

Government 20: Foundations of Comparative Politics
Ashley A's Guide to Short Social Science Writing (for papers and exams)

The Basics:

The purpose of writing short, analytic papers is to give you an opportunity for sustained reflection and analysis of the important issues covered in the course. You're writing an analytical, not a descriptive, paper – this means your goal is not to simply describe what happened but to explain how or why something occurred or did not occur in a particular way.

On the most basic level all analytical social science papers should include the following three elements:

1) An argument or explanation to be advanced

Every paper should begin by clearly stating the argument that you, the author, want to advance with reference to the topic at hand. This argument should address the question at hand (i.e. if asked, "What was the cause of x?", your argument should explain what factors you believe lead to x happening) and should be clear, concise, and coherent.

If you are worried about being clear, beginning your essay with "In this essay I will argue that", is a good way of getting out a clear thought (you can change the syntax later). Being concise just means to keep your argument as simple as possible while still communicating your central point. If your argument takes more than 2-3 sentences to state, it's probably not concise. Finally coherence means that you make an argument that is both logical and internally consistent. The best way to ensure coherence is to consider your argument in terms of cause and effect or independent and dependent variables. If you can identify a statement such that x causes y and this is a logical statement, then you've achieved coherence!

Note that not every argument will be strictly causal so sometimes the x causes y argument is not appropriate. If you are trying to convince someone of a point (i.e. rationality is not a good assumption because...) you will have to have a different approach such that you employ argumentative reasoning rather than causality but your argument will still have to have the three C's.

Finally, note that good arguments will move beyond simply agreeing with positions taken in the readings and will instead evaluate the readings while taking an original stance as much as possible.

2) A Review of the Literature

While a short paper will not allow for a formal literature review like the ones you might see in class readings, it is important that your essay demonstrates an understanding of the explanations/theories relevant to your argument as well as any counterarguments that can be advanced. Thus in writing an essay you should devote time to making a logical case about why and how your preferred explanation was chosen and why alternative explanations were rejected with reference to the literature already in existence.

In this part definitions of terms are important. If you are reviewing a theory advanced by another author or presenting an argument as an alternative (but inferior) explanation it is important that you define your terms/theories in a way that is both clear to the reader and consistent with the original author's formulation of the concept. If you disagree with that definition it is fine to say so but you must acknowledge the original definitions of your selected terms and propose sound reasons as to why those should be modified.

3) Empirical Evidence

To prove your argument you will need some type of evidence whether it is statistical data, historical analysis, or a case study. What evidence you provide depends entirely on the nature of the question/your argument and the information available to you. Some questions lend themselves to certain types of evidence, but the evidence you can use is always constrained by what information exists in the world.

Also remember that although the evidence you use ideally will support your argument, it is more important to select cases and data that provide an opportunity to test, rather than confirm your theory. This means that it is inappropriate to only consider cases that obviously support your argument, you also want to look at cases that seem challenging for your propositions so that you can make sure you have picked the "correct" argument to advance.

RECAP: I want to see that 1) you can make a logical, interesting causal argument, 2) you understand the strengths and limitations of alternative explanations and 3) you can provide strong evidence to support your claims

The Written Product

Introduction – introducing your reader to your position and making him or her interested in how you will defend it

In the very first paragraph, clearly state your thesis or argument

- Arguments should be interesting, contestable and tightly focused. Statements such as "democratization is a difficult process" or "economic development is

important” are neither interesting nor contestable, and are simply too broad to effectively discuss in 5 pages

- Avoid flowery, long-winded introductions that are purely descriptive – don’t be afraid to plunge into your main argument right away!

Body of the Paper – explaining and defending your argument

The strategies you use to convince your reader take a variety of forms:

1) Elaborate the logic of your argument

- Which factors are you arguing have causal importance? That is, what’s causing what, and how?
- Which other theories/authors support some of your claims?

2) Provide evidence – to convince the reader (your very knowledgeable TF) that your argument does a good job of explaining some phenomenon, you’ll need to muster relevant empirical evidence – that is, show that your argument fits well with the facts and show that the rival theories do not fit well, or as well, with the facts

- Judicious use of evidence is crucial – understand which facts you’re citing and how they relate to your claims
- Think carefully what kind of facts do and do not support your argument
- Do not include empirical details just because you’ve come across them while doing the reading. The main purpose of the paper is to show that you can use the material you’ve read to make a pointed, focused argument
 - Show that you understand exactly what about a case helps to prove your point. Never just say, “for instance, India.” But don’t get lost in details! Provide enough facts to show that you understand the country or event you’re referring to, but don’t include every single detail that is mentioned in the reading

Note: As you’re writing, always keep your main argument in mind. If you cannot decide how the point you’re currently making fits into the overall argument, it’s a sign that the argument may be unclear even in your own mind or that the point is not germane and should be removed

- Each paragraph should convey a single unit of information and each paragraph should logically flow from what precedes it

- Carefully think about what each paragraph is doing to help you support your main argument. Irrelevant tangents distract your reader.

