Things All Political Science Majors Should Know About Writing and Research
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Why I Wrote this Packet

Many of our students enter WCU with little knowledge about how to conduct college-level research, study for exams, or write at an appropriate level. This is not because WCU students are not capable, but because they have not been taught the basics about what is expected of them or how to achieve success. I created this packet to help alleviate this problem. The words and ideas here are my own (unless specifically cited) and may differ slightly from what other professors expect. Nonetheless, I believe that students in almost every political science class will perform better if you understand these basics of writing and research. Although this guide is aimed at political science students, students in other disciplines (especially other social sciences) can benefit from the information presented here. If there’s something that’s not here that would help you perform better in your classes, please let me know and I will add it in future versions of this packet.

What is Political Science?

Political Science is, quite simply, the scientific study of politics. The word scientific is important! It does not necessarily mean quantitative (with numbers), but it does mean that we are systematic in the way we accumulate knowledge. Political Science is not a discipline about arguing, nor is it about the person who can speak the loudest. With very few exceptions, political scientists do not argue about good or bad (often called normative questions). Instead, we find out what is. All of the professors in our department do not have the same approach to the discipline (it would be a lot more boring if we did), but all believe that our scientific approach to our discipline is what sets us apart from journalists, political consultants, or the talking heads you see on TV. You should think scientifically when you approach your political science classes—no matter the topic.

Different Types of Papers

Most papers in Political Science classes will take one of three forms: literature review papers, argument papers, or empirical research papers. Each of these has different goals and you should approach each one differently.

**Literature Review:** When we assign literature review papers, we want you to demonstrate that you have mastered what scholars have written about some topic. In many ways, these are the most difficult papers to write. You are expected to read and digest what lots of other people have written, place them into context and form some conclusions about what it all means. There is still a lot of room to be creative, but you are using the ideas of others to make your point.

If you are assigned a paper like this, the first thing you should do is to find an appropriate topic. By appropriate, I mean a topic that (1) interests you enough so you can donate hours upon hours
to reading, thinking and writing about it, and (2) scholars have written enough on so you have something to read! If you don’t care about your topic, it is unlikely that you’ll convince the reader that it’s that important. Likewise, if there has not been a lot written about a subject, you will find it difficult to piece together a quality literature review.

Next, you should locate and read as much as you can about the topic. For instance, if you are assigned a literature review paper on the effects of negative advertising, you should first look in relevant databases (JSTOR, and Academic Search Elite are good places to start) to find what’s been written. At the same time, you should use the library catalog to find books (those are the bound things in the library with dust on them) about the subject. Once you’ve located a decent body of literature, you should begin reading. There is no substitute for this step. This does not mean that you have to read every word of everything you check out, but you should read the important parts (what is important may differ based on your topic). Use the index and table of contents to help determine whether the source has information that will be useful for you. As you’re reading, take extensive notes, so you won’t forget what you’re reading, or where the information came from. As you’re reading and taking notes, be sure to check who the authors cite when making their points. If you begin reading with a recent article or book, often you can work backwards and trace the evolution of the literature. Make sure that you’ve cited some things from academic journals (for more information, see the appropriate section of this packet).

Once you have read the relevant literature, it’s time to develop your argument. To do this, make an outline. This does not have to be a formal outline, but it should include the major points you wish to make, along with relevant citations. As you’re doing this, make sure that each point flows from the one before it. This is a good place to look for logical inconsistencies and other problems in your argument.

If you’ve completed the above steps, it’s time to get to the writing. Unfortunately there are no shortcuts for writing. The best approach is to use your outline and translate it into paragraph and paper form. When you’ve got a complete paper, stop and take a few days off. Get away from the paper and do other things. After a few days off, re-read the paper. You’ll likely find a number of mistakes that escaped you previously. Do this one more time and it will be time to take it to the writing center. Have Barbara Hardy or one of the writing center tutors look over your paper. Take their comments seriously, make the suggested changes and read over the paper one more time. Although there are no guarantees, if you follow these steps, you will likely have a well-organized, well-written literature review.

**Argument Papers**-These papers are most likely to be assigned in lower-division political science classes. The point of these papers is for you to learn how to bring appropriate facts to bear to support a particular argument. This is a valuable skill not only in college, but also in the “real world.” For instance, pretend that you are working for a marketing firm and you have an idea that you think will save the company millions of dollars. You mention this to your boss and they say, “write it down for me.” It is now your job to make the best case you can for your idea. You certainly will not lie, but you will present evidence supporting your point. If you make a successful argument, you will get your idea implemented and you may get a raise. If you don’t make a good argument, you may embarrass yourself and hurt yourself in the eyes of your boss. Clearly making a strong written argument is an important skill.
Although the basic techniques for successful research and writing are similar to that of a literature review paper, there are some differences. First, your argument and ideas will be more important than your ability to master what others have written. You should still begin by investigating what others have written. What argument seems to make the most sense? Once you’ve answered this question, you should be able to translate this conclusion into a thesis sentence. Now use the literature that supports your point to make an outline. As you plan your paper, you may find it helpful to discuss the opposing viewpoint—if only to say how it’s wrong. To move from the outline to the final written product, follow the same steps as outlined for the literature review.

