/Assignments from a POLS 021 Course

Information will be forthcoming.

Sample Paper Structure

American Politics

Prompt: It is common to depict the U.S. Supreme Court as an independent branch of the national government, fully separated from the other branches and so fully protected and insulated against what we tend to think of as “politics.” Argue that the U.S. Supreme Court is properly understood as connected to the other branches and as interacting with them, in different ways. Pay attention to Congress, explaining both institutional or practical connections, using examples from the cases we've read so far. (5-6 pages)
STRUCTURE

- **Introduction:** Background information on the Supreme Court, Congress and the President.
  
  o **Sample thesis:** The U.S. Supreme Court is properly understood as having institutional and practical connections to the other branches of government, particularly Congress, and as interacting with them in ways such as X and Y. This is clear in the cases of J, K, and L.

- **Body Section 1:** Show how the Supreme Court is connected to Congress in institutional ways.
  
  o **Topic sentence:** The U.S. Supreme Court is connected to the other branches of government, particularly Congress, in institutional ways.

- **Body Section 2:** Show how we can see the institutional connection in a particular court case and the examples of their interactions after that case.
  
  o **Topic sentence:** Based on the case of J, it is clear that the U.S. Supreme Court is connected to Congress in institutional ways. This is clear in their X interactions.

- **Body Section 3:** Show how we can see the institutional connection in a particular court case and the examples of their interactions after that case.
  
  o **Topic sentence:** Based on the case of K, it is clear that the U.S. Supreme Court is connected to Congress in institutional ways. This is clear in their Y interactions.

- **Body Section 4:** Show how the Supreme Court is connected to the President and Congress in practical ways.
  
  o **Topic sentence:** The U.S. Supreme Court is connected to the other branches of government, particularly Congress, in practical ways.

- **Body Section 5:** Show how we can see the institutional connection in a particular court case and the examples of their interactions after that case.
  
  o **Topic sentence:** Based on the case of L, it is clear that the U.S. Supreme Court is connected to Congress in practical ways. This is clear in their X interactions.

- **Body Section 6:** Show how we can see the institutional connection in a particular court case and the examples of their interactions after that case.
  
  o **Topic sentence:** Based on the case of L, it is clear that the U.S. Supreme Court is connected to the President in practical ways. This is clear in their Y interactions.

- **Conclusion:**
  
  o **Restate thesis:** Using the cases of K, J and L, it is clear that the U.S. Supreme court is connected to the other branches of government, particularly Congress, in both practical and institutional ways. This is clear in their interactions with these branches in X and Y ways.

  o **Consider implications**—tie back to the larger
9 Oh, yeah! I remember the professor had an entire lecture about this! I know that we discussed several different connections between the Supreme Court and the other branches of government. They're connected in several ways! **This will be my thesis.**

10 The professor wants me to pay more attention to the legislative branch, Congress than to the executive branch, the President.

11 Ok, so they are clearly related in more than one way. Hmm. What does the professor mean by institutional connections? What does the professor mean by practical connections? I need to understand the difference so that I can fully demonstrate my knowledge of these two areas in my paper.

12 Looking at my notes and our readings, I see that the connections between the branches are really clear in the case of J, K, L, M and N. J and K are about connections to Congress, so I think I’ll use those, and L is about connections to both the Congress and the President, so I could use that one. M and N are only about connections to the President, and I’m supposed to focus on Congress so I don't think I should use those.

**Annotated Sample Papers**

**Sample Paper 1:**


He explains,

*This is a term paper that I wrote for The Presidency Seminar, the final course in the American Politics quadrant of Political Science at UVM. The seminar analyzed the foreign policymaking process in the twelve administrations that have passed since WWII (as of May 2008). The paper received an A.*

The directions for the assignment are common in Political Science courses: Read an assigned book and use the content of the book to draw a conclusion about a theme we’ve explored over the semester. In this case, the book was Bob Woodward’s Plan of Attack, and we had to use the content of the book to draw a conclusion about foreign policymaking in the George W. Bush administration compared to another administration we studied.

