

Writing Political Theory Papers

Political theory is a little bit different than political science. Here are some important differences.

- 1) It's more like philosophy than social science: it is more concerned with theoretical issues.
 - It is crucial to make a logical argument rather than causal or empirical claim.
 - "Hobbes' State of Nature is more realistic and therefore better" isn't necessarily a compelling argument for a theorist. For a theory paper, it is important to remember that just because a type of government, process, or practice hasn't existed before doesn't mean the theory is invalid. Although it often references empirical realities, political theory focuses more on possibilities and interpretations.
- 2) Evidence often looks different (theoretical, text-based and logical v. empirical counting of things or people or words or bills in committee): theoretical concepts are more important than facts.
- 3) A precise and accurate interpretation of the author(s) discussed is vitally important.
 - Your argument will fail if you cannot recount the important points in the author's claim succinctly.
 - This requires judgment: before you write, think about ways the authors are comparable and how they are different.

And yet, political theory is also similar to political science.

- 1) It depends on logical organization of thoughts and presentation of evidence: the structure of your paper should make sense and build toward proving your thesis.
- 2) It requires a clear thesis statement at the beginning of the paper...
 - ...even though you may write your fully-developed thesis statement and introductory paragraph last.
- 3) ...which is fully explicated and defended throughout the paper through the use of textual and logical evidence.
- 4) The paper should consider counterarguments: not all counterarguments, but certainly some.
- 5) Citations of direct quotations and paraphrases are critically important.
- 6) Provide a conclusion that reiterates your thesis and reminds your reader why this is an important question.
- 7) Think of your audience as a peer in your class who has done all the reading but disagrees with your claim. Try to persuade him or her to agree.
- 8) Clear writing is the key to success!! This is true in most academic endeavors, but especially in political theory, where all we've got is words.
- 9) Edit your paper on two levels:
 - Proofread it for *coherent structure*: do the paragraphs make sense in this order? Does each paragraph build toward your claim? Does each paragraph have a topic sentence and then stay on topic?

- Proofread it for *clear language*: are your sentences as active as possible (Active: “Locke asserts that everyone knows natural law” v. Passive: “Natural law, according to Locke, is known by everyone.”)? Does it sound like English? Are you using words that you know the meaning of? Have you spelled the theorists’ names correctly?
- It’s important to remember that your reader only knows what’s on the page, not what’s in your mind: your task is to do the work for your reader rather than requiring them to fill in gaps.

The following are good websites that also discuss how to write political theory papers. I strongly suggest that you review these prior to beginning your essay.

Written by former UW professor, Dr. Mika LaVaque-Manty of the University of Michigan, this is an excellent overview of how to conceptualize and execute a political theory essay.

<http://www-personal.umich.edu/~mmanty/teaching/papers.html>

Here’s another example, this one by Dr. Anna Marie Smith of Cornell University.

<http://falcon.arts.cornell.edu/ams3/guide.html>

And from the Writing Center at the University of North Carolina, here is a pretty good discussion of different kinds of papers in political science, with an occasional discussion of how political theory papers differ from papers in other subfields.

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/polisci.html>

Remember: you **should talk with your professor or TA** to make sure you are headed in the right direction. These resources are offered merely as food for thought rather than firm guidelines. The person grading your paper is the single best resource when it comes to receiving guidance and feedback.

An Example of a Political Theory Question

Hobbes essentially argues that ordinary citizens should stay out of politics and that absolute monarchy is the best form of government. Why does Hobbes hold this view, and how does he justify it? Are you persuaded by his argument against popular political participation? Why, or why not?

What’s a thesis statement again??

A thesis (claim/argument) is a statement that you want to persuade someone is true. It should have two components:

- A clearly stated position you will take in the paper
- A key reason (preferably reasons) why you support this position.

Examples of a thesis statement:

Although Hobbes makes a compelling claim that absolute monarchy is the best form of government, his argument fails because it does not take account of important-theoretical-concepts-related-to-popular-participation A, B, and C.

