

ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL POLITICAL THEORY PAPER

1. ARCHITECTURE

A successful political theory paper in part depends to a huge extent on its architecture: the introduction (1.1), thesis statement (1.2), body (1.3) and conclusion (1.4). Understanding the role that each of these components are meant to play within the essay will hopefully aid you in crafting a strong, argumentative essay.

1.1 A clear introduction

Your paper should begin with an introductory paragraph or couple of paragraphs, in which you introduce the reader to the problem or question you are addressing, lay out the thesis statement, and (often) provide the reader a “roadmap” for how you will defend your thesis. Sometimes, and in addition, authors use introductions to present general background information or provide their own motivation for writing on this subject matter – but this is not always necessary.

The problem. This is the wider subject or question you are trying to address with your essay. In academic writing, this sometimes takes the form of a misunderstanding common within a certain field, but the larger problem can also refer to a situation in the world or a state of affairs on which your thesis has direct bearing. For example, you might wish to motivate your own essay on legitimacy on the problem posed by the kinds of resistance movements we see in the Arab Spring or Occupy Wall Street. Situating your (more specific) argument within a broader problem tells the reader *why your paper is relevant*.

The thesis. Explained in more depth below, this is the short (1-2 sentences) statement of what your paper will argue specifically.

The roadmap. Following the thesis, authors will often provide the reader a plan for how they will defend their thesis, which operates like a preview of the paper’s main points, presented in order. While not always necessary, such a plan is highly encouraged for the papers you will be writing, as it not only lends clarity to the structure of your argument, but also provides a check for the logical coherence of the points you make.

1.2 An argumentative thesis statement

A thesis is the main or central claim that you will make in your paper – which means it is the most important part. The thesis tells your reader exactly what the main point of the paper is – what you will argue. Though it is tempting to want to hold the reader in suspense or save something for a big reveal at the end of the essay, in academic writing the thesis should appear within the first 1-2 paragraphs of your paper.

What a thesis is NOT:

A thesis is not the same as the topic of your paper (“This paper focuses on the idea of individual rights in Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*”), nor a statement of fact (“John Locke wrote his *Two Treatises of Government* ten years before the Glorious Revolution”) nor an observation about the text so obvious or general that no one would dispute it (“Central to Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government* is the importance of consent for legitimate government”).

What a thesis IS:

A thesis is an argument, which means that it is debatable: it is something about which reasonable, intelligent people might disagree. It is something you have to argue for and defend.

A thesis is a declaration of what you will accomplish in your paper. Typically, a thesis will take the form of 1-2 sentences toward the end of an introduction: “In this paper, I will argue that although the idea of consent is central to Locke’s political theory, he does not adequately address the reality that no one chooses the state into which she is born.”

1.3 A well-organized body

The body of the paper follows your introduction, and is where you develop your thesis and defend it with evidence and reasons. The structure of your body should follow the roadmap you provided in the introduction. It is most important that this is structured logically, so that each point and paragraph flows from the preceding one. For example, if there are 3 main defenses that you need to make in order to substantiate your thesis, think about what order makes the most sense. How

does each proposition relate to the next? What relationship they have to the main thesis? You should know what each paragraph is doing (which point is it related to) and why it is located where it is in your paper. Often, the last section of the body of your paper will consider alternative explanations or counter-arguments to your own, which you present and then argue against in further defense of your thesis. This is not always necessary, but in political theory it is often a good way to defend your thesis from others' best counter-arguments.

1.4 A strong conclusion

Following the body of your paper, the last component is the conclusion. Here, you should sum up what you have argued in your paper: revisit your thesis, and the main points you made in its defense. You may also use this to draw out further implications or applications of your paper, though this should not be too extensive.

2. STYLE & MECHANICS

Architecture and argument are not the only things we look for in good papers, crucial though they are. The other main elements of a successful theory paper are the quality of the writing (2.1), attention to citations (2.2) and originality of thought (2.3).

2.1 Writing

Good, clean writing goes along way. The main things you should keep in mind:

Do not fear the first-person! Your paper lays out *your* argument, so be bold and take ownership for it. While you should avoid over-personalizing academic papers, you should not shy away from saying things like “In this paper, I argue...” or “It is my contention that...” This language makes it clear what separates your particular contribution from those of others.

Avoid the passive voice wherever possible. Passive voice is when there is no specified actor for a verb: e.g. “The book was *written* in 1793” leaves ambiguous who wrote it. Sometimes using passive voice is necessary, but keep it to a minimum.

Write in the present tense where possible. Even for authors who are long-since deceased, it is standard in political theory to write sentences like the following: “In his *Two Treatises of Government*, John Locke contends that...” While historical details can be written in the past (“Locke wrote before the Glorious Revolution”), everything else should be written in the present.

Avoid jargon. Overly technical language often only confuses the point you are trying to get across. If a technical term is absolutely needed, be sure that you define it: remember that most concept terms in political theory – technical or otherwise – are the subject of controversy (e.g. what does “democracy” mean? How is “legitimacy” defined?) and require definition.

Proof-read before you turn it in! Spelling and grammatical mistakes distract the reader, and reduce the clarity of your argument and analysis.

2.2 Citations

In academic writing, citations are not just how you avoid accusations of plagiarism; they also situate the writer in a specific conversation between scholars, and help the reader to understand where the author is coming from. It is also the way in which scholars give one another credit for their ideas and writing. No single style guide predominates political theory, so you may choose which one you'd like (Chicago, MLA, APA, etc.) – just be consistent. While you should consult the university's policies and guidelines on plagiarism, in general, you need to cite anytime you use someone else's words (quoting verbatim) or ideas (paraphrasing). A bibliography of all works cited should be appended to the paper.

2.3 Originality

Originality does not mean that you must present an idea that no one has ever had before in your paper – and it does not mean that you do not rely on the work of others. Rather, the measure of originality in your papers will be how much you are able to move beyond what we have explicitly said in class or lectures to develop an argument that is your own. There is no recipe for this, but a good rule of thumb is: question as much as possible – every term, every assumption. The more questions you ask of the readings, the more likely it is that you will land on an idea that you genuinely want to write about, and an argument that really reflects your own creative thinking on any given topic.