*Note that all direct quotations and non-original material were originally accurately cited in footnotes (a total of 60), but I have removed them and substituted footnotes explaining the choices I made as a writer.*

*Also note that there is more than one way to write a successful Political Science term paper. This is the way that has worked for me.*

**Sample Paper 2:**

[Essay written in an intermediate level POLS course.](http://www.uvm.edu/wid/writingcenter/tutortips/POLS_Sample2.pdf)
The assignment tasked writers with answering the question, "In the view of Judge Thomas Cooley, would the Freedmen's Bureau Act of 1866 qualify as unequal and partial legislation?"

To craft an effective response, writers must think as Cooley would regarding an issue the man himself had not written about - at least, in the set of assigned course materials which writers may utilize for this paper. This assignment acts as a comprehensive exam - mastery of core concepts is evinced through a well-organized argument that displays familiarity with readings and lectures. Conciseness is important - writers are limited to a response of three to four double spaced pages. Furthermore, this assignment essentially limits writers to drawing from only two sources of evidence for their arguments - Cooley's treatise and a transcribed Senate debate on the merits of the Freedmen's Bureau Act of 1866, both contained within the course's textbook. While in-paragraph citations for page numbers are necessary, a separate page for references or citations was not required for this assignment.

The essay's argument is organized into three body paragraphs. Each begins by expounding upon one of Thomas Cooley's three criteria for "unequal and partial legislation," providing a quote from the Judge's treatise. Each paragraph then proceeds to highlight relevant excerpts from Senate debates, in which testimonies of politicians discussing the Freedmen's Bureau Act are used to frame how those actors involved with the legislation regarded its legitimacy. No senators use the same phrasing around "unequal and partial legislation" that Cooley employs in his own treatise; it is up to writers to bridge this semantic divide, translating senators' thoughts on the bill into terms Cooley would understand.

Professor Tips

What general writing advice can you give?

Have a really good outline in mind. This will lead you to write a coherent piece because you will be able to present your ideas in a logical and coherent manner.

– Professor Jack Gierzynski

Don’t push it beyond your current vocabulary. Stay with what you know and can explain.

– Professor Jack Gierzynski

What are good revising and proofreading strategies?

The more you write, the better you get at writing. Make sure to revise often because only that way can the paper become better. Try writing in different styles to get more practice at constructing arguments and using what you know to write coherently.

– Professor Jack Gierzynski

Don’t rely on spell check! Make sure to look through the paper yourself without relying on the technology to highlight your mistakes for you. If you want to avoid making a professor laugh, then definitely read through your writing to catch any spelling mistakes.

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**Issue of Plagiarism**

Never plagiarize. It is bad in the academic setting and it is bad in the professional setting. If you are doing research for legislative policy briefs and you plagiarize, then it undercuts all your credibility. It is never the right choice.

— Professor Jack Gierzynski

**Political Theory**

Political theory focuses on the purposes of government and the philosophy and theories behind governmental policies. It discusses the difference between how states should be and how the currently are. There is emphasis on the nature of justice and which types of government can best achieve it.

Below you can find information regarding the introductory course, sample prompts, sample paper structures, and tips from professors in the subfield for success.

**Introductory Course (041)**

Introduction to Political Theory often has several smaller papers and occasionally a term paper at the end of the course. In these papers, the idea is to synthesize lectures with the course readings and add some analysis. Political theory papers tend to have more room for originality and personal input, because they are based in philosophy and therefore more open to interpretation. However, in the lower level course of POLS 041, instructors tend to stress comprehension of material over originality.

Political theory is also referred to “political philosophy.” Due to their content, papers in political theory are often structured like philosophy papers. See [http://www.uvm.edu/wid/writingcenter/tutortips/philosophy.html](http://www.uvm.edu/wid/writingcenter/tutortips/philosophy.html).

**Sample Prompts/Assignments from a POLS 041 Course**

Malthus attempted to demonstrate using his ‘two postulates” that humans are doomed by divine and natural decree to suffer. “Unhappy are the persons in the great lottery of life who have drawn a blank”. There are simply no prospects for achieving universal prosperity. Freud comes to a similarly pessimistic conclusion about the prospects for social harmony. Why is it essential to refute Malthus and Freud if we define justice as having something to do with freedom and equality and see these as achievable through political means?
Dahl questions whether we are producing citizens who possess sufficient dedication and competence to keep our democratic institutions afloat. How do his models of citizenship (‘good’ and ‘adequate’) square with Berlin’s models of liberty (‘negative’ and ‘positive’)?

