Guidelines for Writing a Political Theory Essay

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Essay writing may be one of the most important skills that you will learn in the course of your undergraduate degree. It will prove invaluable for you whether you continue on to graduate school, pursue a J. D. degree in a Law School, or move directly into a professional career. Perhaps you will come to enjoy essay writing for its own sake; in any event, you will find that there is an enormous demand for writing that is well-organized, coherent, and concise.

A. The scholarly essay is a unique writing genre.

The purpose of your essay is to address a particular question pertaining to a topic that we are studying, to provide a well-grounded response to that question, to show that your answer is supported by textual evidence, to demonstrate your ability to consider reasonable counter-arguments in a thoughtful manner, and to persuade the reader that after taking a fair consideration of the evidence and counter-arguments, you are offering the most compelling answer.

The paper is not, by contrast, a speech, blog post, or a report. Maintaining a scholarly tone is important throughout, as is selecting the relevant points about the subject that belong in your essay. Consider your specific question and answer carefully, and build a logical outline that attends to your particular argument.

B. The purpose of political theory writing.

1. The theoretical problems and dilemmas, rather than empirical facts presented on their own, are most important for us. Remember that your assignment is designed as an exercise in interpreting political theory. Emphasize the conceptual and theoretical aspects of your answer. Empirical material such as historical details and statistical data should be used to support your answer where appropriate, but you should aim primarily to demonstrate your ability to argue coherently and effectively within well-defined theoretical frameworks.

2. Engage directly with the essay question and assignment memo. Creative variations may be acceptable, but you should check with me first. Also, I probably did not hand you a ready-made thesis in the essay question. What you will probably find there are "prompts": themes and provocative suggestions. You will have to tackle the challenge of moving from the essay question to the formulation of a thesis or argument.

3. Make a compelling argument. Your goal is to present an accurate treatment of the basic interpretive facts, but then to conduct a dialogue with the text and to give your
considered opinion on the theoretical problem at hand. Your task is to formulate a “candidate” interpretation of the text, and then to engage in a thoughtful presentation and defence of your candidate. Unlike the conduct that is typical among election staff in an actual election campaign, however, the essay genre requires you to treat the rival candidates with great respect. You should learn from them where appropriate, draw attention to their strengths, and incorporate the lessons that you ought to value in order to make your candidate even more persuasive and compelling. (Indeed, at the research stage, a fair-minded political theorist sometimes changes sides one or more times before settling upon a favored candidate.)

For example, political theory essays often deal with a normative issue (known colloquially as the "ought" question, that is, what should we do in this situation, etc.) Martin Luther King Jr. thought that the achievement of genuine racial equality would require both the elimination of discrimination against African-Americans and the reduction of the gap between the wealthy to the poor. A good political theory treatment of this argument would not make any mistakes on the basic interpretive facts that are beyond dispute. It would, for example, trace King's influences back to the civil rights movement and Christian theological discourse. But it would also move into the realm of the "should" statement as well. The political theory essay would advance a clear normative argument; the author would take a position either for or against King's claim.

Now an economist might respond to King's argument by seeking to find an absolutely precise measurement of the distribution of wealth in the United States and the developed world during the 1960s. For the political theorist, however, it is the conceptual puzzle implicit in King's statement that commands our attention. According to King, what does racial justice mean? What is his understanding of racial discrimination – is it merely the totality of intentional prejudicial acts, and laws that are clearly discriminatory on their face, or does it also encompass “structural racism”, de facto segregation, and laws that systematically produce disproportionate racial outcomes? Why did he believe that the passage of civil rights legislation in the mid-1960s had not brought racism to an end? In your opinion, is King's argument persuasive? Think of two or three plausible alternative interpretations: e.g. a) I disagree with King: all that is needed to usher in racial justice is an elimination of intentional prejudice and obviously discriminatory law, and I can support that position not only by presenting a thorough interpretation of King, but also by discussing the works of theorists (i) and (ii); or b) I agree with King; the elimination of de jure racism and intentional prejudicial conduct are insufficient, under the theory of fair equality of opportunity, as expounded by theorists (iii) and theorists (iv), which I will discuss in tandem with my close reading of King; or c) I agree and disagree with King; as my close reading will show, he does say that we need to attend to structural racism and disporportionate impact, but I argue, using the works of theorists (v) and (vi), that what we need, in order to achieve racial justice, is the revolutionary overthrow of the entire capitalist system.

