

# Haverford College Writing Center Guide to Writing in Political Science

## Components of a good paper

- **Thesis Statement**
  - The thesis is a claim/argument that answers a question. If the paper is a response to a prompt, then the thesis should directly answer the prompt question. If the paper is a research paper, then the thesis answers a question that you formulate and pose yourself. The thesis should be a succinct but informative summary of the main point of your paper, typically at or near the end of the introductory paragraph.
  - Long research papers and senior theses should ask and answer questions that are novel/understudied, puzzling/interesting, and/or have meaningful stakes. Set out why your question has some (or all) of these qualities in the paper.
- **Structure/Content**
  - Intro paragraphs should pose the question of the paper and provide the thesis as the answer to the question.
  - Subsequent paragraphs should each contain one central idea which develops or supports your thesis; if you start to address a new idea, then start a new paragraph.
  - Body paragraphs should generally be highly evidence-based and have a coherent logical flow, both within and between paragraphs.
  - Professor expectations for a paper's structure/content often differ based on the type of assignment and the subdiscipline of the class, so ask your professor for their expectations of what a particular paper should look like, or for a sample paper from a past student. Here is some general advice:
    - Prompt-based papers usually do not require that you have specific sections, and typically utilize course readings as the primary source of evidence.
    - Research papers typically require significant outside research as the primary source of evidence, though course readings are sometimes relevant.
    - Research papers typically require an introduction that states your question and justifies its importance, a literature review which surveys relevant literature to your question, a methodology/research design section that explains your selection of case(s) and how you will test your hypothesis(es), a case section where you analyze the case(s) you have selected, and a discussion/conclusion section that explains how your cases confirm/disconfirm your hypothesis(es) and the significance of your findings.
- **Citations**
  - Most professors do not require a specific citation style, they simply ask that you be consistent in your use (e.g., don't mix two styles).
  - Most papers in the discipline either use MLA or Chicago style citations.
  - You must include citations for all non-obvious empirical claims made in your paper.

## Common errors made by new students

- **Failure to answer the prompt** – new students frequently fail to directly answer the prompt, and sometimes fail to clearly articulate which prompt they are responding to. This is the **single most common/important piece of advice professors gave** – students should directly answer the prompt and utilize office hours/ask questions in class to be sure they understand what an assignment is asking for.
- **Starting too late** – students often start researching and/or writing far too close to an assignment’s deadline, leaving them inadequate time to revise a paper. This is the **second most common/important advice professors gave** – give yourself sufficient time!
- **Overly descriptive papers** – students sometimes write papers that are mostly or purely descriptive, rather than argumentative. Evidence from course materials should build to an argument, not substitute for having an argument. In most cases, **if you design your thesis to answer a “why” question**, you will avoid writing an overly descriptive papers, as explaining why something occurred typically entails making an argument rather than simply describing what happened.
- **Evidentiary/argument problems** – students often fail to use adequate evidence to support their claims/arguments, fail to connect lines of argument/evidence to their thesis claim, or fail to connect their thesis to the prompt. Be sure to adequately support your claims with evidence, and be clear with how your claims provide support for your thesis.
- **Unclear/jargon-heavy language** – students sometimes use academic/political science jargon without fully understanding its meaning and use terms incorrectly as a result. This produces papers where core ideas are less clear and more confusing than if students had used simpler language.
- **Failure to clearly define key concepts** – students sometimes fail to adequately define key concepts (e.g., what is “democracy”). This is especially important for classes in the political theory subdiscipline, whereas in other subdisciplines, defining concepts may be less important based on the assignment.

## Professors’ advice on the writing process

- **Start writing/researching early** – leave yourself enough time for at least one or two full rounds of revision/editing before the final deadline.
- **Use the library’s resources, especially Margaret Schaus** – particularly for research papers and senior thesis, Margaret is an incredible resource for getting started with the research process – schedule meetings with her, she’ll make your life easier!
- **Know your own writing process** – some students work best by having a detailed outline before beginning to write, others dump words onto the page and then heavily restructure/edit, some students write best in large chunks, some write best in small chunks, etc. Learn what works for you and give yourself enough time to produce at your peak.
- **Be collaborative** – it often helps to bounce ideas off peers or get editing help from a second set of eyes. Don’t be afraid to ask for feedback on your drafts from your professor either, they welcome students asking for help.

## Senior Thesis – advice and common mistakes

- **Start early** – think about what topics you’re interested in the summer before your senior year; start reading if you have time. Choose a topic that interests you/that you care about.
- **Pick a good research question** – having a good research question is crucial – the worst crises come when students realize late in a semester that there’s a critical flaw in their research question. If you have a good question, it will guide you throughout the process of writing the body of your thesis. Avoid picking overly broad research questions.
- **Don’t procrastinate** – thesis isn’t a paper you can cram for. Students often do too little work in the Fall semester, or don’t start writing the body of their thesis until too late in Spring semester. Political Science theses are due before most other departments in late April, so it’s crucial to get work done early – otherwise, you end up having to write large chunks of thesis right as finals season approaches and other classes are ramping up their workload.
- **Work with your peers/advisor** – your thesis advising group is a great resource for getting feedback on your ideas, and they’re all going through the process too. Fall seminar classes vary in how much they are geared towards helping you come up with research questions, and advisors vary in how structured they are/how explicit they are about expectations. Utilize office hours if you find yourself lost.
- **Use Zotero for citations/bibliography** – it is that simple. It will save you hours of work.
- **Thesis is hard** – it is longer than anything else you’ve written, and you probably be continually revising what you’ve already written, even as you write new content. It helps to break thesis up into doable chunks (i.e., think of it as four 20-page papers rather than one 80-page paper and create a timeline for yourself accordingly, even if you don’t stick to it). Be creative when you run into writer’s block (voice memos, post-it notes, and walks along the nature trail can all help).
- **But, thesis is not the end of world** – students make too much of thesis and it often harms their mental health as a result. It’s important, but at the end of the day it’s just a very long paper; it isn’t a referendum on your value as a person, and it’s unlikely that your thesis will matter much after you graduate.

### Other resources on writing in Political Science:

- <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/political-science/>
- <https://twp.duke.edu/sites/twp.duke.edu/files/file-attachments/poli-sci.original.pdf>

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