Why did Marx criticize those, like Bruno Bauer, who looked to the political realm and the extension of citizenship to all Germans as a remedy for inequality? What would Pateman respond?

Why do advocates of capitalism believe that self-interest and the impersonal market can sustain efficiency, prosperity, and justice? Why do critics disagree with them?

Sample Paper Structure

Political Theory

Prompt: Can states permissibly deny entry to people who wish to become citizens? If so, on what basis can they legitimately exclude people, and what makes such exclusions legitimate? If not, consider and reject what you consider to be the strongest arguments for border control. Find at least two authors you disagree with on some important point, and carefully explain why their argument is mistaken. (8-9 pages)

STRUCTURE

- **Introduction:** Background information on states and immigration.
  - Sample thesis: States can permissibly deny entry to people who wish to become citizens because of X, Y and Z. Smith, who argues L, and Brown, who argues K, are both mistaken because of X, Y and Z.

- **Body Section 1:** Make point #1 on why states can permissibly deny entry.
  - Topic sentence: States can permissibly deny entry to people because of X.

- **Body Section 2:** Make point #2 on why states can permissibly deny entry.
  - Topic sentence: States can permissibly deny entry to people because of Y.

- **Body Section 3:** Make point #3 on why states can permissibly deny entry.
  - Topic sentence: States can permissibly deny entry to people because of Z.

- **Body Section 4:** Show Smith's argument in favor of immigration and use your previous points to explain why they are wrong.
  - Topic sentence: Smith argues L regarding immigration. His argument is persuasive, but he is wrong because of X and Y.

- **Body Section 5:** Show Brown's argument in favor of immigration and use your previous points to explain why they are wrong.
  - Topic sentence: Brown argues K regarding immigration. His argument is persuasive, but he is wrong because of X and Z.

- **Conclusion:** Restate thesis and discuss implications of closed borders vs. open borders. DO NOT DISCUSS ANY NEW INFORMATION.
  - Restate thesis: Through Smith and Brown argue in favor of open borders, states can permissibly deny entry to people because of X, Y and Z.
  - Consider implications of the thesis. Why does this matter?
OK, so the professor wants me to discuss immigration. I think that states can limit immigration by denying entry to people. **This is now my thesis.**

I think that states can deny entry to people based on X, Y and Z, which we discussed in class. These will be my proofs.

In class, we read authors Smith, Brown, Green and Johnson. I agree with Green and Johnson that states can deny entry to people, so I should use Smith and Brown as those that I disagree with. This will help me to fully answer the prompt.

**Professor Tips**

**What audience should I write my paper for?**

Don’t imagine you are writing to the professor. Rather, imagine you are writing to your peers-smart, capable people, but people who are not expert at the material. You can't talk baby talk to them, but you do need to be clear about explaining basic ideas. If they get their audience right in their heads, the paper is most likely to be pitched at the right level. When you think you're writing for the professor, you know that if you just "wave" at certain issues (very briefly mention them, or allude to them), that's sufficient-the professor, after all will know what you're talking about. But that often leads to underdeveloped ideas.

*– Professor Bob Taylor*

Since you're being asked to explain difficult, abstract concepts, the simplest and easiest thing to do is find another human being and have them listen to you sketch out an idea. It's not enough to do that in your head. It could be your roommate or someone in the dorm: if they can't pick up your paper and know what is going in your writing, then that's a sign you need to go back and rework it. That is a very simple test to see if you're doing it right.

*– Professor Patrick Neal*

**What general writing advice can you give?**

We are all taught early in school to begin with an outline, and then write from that. Most don't do this. I actually think that it is often more effective to just write your ideas-get them on paper. And THEN, go draw an outline of what you've written. You'll see that there are gaps in logic, etc., and then you can revise in light of what the outlining has taught you.

*– Professor Bob Taylor*

Students always have trouble explaining. They don't spend a lot of time explaining. They spend a lot of time having things explained to you and learning the punch line or the take away thing to remember. In political theory, you have to not only intellectually understand what is going on in the text, but you have to artfully explain that to a reader that doesn't already know it. Students should not be summarizing masses of data or ideas – this approach doesn't work well if you're trying to dig into an argument and explain how it works. What I notice more than anything is when students rush to say the point of the argument without
Another thing we all seem to have been taught early in school was to write elaborate and highly general (and flowery) introductory paragraphs. I strongly recommend actually cutting these right out. Get to the point. Write directly, clearly, no frills, no fluff.