In other words, what you are attempting to do is to provide carefully crafted reasons, based upon your rigorous reading of the political theory texts in question, that favor your candidate interpretation. You do not simply assert that X reading is right and Y reading is
wrong. Drawing on scholarly sources, you work with the political theory arguments from
the assigned texts in our course (here, King, and theorists i-vi) in order to support your
decision to favor interpretation X over interpretation Y. “Working with” these arguments
means more than merely citing them. You have to demonstrate that they are relevant to
the point you are trying to make, and then you have to show exactly how they support
your particular answer.

Here is one possible way to organize the paper. Introduce your two or three candidates;
show how you built them up in the course of a reasonable initial reading of King’s texts;
and then demonstrate that a close and careful study ultimately reveals that although the
alternative interpretation has many merits, on balance, you can show, on the basis of deep
textual engagement and sound reasoning that your candidate interpretation prevails over
the alternative. Note that the reader cannot, in all fairness, expect the political theory
essay to present a "correct" answer. The political theory essay attempts to persuade the
reader by advancing a compelling argument that is well supported by detailed and
insightful interpretive work.

4. Sustain your thesis argument throughout the paper. Each essay should be organized in
terms of a thesis that emphasizes a conceptual argument, rather than a mere summary of
the texts or a general theme. Take a position, state clearly what your position is, and then
engage with the text to persuade your reader that you have approached the question in a
fair-minded and thoughtful manner, and that you have arrived at a compelling answer.
Essays that are not built on a thesis tend to summarize the text and to wander aimlessly
from point to point.

A good argument is specific (Not: “Foucault is the best theorist of power from the
Twentieth Century.” But: “Foucault offers a more precise and compelling analysis of
power relations than Lukes, especially where subject formation and resistance are
concerned.”)

And it must be contestable. (Not: “Foucault has both continuities and discontinuities in
his work.” But: “Foucault’s implicit theory of democracy is more radical in Discipline
and Punish than the one he offers in Madness and Civilization.”)

Finally, it must be well supported by the textual interpretation that you are offering. If
your quotations demonstrate, to a fair minded reader, that Foucault is offering a more
radical theory in Madness and Civilization, then perhaps you need to acknowledge that
you are offering an experimental reading. Revisit the text and find the passages that you
think actually support your argument, anticipate the criticisms of your reader, and then
patiently explain to the reader why you nevertheless have reasonable grounds for
maintaining your argument. Starting with a completely implausible thesis argument
makes things altogether impossible for you.

5. Engage with the themes of the course and the texts that we are studying. A good paper
strikes the reader as a work that could not have been written unless the student-author had
attended the course lectures/seminars, taken part in class discussions, and engaged with
6. **Define your terms and avoid "showing off."** Political theorists should aim to define terms with great precision. Political theorists contribute to the study of politics by shedding new light on the conceptual dimensions of key political problems. There are several perfectly acceptable ways to present a concept; you could define it quite thoroughly at the outset, or you could build up a complete sense of its meaning over the course of your argument, showing how various elements do and do not belong in the definition. In any event, you must carefully footnote the passages from the text that you are using to build your definitions.

By the same token, if a hugely complicated conceptual claim is distracting and largely irrelevant, you should avoid it altogether. The same is true where "name dropping" is concerned. You could invoke the work of many famous thinkers without contributing at all to the clarity and persuasive force of your argument, if you also fail to demonstrate their relevance for your paper.