3) Address alternative explanations – defending your position also involves identifying and refuting relevant counter-arguments. To figure this out, ask yourself some questions about the theories you’ve read:

- What exactly does a particular theory explain? Does it leave out some crucial consideration?
- Does a theory explain only a part of what you want to explain?
- Does it fail to explain a really important case?
- Is a theory portable to a different context? (e.g. geographic region, different time period, etc.)

But,

- Always be fair to the theory you’re evaluating – if you can build the strongest possible case for a theory, and then refute it, your argument will only be stronger. By contrast, sweeping obvious counter-arguments under the rug does not make your argument stronger!
- Also, don’t be afraid to admit that other theories are explaining parts of what’s going on
- Do not address every theory you’ve read in class. Instead, think carefully about which theories directly bear on the arguments you’re making, and include only those theories in your written work. A few great references from three articles are much better than a slew of weak references from 10 articles

Conclusion – summing up with your strongest points

Papers need a carefully thought-out conclusion that reminds the reader of your overall argument and how effectively you have proven it. You shouldn’t summarize or restate your whole argument, but it’s a good idea to touch upon the main/strongest points you’ve made and remind the reader of why your argument is particularly interesting or convincing.

Citations – it’s extremely important to cite properly (when in doubt, cite!)

No matter what style of citations you use (footnotes, parenthetical citation, end notes) be consistent throughout your paper. Make sure to cite what you learned from Professor Levitsky in lecture.

What Gets the Grade?

The Excellent Paper: (A/A-)

Mechanics: Sentence structure, grammar, and diction are carefully selected and appropriately used; correct use of punctuation and citations; no run-on sentences; conforms to formatting requirements

Structure: Paragraphs are organized to advance argument in a clear and consistent manner; makes artful use of topic sentences and transitions; paragraphs are tight, structured, and logical

Thesis: Thesis is clear and apparent in the first paragraph of the essay; thesis is obviously argumentative, plausible, and adds something original or nuanced to the debate/explanation at hand.

Evidence: Evidence is used to buttress all major points and is carefully selected from reading to advance argument presented; use of examples, statistics, and quotes shows an in-depth understanding of the assigned texts and is integrated flawlessly into student's own analysis.

Analysis: Ideas presented delve beyond the surface and display critical thinking about theories/cases presented in the reading rather than simple summary; details (of argument) are carefully elaborated and are thoroughly advanced.

Logic and Argumentation: All ideas in the paper flow logically, the argument is identifiable, reasonable and sound/coherent; author anticipates and fully addresses/refutes counterarguments.

The Good Paper: (B+/B)

Mechanics: Sentence structure, grammar and diction are strong despite occasional lapses; punctuation and citation used correctly; may have one run-on sentence; conforms to formatting requirements

Structure: Paragraphs are generally clear and concise though points may wander/linger occasionally; essay contains a clear introduction, body and conclusions; paragraphs are

generally logically structured and are usually linked with appropriate transitions/topic sentences.

Thesis: Thesis is still apparent and argumentative but may be lacking in originality or insight; argument is plausible

Evidence: Evidence is used to support most points but may not clearly relate to the argument being advanced; use of examples/statistics/quotes demonstrates a general understanding on the assigned readings

Analysis: Ideas relate clearly to the thesis though elaboration of ideas is not always clear/apparent; critical thinking is intertwined with summary/description of theories presented in the assigned texts.

Logic and Argumentation: Argument of paper is clear and ideas usually flow logically; counterarguments acknowledged but perhaps not fully addressed.

The “Needs Improvement” Paper: (B-/C+)

Mechanics: Problems in sentence structure, grammar and diction (apparent but not excessive); more than one run-on sentence exists; conforms in almost every way to formatting requirements

Structure: Often unclear, with ideas ambling or jumping around; paragraphs contain argumentation but are often unfocused; transitions and topic sentences are weak/non-existent and do not advance argument.

Thesis: May be unclear (containing vague terminology) and is only limitedly argumentative; does not display originality or nuance.

Evidence: Examples used to support some points and are often not well-related to points advanced in argument; generalizations are used without support; evidence shows basic knowledge of/familiarity with the assigned material.

Analysis: Ideas are often basic; elaboration of argument displays summary and only limitedly shows critical analysis/evaluation of theories or ideas from readings.

Logic and Argumentation: Logic may often fail or argumentation may be unclear. Does not address counterarguments effectively.

The “Come see me” Paper: (C and below)

Is like the “Needs Improvement” Paper but the problems are more grave or more frequent.