— Professor Bob Taylor

An awful lot of bad writing comes from people trying to paraphrase. Your paraphrase will not be as intricate as what philosophers were trying to do. If you drift away from the text, you are robbing yourself of the raw material that is available to use to display your skills.

— Professor Patrick Neal

**What are good revising and proofreading strategies?**

Practice your writing skills! How else will you develop them unless you practice? There is no memorizing or getting them out of the book.

— Professor Patrick Neal

I also often suggest that students read their writing out loud to themselves. We tend not to know the formal rules of grammar, but we do tend to know when they are violated in speech. Our ears are more skillful than our eyes, simply because we speak (and listen) much more than we write (and read). We also are often more attuned to the flow of an argument when we listen to it. Overall, if we read out loud and it sounds at all "funny", it is-and it needs to be fixed.

— Professor Bob Taylor

Teachers are human. If there are two typos or mistakes in the first sentence you write or in the first paragraph, then it's worse than if they are in the 5th paragraph. Even if you're not willing to take the time to polish the whole paper, at least work on the beginning. It creates the first impression. An overwhelming impression.

— Professor Patrick Neal

**International Relations**

Studies in International Relations focus generally on war or conflict, international economics and globalization, and/or human rights.

There are clear differences between the writing expected in the Introductory IR course (051) and Advanced IR courses (100 & 200 level)

Below you can find information regarding the introductory course, sample prompts, sample paper structures, advanced courses, and tips from professors in the subfield for success.

**Introductory Course (051)**
The introductory course often requires a term paper(s). In these papers, professors look for a summary and a degree of brief analysis of theories learned in class. The writing is not as demanding as that for advanced courses in terms of originality.

An introductory term paper will often ask the student to layer or contrast theories. The most popular prompt is to ask students to apply a theory to an era, such as the “post-Cold War era,” which requires a layering of history into the paper.

Some commonly discussed theories include:

**Realism** – holds that mankind is inherently self-centered and competitive.

**Liberalism** – political doctrine that takes protecting and enhancing the freedom of the individual to be the central problem of politics.

**Constructivism** – focuses on influence of ideas, beliefs, and identity (individual or collective) on policies and politics

**Democratic Peace Theory** – holds that democracies, for some appropriate definition of democracy, rarely, or even never, go to war with one another.

**Sample Prompts/Assignments from a POLS 051 Course**

Explain why there still exists a major controversy over universal human rights between Universalists and relativists. Then, explain why nations commit to human rights treaties.

Explain why autocratic regimes in developing countries are prone to trade protectionist policies whilst democratization in developing countries leads to trade liberalization.

Describe the main principles governing trade liberalization under the GATT/WTO. Then, identify and describe the characteristics of the different types of Regional Trade Agreements being formed around the world today.

Using the theories of neorealism and power transition from the paradigm of realism and the theories of liberal institutionalism, complex interdependence, and democratic peace from the paradigm of liberalism, explain how states behave in the international arena post WWI. If you are going to argue that some events seem best explained by one theory and others by another, you must discuss the characteristics of a theory that makes it most applicable as an explanation for a major trend or event in the international arena.

Using Mary Kaldor explain why intrastate wars (civil wars/new wars) are increasing today (account for the rise in intrastate wars by explaining how globalization has led to the decline of the nation-state, an increase in identity politics, and an increase in intrastate wars). Then using Mary Kaldor, identify and explain three differences between new and old wars.
**Sample Paper Structure**

**International Relations**

**Prompt:** How would a realist versus a liberal analyze the Cold War era? A good answer will provide a clear thesis regarding how a realist and a liberal would analyze US-Soviet interactions as well as the general international atmosphere during the Cold War. (5-7 pages)