7. **Support empirical claims.** Where your argument does depend upon factual claims, you must state them clearly in an accurate manner, and you must footnote your source.

8. **Leave yourself enough time to write a full outline and multiple drafts.** I understand that you will find yourselves writing last-minute papers and “cramming” for exams, but you should avoid this approach at all costs where political theory papers are concerned. The best theoretical papers take a great deal of reflection and critical revision. Aim to finish the next-to-final draft several days before the due date, and then put it away for a couple of days. Then re-read your draft. Because you will be looking at the paper with fresh eyes, you will be able to detect weak passages and problematic transitions much easier. Make your final corrections, and hand it in.

**C. Interpreting the political theory text.**

1. **Put your own voice at the forefront throughout the essay.** Emphasize your informed argument. The political theory essay is never just a summary of the text or a research report that collects a number of quotations and strings them together; we want to see evidence that you have done the appropriate reading and that you are thinking independently and creatively about the text.

2. **Always remember that the essay is an academic mode of discourse.** Almost every student lapses into casual language usage and sloppy argumentation at some points in their essays. Do not use the kind of words, phrases and arguments that you would use in other contexts, such as e-mail, your personal journal, a blog post, tweets, conversations with friends, journalistic articles, or a speech to a political rally. In political theory
writing, the more you strike a thoughtful and scholarly tone, the more your reader will trust your judgment.

3. **On a few occasions, you will quote directly from the text.** This can be particularly appropriate when you are dealing with a richly textured passage in which the text advances a complex argument that is central to your paper. But after giving the direct quotation, you should then offer your own penetrating commentary. Do not fill out your answers with long and unnecessary direct quotations from the text. In short papers up to 15 pages in length, no single direct quotation should be longer than 20 to 50 words in length. Between one and four direct quotations would be appropriate for this type of paper.

4. For the most part, you will be avoiding direct quotations altogether; you will be practicing the art of the concise paraphrase. You should choose appropriate passages from the text and put them in your own words, taking care throughout the paper to capture the nuances of the text, and to footnote the original source. (Plagiarism is strictly forbidden.) Following each paraphrase, you should give the precise page number and source of the text. Failing to do so is against our plagiarism rule. Once again bring your own analytical voice to the forefront by giving your own commentary. In other words, your paper should never strike the reader as a simple set of textual summaries. Pay attention to the more complicated aspects of the text; sometimes, this is where the most challenging interpretive work is required. Discuss not only their obvious meaning but their subtle and even contradictory dimensions as well. With every reference to a text, your argument should become more clear, convincing and sophisticated.

5. When analyzing the text of a given theorist, carefully reconstruct the argument in your own words, with full notation as required. Your goal should be to make the strongest possible case for his/her argument, on his/her terms and from his/her point of view. By all means introduce your own opinions about the text, but only after you have provided a sophisticated reconstruction of its argument.

6. You should explore the meaning of each text very carefully. If you are opposed to an argument, you must nevertheless recognize its strengths. By the same token, you must indicate the weaknesses and contradictions in the texts that you happen to favor. Any essay that fails to do this will miss the opportunity to engage in advanced forms of interpretive work. The political theory essay differs sharply in this respect from polemical writing, debating statements, electoral campaign speeches, and closing arguments in a trial. If you agree with the text without carefully reconstructing its position, then your agreement will come too easily and you will fail to note the text's own contradictions and weaknesses. If, by contrast, you criticize the text without considering its strengths, you will be reducing the text to a "straw man" and engaging in a dismissive reading where subtle, detailed, and sensitive commentary is required.

