

Politics Writing Guide

For the most part, Politics professors say that they, like professors in other humanities and social science departments, will prioritize clear, concise, precise, engaging writing over any formatting particulars. However, there are a few things that you should know they *do* have opinions about.

A Solid Introduction is Key

The introduction will clarify your argument for the reader. In Politics, it is very important to be up front with your claims—literally! Rather than saving your main points for a grand reveal in your conclusion, put your main argument and reasoning close to the beginning of your paper.

Consider the following example introduction from a 100-level politics paper:

The 17th century was an incredibly influential time for the political philosophers of Europe. Many theories being published at the time sought to justify or critique the current political situation from ground-up approaches that rooted political power and government in the nature and rights of men. Although semi-contemporaries Thomas Hobbes and John Locke both engaged with the idea of human consent as instrumental in the formation of governments, their ideas about interaction before, after, and during the creation of the governmental ‘compact’ are radically different. This is, ultimately, due to the stark differences in the way in which they derive power – beginning with their ideas about human beings themselves. (Nick Budak, ’14)

The writer maintains control over the argument from beginning to end, keeping it precise and focused. By the end of the introduction, we know that the paper will be about Hobbes’ and Locke’s theories of consent relating to the derivation of power in both government and human nature.

Questions to ask:

- Does your introduction have a solid thesis statement?
- Does the reader have a clear understanding of the paper after reading the introduction?
- Does the paper reflect the claims made in the introduction?

Write Introductions Last!

Although it may seem counterintuitive, write your paper before your introduction. This will make it easier to track the development of your argument. It can be helpful to have a “working-thesis” to guide your paper, but don’t be afraid to go back and change it completely if you end up writing about something else.

Sometimes it is difficult to rewrite an introduction, particularly if you laid it out well. But often the idea you have when you begin to write is not the same one you end up putting on the paper! Saving the introduction for last can help you avoid trying to salvage old material that may not be helpful.

Shelly Le ’14 recommends including a brief roadmap in the introductory paragraph, though you should ask your professor about their individual preference: some like it, some don’t.

Questions to ask:

- Does your introduction include a roadmap? If so, is it clear? If not, should it have one?
- Does your thesis reflect the arguments made throughout the paper?

Is the Thesis “Strong” Enough?

Students and professors agree: a good paper needs a strong thesis. For politics papers, Prof. Apostolidis recommends a “strong, arguable claim.” A good litmus test for this is whether you can immediately

think of an opposing view. However, a *solid* thesis needs evidence to back up each claim it makes!! Make sure there aren't unsubstantiated claims.

Questions to ask:

- Could you explain your thesis to me in your own words?
- What question are you trying to answer?

Be Mindful of Paragraph Breaks!

Sometimes a paragraph just seems like it's getting too long and needs to be broken up. A simple click of the Enter-then-Tab creates the perfect division! ...well, not quite. Sometimes it's necessary to just break up a large paragraph into two; often, however, a little more work needs to be done to keep the flow of the paper smooth.

Each paragraph should have a clear topic sentence and concluding sentence. A common error is to introduce ideas from the next paragraph at the end of the previous paragraph. This tends to read awkwardly—keep paragraphs focused on their own main ideas!

Questions to ask:

- What function does each paragraph serve?
- Does each paragraph have a topic sentence? A concluding sentence?
- Try the reverse outline technique: summarize each paragraph and track the fluidity of the argument.

Can I Say “I”?

In Politics papers here at Whitman, it is A-OK to use the first person. Examples of **appropriate** uses include:

“I will discuss...”

“I intend to show...”

“In this paper, I argue that...”

Examples of **questionable** and **dangerous** uses include:

“I believe...”

“It seems to me that...”

“I think...”

These uses are marked as “questionable” because they indicate an intrusion of the writer's *opinion* rather than an acknowledgment of the writer's hand in writing the paper. Politics professors are looking for a stronger, argumentative stance: the **appropriate** examples signal more authority over arguments.

Is the Passive Voice Allowed?

No, avoid it! Unless you are an experienced writer trying to make a point about the actor or agent of an action being unknown, the passive voice is almost always a problem. Consider the following:

Poor: *“Voters were convinced Reagan was the correct choice.”*

Better: *“Voters were convinced by political ads that Reagan was the correct choice.”*

Best: *“Political ads convinced voters that Reagan was the correct choice.”*

In the first sentence, we know only that the voters are convinced Reagan is the correct choice. In the second sentence, we know the political ads caused the voters to become convinced that Reagan was the right choice; however, the sentence is clunky—it could be better. The last sentence highlights the relationship between the ads and the voters, showing the reader the connection syntactically as well.

Interviews with Prof. Jeanne Morefield, Prof. Paul Aposotolidis, and Shelly Le '14