Empirical Research Papers- These are the most difficult, involved and rewarding papers you will be required to write in a political science class. With an empirical research paper, the professor wants you to (1) investigate what others have written, (2) collect some of your own data and interpret what it means. The ability to write a quality empirical research paper is one of the most important skills you will develop as a political science major. Empirical research papers often make good papers to use for “writing samples” when applying to graduate or professional school.

As always, you should begin by deciding on a topic. In addition to the considerations outlined for the other topics, you will also need to consider what you can collect data about. Data can take a few different forms. In some classes (such as political analysis), you may need to collect quantitative data (data in numbers), whereas in other classes, you may collect qualitative (data with no numbers—for instance, interview) data. For a list of places to acquire quantitative data, please see Appendix 3. If you’re not sure what a good topic might be, you might begin by reading through some academic journal articles. Often, reading what others have done will spark some ideas on your own. Make sure that you can state your topic as a research question that you can reasonably expect to answer in the course of one semester.

Once you’ve decided on a topic, collected data and read the relevant literature, it’s time to analyze your data. If you have quantitative data, make sure that you are using the correct technique for your data. If you have qualitative data, it is no less important to make certain that you analyze it properly.

Although each paper will look slightly different, the following outline generally works well for empirical research papers.

- Introduction- Here you introduce the reader to the topic. In this section make sure you pose your research question and make the case for why the question is important
- Literature Review- In this section, you will review what others have written about your topic. This should not just be a timeline of work, but should lead to some specific hypothesis/es.
- Hypotheses: In this section, you will review your hypotheses (this section may be integrated with the previous one.
- Data and Methods: Here you discuss where you got your data and how you will analyze it.
- Results: Here you discuss the results of your analysis
Conclusions: Here you should return to the bigger picture. What does this paper conclude and what does it tell us about politics more generally. This is also a good place to discuss avenues for future research, as well as some limitations of your research.

*Other Papers* - These three major types of papers are only the most commonly assigned. If you’re assigned a paper in one of your classes that does not fit this mold, ask your professor two questions: (1) What do you want us to learn from this paper, and (2) what will you be looking for when you grade it? You can use the answers to these two questions to create a strategy for success that it suited to the task at hand.

**What is a “scholarly article” and why does your professor think they’re so important?**

Academics get paid to do two basic things: create and transmit knowledge. The major way we transmit knowledge is by teaching. At most universities (Western included), teaching is the most important thing we do. Despite the importance of teaching, we must also create knowledge to keep our jobs. In political science (and most disciplines), we do this by conducting research and publishing it in a small number of journals. These journals are distinct from magazines because the papers are subject to rigorous review process.

Each paper undergoes a “double-blind” review process where the paper is sent to anonymous reviewers (generally three experts in their field). The reviewers do not know who the authors are, nor does the author know who the reviewers are. The reviewers write extensive comments about the paper and the editor uses these comments to make a decision about whether to publish the article. You will notice that journal articles are not as easy to read as magazines, but you can generally be assured that experts in the field find their evidence to be extraordinary. As a result, information you get from an academic journal is generally trustworthy.

The library subscribes to many journals and an even greater number are available through databases on the library webpage. I have listed many of the major journals in Appendix 1 of this packet.

**How to read Academic Journal Articles**

Although you may understand some parts of academic journal articles, there is a good chance you will not be able to understand it all. That’s OK. Academics state and restate their points many times throughout the article. If there is some math or statistics you don’t understand, you may be able to skip over it and read further. Most authors will soon state it in easier words. If all else fails, pay close attention to the conclusion where the author will restate their thesis and make a point for how it relates to the real world (just like you’ll do when you write empirical research papers).
What is Plagiarism?

Plagiarism (or cheating) takes many forms. Most of the time, it’s obvious. If you copy a paper off of the Internet, it’s cheating. If you copy from another student’s paper, it’s cheating and once again, there’s little doubt about it. If you take someone else’s ideas, make sure you provide a proper citation. If you take someone else’s words, make sure that you provide both a citation and put the section in quotation marks. If you do not, it is plagiarism.

Why is it so bad?

As academics we take ideas and words pretty seriously. We want you to develop your own thoughts. Likewise, we want you to become better writers. When we assign a paper, we want to be able to assess how well you’re progressing as a thinker, researcher, and writer. When you plagiarize, we cannot determine how well you’re progressing along this path. In addition, we want to make sure that all students are playing by the same rules.