7. Use the non-expert scholar figure as your target audience. Write your paper as if you will be submitting it to a politics professor who is not an expert on the material you are dealing with. This will remind you to introduce the text briefly, to use any complicated
terminology sparingly, to define all key terms thoroughly, and to avoid taking for granted the meaning of complicated debates and issues. Take care to lead the non-expert scholar through the twists and turns of your argument, and make sure that your imaginary reader will regard your work as an accessible, scholarly, and persuasive paper. Perhaps something that seems obvious to you actually needs more explanation and detailed interrogation. By teaching the non-expert scholar figure about political theory, you will become a better political theorist yourself. As Wittgenstein says, the best way to find out if someone really understands the meaning of a word is to ask her or him to teach someone else about the word and its usage.

8. **Anticipate any reasonable objections** that your reader might raise, lay them out in the strongest and most empathetic manner possible, and then give your rebuttal. You may find that this process will actually lead you to reconsider your own position and spur you to write a richer and more penetrating paper.

9. **Avoid clichés, obvious statements, and “boosterism.”** You may have been encouraged by other instructors to “grab” the reader’s attention with a “catchy” theme in the Introduction and then to round out the paper with a Conclusion that links your particular argument to a person, institution, or historical trend whose significance is widely appreciated. The problem for the political theory student working at the college level is that this sort of writing can come across as rather weak and distracting.

It is highly likely that your paper cannot really support sweeping references to the entire span of human history, for example. (e.g. “Since the beginning of recorded time, the human race has wrestled with the problem of liberty, reason, and the legitimacy of political authority.” Be sure to delete this sort of assertion by the time your paper reaches the final editing stage.) What we are looking for is a paper that demonstrates your ability to engage, with a nuanced and subtle voice, with the question at hand. You should offer an Introduction and a Conclusion that logically correspond to the specific textual work that you are performing in the body of your paper.

Obviously, democracy is a good regime and a democratic society may very well yield very attractive outcomes. However, you would be well advised to avoid crafting your essay as a passionate “fan” letter to Democracy. Similarly, any reasonable critic would agree that the United States’ society, as we know it, is extremely complex and has many positive and negative aspects. Do not finish up your paper with a sensationalistic flourish in which you claim that this country would experience an historic triumph and avoid catastrophic disasters if it adopted your point of view. By the same token, if you realize that your essay essentially places a particular thinker on a hero’s pedestal, you have taken a wrong turn. Find the road back to the scholarly essay genre, and leave the popular blogosphere behind.

**D. Technical requirements.**

1. Present the different parts of your argument in a logical order. Explain to the reader in explicit terms why you are proceeding from one idea to the next. In a longer piece (i.e.
over 10 pages) you may even use subtitles to help the reader to follow the progression of your argument. Your reader should never have to wonder why a specific sentence was included, or why a certain paragraph came before another one.

2. Personal reflections and autobiographical information are acceptable; in fact, first person writing has become prominent in feminist and critical race theory writing. (See, for example, the work of Patricia J. Williams.) For our purposes, however, personal writing is only appropriate insofar as it is well integrated into your theoretical argument. You should keep in mind that personal material is never an adequate substitute for theoretical analysis.

3. You should meticulously edit your paper and eliminate spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors. Your paper should be in 12 point font, with 1 inch margins, and double-spacing. Please make sure that your pages are numbered and that your name appears on the first page.

4. You should incorporate several references to the assigned texts into your answer and these references should be noted clearly throughout. All noting systems are acceptable. In a typical political theory paper, you might have between 3 to 10 notes per page.

5. Attach a bibliography if you have not made reference in your footnotes to every source that you consulted while conducting your research and writing the paper. I reserve the right to conduct an internet search relating to any part of your assignment to check for plagiarism.

6. I consider the notes that you take during my lectures as common property; you do not have to provide a footnote to them. By the same token, you should not be relying heavily upon your lecture notes. You should depend, first and foremost, on your own reading.