**STRUCTURE**

- **Introduction:** Background information on realism, liberalism and the Cold War era.
  - Sample thesis: A realist would see the Cold War as X. A liberal would see the Cold War era as Y.
- **Body Section 1:** Explain how a realist would analyze the US-Soviet interactions, demonstrating any differences between the first, second and third phase of realism.
  - Topic sentence 1: The first phase realist would see the US-Soviet interactions during the Cold War as X.
  - Topic sentence 2: The second phase realist would see the US-Soviet interactions during the Cold War as X.
  - Topic sentence 3: The third phase realist would see the US-Soviet interactions during the Cold War as X.
- **Body Section 2:** Explain how a realist would analyze the general international atmosphere, demonstrating any differences between the first, second and third phase of realism
  - Topic sentence 1: The first phase realist would see the general international atmosphere during the Cold War as X.
  - Topic sentence 2: The second phase realist would see the general international atmosphere during the Cold War as X.
  - Topic sentence 3: The third phase realist would see the general international atmosphere during the Cold War as X.
- **Body Section 3:** Explain how a liberal would analyze the US-Soviet interactions, demonstrating any differences between the first, second and third phase of liberalism.
  - Topic sentence 1: The first phase liberal would see the US-Soviet interactions during the Cold War as Y.
  - Topic sentence 2: The second phase liberal would see the US-Soviet interactions during the Cold War as Y.
  - Topic sentence 3: The third phase liberal would see the US-Soviet interactions during the Cold War as Y.
- **Body Section 4:** Explain how a liberal would analyze general international atmosphere, demonstrating any differences between the first, second and third phase of liberalism.
  - Topic sentence 1: The first phase liberal would see the general international atmosphere during the Cold War as Y.
  - Topic sentence 2: The second phase liberal would see the general international atmosphere during the Cold War as Y.
  - Topic sentence 3: The third phase liberal would see the general international atmosphere during the Cold War as Y.
- **Conclusion:**
Restate thesis: A realist would argue that the Cold War can be analyzed as X manner. A liberal would argue that the Cold War era can be analyzed as Y.
Consider implications.

That's right! We've spent a lot of time talking about these two theories. I know that there are three phases of each of them! I also know that they are two different ways of explaining the international system, and that they would analyze the Cold War in very distinct ways. This will be my thesis.

Even though it's not a part of the prompt, the professor indicated that I should demonstrate a thorough comprehension of the evolution of realism and liberalism. I know that each theory has three phases, so I should demonstrate each of the three phases in my essay!

The professor gave a whole lecture on the Cold War! I better start by looking at my notes.

Advanced IR Courses:

In an advanced writing assignment, professors are looking for the student's ability to critically use information from the classroom and provide a new spin on it. Professors are not looking for original topic questions; what is important is the quality of thought evident in handling the topic.

Process:

Develop a research question to guide your research.

In the introduction, inform the reader where you are going; include what you are arguing (your main argument) and how you are supporting it, as well as your conclusion. Then include a literature review in which you describe what has already been done with this topic.

You must then present your argument and give a case. This must be logical and sequential, while still concise. Professors are not looking for dozens of pages. The conclusion should then be the implications of your argument.

Add something the readings in class did not cover; the professor is looking for an answer that shows your independent analysis.

One example of a common assignment is to pick a country and theorize how the political structure impacts the way the country uses a resource.

Professor Tips

Information will be forthcoming.
Comparative Politics

Below you can find information regarding the introductory course, sample prompts, sample paper structures, and tips from professors in the subfield for success.

Introductory Course (071)

Information will be forthcoming.

Sample Prompts/Assignments from a POLS 071 Course

Britain and Russia emerged from the medieval period with very different regimes. Whereas Britain became a limited constitutional monarchy (which subsequently became a democracy), Russia evolved into an absolutist monarchy (which was later toppled by a revolutionary movement). How can we explain their different trajectories? This essay should address that question. Specifically, I ask you to illuminate the variables or factors that help to account for the different patterns of regime development in these two countries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moderate or No Protests</th>
<th>Big Protests, No Overthrow</th>
<th>Regime Overthrow</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>Tunisia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qatar</td>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>Egypt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td></td>
<td>Libya (due to external factors)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table above indicates that countries of the Middle East and North Africa had very different experiences in the context of the Arab Spring. A handful, lying in the far right column, saw regimes overthrown in the face of massive popular protests. Yet many others, represented in the far left column, avoided major protests altogether. Still others, represented in the middle column, faced substantial protests, but authoritarian governments were able to stay in power. The purpose of this paper is to identify and discuss the factors that explain why many regimes were able to “survive” the Arab Spring. Specifically, this entails identifying the factors that characterized those regimes that, in contrast to those in the far right column, were able to persist in the face of substantial protests or avoided those protests altogether.