Will your professors know?

The odds are that you will get caught. The major reason is because your professors are not stupid (or at least not as stupid as you may believe). We know the literature well. If you are stealing someone’s argument, it’s likely that we are already familiar with the argument and will spot it as not your own. Likewise, it is not difficult to tell when you are using other people’s words. We read a lot of papers and when the author changes, we generally can tell. There have also been tremendous advances in anti-cheating software that can identify plagiarized sentences, paragraphs, and papers.

What is the Penalty?

The penalty for plagiarism is severe! Although some of it remains up to the professor’s discretion, all of us are committed to eliminating plagiarism at WCU. As a result, if we catch you plagiarizing, we will place your name on file with academic affairs. We will also either fail you on the assignment, or fail you for the class. Please see the university handbook for details.

How Can I Avoid It?

Make sure that when you use someone else’s words or ideas, you provide proper citation. One way to help is to make sure that you do not have the source open when you’re writing your paper. The temptation is simply too great.

How Do you Cite Things?

There are a number of different citation styles. Ask your professor on the first day or class which style s/he prefers. For my classes, you may use any style as long as you’re consistent. If you have any questions about how to cite, please visit the writing center. They have a number of self-tests and other resources to help.
Writing Tips

- Follow the directions! This packet gives some general guidelines on how to write a paper, but first and foremost, make sure you followed the instructions you professor gave you.
- Use section headings to give your paper structure. For instance, this packet has section headings throughout. This allows you to move through my logic and tells you what each section is about. Simply stated: it makes it easier to read.
- Use active voice. Many students try to make their writing sound more “academic” by writing in the passive voice. In reality, it just makes it harder to read.
- Use outlines
- Never turn in your first draft.

Some Good Sources for Further Reading

The best single source for information about writing and research in political science is the American Political Science Association’s Guide to Writing in Political Science.

Who to Ask for Help

Every professor in our department has their own specialization(s). If you need assistance or guidance with a specific topic, you may find it helpful to contact our local expert in that field. Whether they are teaching you that semester or not, they will likely be glad to help you get started with your research. The following list may help you determine who to ask for help with any given topic.

Dr. Claudia Bryant: American politics (gender and politics), health policy, public administration.

Dr. Bruce Carroll: Public law and judicial behavior, European politics, quantitative methods.

Dr. Chris Cooper: American politics (media and politics, state politics, mass political behavior), public policy, quantitative methods.

Dr. Gibbs Knotts: American politics (southern politics, political participation, political geography, urban politics), public policy, quantitative methods.

Dr. Don Livingston: American politics (Congress, the Presidency).

Dr. Gordon Mercer: Public administration, American politics

Dr. Niall Michelsen: International politics
Appendix 1: Academic Journals by Subject

General Political Science:
- *American Political Science Review* (JSTOR and print)
- *American Journal of Political Science* (JSTOR and print)
- *Journal of Politics* (JSTOR and print)
- *Political Research Quarterly*¹ (JSTOR and print)

General American Politics
- *American Politics Research*²

General International politics
- *International Studies Quarterly* (JSTOR and print)
- *Journal of Peace Research*
- *International Organizations*

Media and politics
- *Political Communication* (print)

State politics
- *State Politics and Policy Quarterly* (print)
- *State and Local Government Review* (print)

Local politics
- *Urban Affairs Review*
- *State and Local Government Review* (print)

Congress
- *Legislative Studies Quarterly* (JSTOR and print)

The Presidency
- *Presidential Studies Quarterly*

Comparative Politics
- *Comparative Political Studies*

General Social Science
- *Social Science Quarterly* (print)

Public Law and Judicial Behavior
- *Judicature*
- *Law and Society Review*

¹ Formerly *Western Political Quarterly*
² Formerly *American Politics Quarterly*
Appendix 2: A Check sheet for all Papers

Before you turn in your paper, make sure you answer say yes to each of the following statements:

✔ I have followed all specific directions that my professor gave me about this paper.

✔ My paper has a cover page.

✔ My paper has 12 point font, Times New Roman (or other normal font).

✔ My paper has 1 inch margins.

✔ My paper has numbered pages.

✔ My paper is double-spaced.

✔ My paper has a thesis sentence or research question.

✔ My paper has a consistent citation style—make sure that if they are not your words, you have them in quotation marks with a citation. If it’s not your idea, you don’t have quotation marks, but you do provide a proper citation.

✔ My paper does not have long paragraphs (generally if it’s longer than a half a page, it’s too long).

✔ My paper has no misspelled words (look for homonyms, not just words that are underlined in MS Word).

✔ My paper does not have any awkward sentences.

✔ I only capitalized proper nouns, and the beginning of sentences.

✔ I used commas only when necessary.

✔ I did not use contractions in my paper.

✔ I used its and it’s, to, two and too, affect and effect appropriately.