7. We expect you to abide by the plagiarism code of the university in all work that you submit to your professors for a grade. Note, too, that I sometimes require students to circulate their seminar papers to the members of the class e-mail list, and that I often encourage political theory students to read exemplary student papers and theses that I place in the public domain. However, you may not copy any material from a student paper without providing a full citation to that work. Double submission of your own work is also forbidden. This rule often raises a lot of questions in students' minds. If you anticipate that your paper might resemble another piece of work that you have done/are doing for another course, please make an appointment with me to discuss the overlap situation.

8. Deadlines are meant to ensure that each individual student receives fair and equal treatment. I give extensions only to the very few students who have documented medical excuses. In addition, undergraduates are rarely eligible for an “Incomplete” grade at the end of the course.
E. Some notes on grading.

First, let’s start with “B” grades. They are quite common. By discussing these papers, we can also clarify the requirements of a sound political theory essay.

B
To obtain a B, the paper must be “solid.” The student understands the question and why it is a problem. She offers a thesis argument, and the reasoning and interpretive work are basically reliable. The political theories in question are largely presented in an adequate manner. Candidate interpretations are fairly presented and given a basic discussion. There are no serious deficits or misinterpretations, and the question is addressed. Citations are provided as necessary. The paper reaches the minimum length. It is adequately spell-checked and edited, and it is handed in on time.

However, the B paper has some deficits. The writing may not be very clear; it may be vague or slightly dis-organized. Clarity and organization are indispensable to a successful political theory paper since these features are indistinguishable from the required interpretive work. If you really understand the question and how to tackle it; if you came to class, digested the lectures and mastered the assigned reading material; if you also really understand the arguments of the political theorists in question; and if you have good writing skills, you will not fail to deliver a clearly written, well-organized, and cogent paper.

The papers that fall below and above this standard B grade differ on each of these points. Compare, for example, the following remarks.

B+
This is a very good paper, by and large. It is better than the B paper in various aspects. Most importantly, it demonstrates a more rigorous and nuanced grasp of the central interpretive problems. There may be moments in the B+ paper in which the student has shown a flair for original thinking. However, it is not an A- paper. It may have some relatively minor mistakes, key points may not be adequately developed, or it may lack clarity in a few places. On the whole, however, it is well written.

A-
This is an excellent paper. It is very clearly written and it offers an advanced interpretation of the texts in question. There might be a few superficial blemishes here and there. Perhaps the student has given only brief consideration to a potential objection where a deeper discussion would have enriched the paper. Alternatively, there may be passages in which a major concept remains insufficiently explored and further
engagement with the text would have been helpful. By the same token, the A- paper will exhibit some degree of originality. The response is not just a workmanlike engagement with the question or essay prompt. The paper shows instead that the student has both mastered the texts in question and approached the paper in a creative manner.

A model paper featuring outstanding interpretive work, presented with exceptional clarity. The essay exhibits a virtually flawless writing style and it is tightly structured throughout. In addition, it features a substantial degree of originality. A balance is struck, however, between creativity and rigor, such that one does not come at the cost of the other.

Going in the other direction, consider these remarks about the papers that fall below the B grade.

B-
The B- paper exhibits serious problems of one kind or another. There has to be some thesis argument that addresses the question; if the paper lacked this element, it would receive a lower grade. And it has to include some passages in which the student engages with the texts in a basically sound manner. However, the paper is marred by some significant errors of interpretation. The writing may be very unclear and the paper may be poorly organized. In the end, however, the paper makes it clear that the student is making an effort.

C+
This paper has even more significant and devastating deficits. The writing is rather poor and the reader cannot pick out the paper’s organizational plan. The student does not demonstrate that she has achieved a basic understanding of the texts and has not considered various candidate interpretations. Instead of a thesis argument, the paper offers mere summaries. It is not at all clear that the student is making an adequate effort and engaging with the course material at a threshold standard.

Papers with more problems will earn grades of C or below.

In writing up these grading rubrics, I drew heavily from Jim Pryor’s memo:

http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/grades.html
Note:
These guidelines apply only to the assignments in my classes. Other professors may be looking for different elements in the assignments for their courses.

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