By nearly every measure, the United States has a weaker welfare state than most advanced industrial democracies, and we spend less on redistributive policies. As students of comparative politics, this presents a puzzle for us: Why is the United States so different in terms of how we deal with poverty and inequality? I suggest that you begin, after your introductory paragraph, with a brief overview of some of the key ways that the US is different. Thereafter you should offer an explanation for those differences. That explanation should give ample consideration to the cultural (sometimes described as “behavioral” or ideological) peculiarities of the US, our political institutions, and the kinds of socio-economic forces that have (and have not) operated in the US.
Sample Paper Structure

Comparative Politics

Prompt: Over the last decade, political scientists have come to see oil and mineral wealth as potentially “bad” for peace, development and democracy. Review research addressing this issue. In what ways are the deleterious effects of oil and mineral wealth apparent? Why does oil and mineral wealth play this negative role? Finally, are such resources “bad” in all instances? (3-4 pages)

STRUCTURE

• **Introduction:** Background information on oil and mineral wealth and problems they cause for specific states.
  o **Sample thesis:** It has recently been argued that oil and mineral wealth are bad for peace, development and democracy.

• **Body Section 1:** USING THE RESEARCH, demonstrate ways that oil and mineral wealth are bad for peace, as shown in State R. Explain why.
  o **Topic sentence:** Oil and mineral wealth are potentially bad for peace, as shown in State R, because of X.

• **Body Section 2:** USING THE RESEARCH, demonstrate ways that oil and mineral wealth are bad for development, as shown in State S. Explain why.
  o **Topic sentence:** Oil and mineral wealth are potentially bad for development, as shown in State S, because of Y.

• **Body Section 3:** USING THE RESEARCH, demonstrate ways that oil and mineral wealth are bad for democracy, also as shown in State S. Explain why.
  o **Topic sentence:** Oil and mineral wealth are potentially bad for democracy, as shown in State S, because of Z.

• **Body Section 4:** USING THE RESEARCH, give specific examples of the positive role of oil and mineral wealth.
  o **Topic sentence:** Though oil and mineral wealth are potentially bad, there are examples of them having a positive role, such as in State M.

• **Conclusion:** Restate potential good effects; show the problems oil and mineral wealth cause for peace, development and democracy and how these problems outweigh the good effects.
  o **Restate thesis:** Oil and mineral wealth can sometimes have good effects on states, but generally they are bad for peace, development and democracy.
  o **Consider implications.**

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4 OK! We just learned about this in class. I remember discussing these in relation to State R and State S. In both of these states, oil and mineral wealth has caused major problems, especially for their peace, development and democracy. **This will be my thesis.**

5 Sweet, the professor has provided me with some articles to read for this paper. I better get reading, because this research is going to help me support my paper.

6 The professor wants me to give specific examples about this in my paper.
The professor wants me to explain the reasons behind this in my paper.

Here, I'll need to look at the counter evidence, as shown in State M! If we look there, we can see that the wealth gained from oil and mineral wealth actually helped them develop! Hmm…

Professor Tips

What general writing advice can you give?

“There is this idea that you create a classic outline, and then you write from beginning all the way through the paper. But I tell students to write the introduction last, because as you’re writing, you figure out what’s missing and what you’re actually writing about.”
– Professor Peter VonDoepp

“How can you have a thesis when you don’t have any evidence?”
– Professor Peter VonDoepp

“Frontload your work to prevent train wrecks at the end of the semester.”
– Professor Peter VonDoepp

What makes a “good” essay to you?

“Draw connections between materials. Create a conversation. Have multiple sources to support your claims.”
– Professor Peter VonDoepp

What audience should I write my paper for?

“Depends on what the assignment is. If I’m asking you to write a letter to the editor, it’s a broader audience. If you’re doing a research paper, it’s for an academic audience. In some of my classes I do policy briefs. They should be sophisticated but for a lay person who wants brief.”
– Professor Peter VonDoepp

What are good revising and proofreading strategies?

“First of all, do it. Read out loud. Take your time and read out loud.”
– Professor Peter VonDoepp