Hobbes' argument against popular participation in government is unconvincing because it fails to adequately address concerns A, B, and C.

Hobbes' theory, which limits popular participation in government, is correct because D, E, and F.

In prioritizing security over freedom, Hobbes pretends that he is constructing a social contract: instead, his theory support a virtual dictatorship, which is a dreadful form of government because it ignores the will of the people.

- You will note that ALL of these examples include the word “because.” “Because” or “since” are good words to use in thesis statements because they indicate the reason(s) why your claim is true. You will then prove these reasons over the course of the essay.

What ISN'T a thesis statement...

Hobbes is insane and gives his sovereign way too much power.

Hobbes' state of nature is very realistic, so his theory must be right.

Hobbes' theory is confusing and his view of human nature is awful.

Now, think about what you need to do to prove your thesis statement to be (conceptually!!) true.

Recall your (provisional) thesis: Hobbes' argument against popular participation in government is unconvincing because it fails to adequately address A, B, and C.

What do you need to discuss to show this is true? (AKA brainstorming/outlining/*BEFORE* you start writing.) *You need to have some idea what the answers to these questions are before you sit down to right your paper.*

- 1) Clarify what Hobbes says about the dangers of participation in government. What, SPECIFICALLY, is he concerned about? This is the “why does Hobbes hold this view and how does he justify it” portion.
- 2) Think about whether you agree with the theorist's (or theorists') argument(s). What's wrong? What's right? What assumptions does the theorist make? Does s/he make claims that are unsupported? Is your problem with Hobbes that he prioritizes things wrong (security is always more important than freedom) or that the outcome of his theory is creepy? If it's creepy, why (specifically!!) is it creepy? Clarify the things you find to be a problem or, conversely, that make his theory the best of all possible theories.
- 3) Do you agree with Hobbes about participation? Why, specifically? Do you disagree with Hobbes about participation? Why, specifically?
- 4) If you disagree with him, how would Hobbes respond to your critique? How would he critique *your* claim(s)? If you agree with him, how do you think other theorists (say, Locke) would critique you?

A Sample Outline (for a 5-ish page paper)

I. Introduction (1 paragraph)

- a. First sentence: say what (you think) the author says. Specify what particular issue you will be considering.
 - Please—PLEASE—do not start out with “from the beginning of time...” or “man has always...” These are irritating beginnings to papers and you do not want to immediately alienate your TA.
- b. Second sentence: why is this theoretical question important?
- c. Third sentence: what is your claim? (HINT: this is your thesis statement!)
- d. Provide a ‘road map’ of the paper that previews the structure your paper.
- e. Your thesis and roadmap are not the same thing: one states your argument (thesis) while the other provides a preview of your paper (how you will prove your argument to be true).

II. Author discussion: BRIEFLY summarize the relevant portions of the author’s main points (1-2 paragraphs)

- a. Only discuss the points that are relevant to YOUR ARGUMENT.
- b. This is your chance to demonstrate to the reader that you 100% get the author’s argument.
- c. Do not make the author sound like an idiot or halfwit.

III. Your argument: clarify and discuss your objections to (or support for) the author’s claims (3-5 paragraphs)

- a. Recalling your thesis statement, A will get a full paragraph, as will B and C.
- b. Use direct quotes sparingly and well, but cite everything you didn’t know before you encountered this author or this class. There will be many citations (~5 per page).

IV. What would the author say in response to your objections? (1-2 paragraphs)

- a. Engage with the author to counter his claims.
- b. Do not go easier on yourself than you went on the author. Really think about what his objections would be and come up with logical thoughtful responses to them.

V. Who cares/so what? (1-2 paragraphs)

- a. Demonstrate to your reader that you can place this discussion in the larger context of politics and/or political theory (particularly important in longer papers).
- b. Why is this question interesting? How does the author point us towards important questions? What is really at stake in determining the correct position in this debate? Do the author’s points have resonance or relevance to contemporary issues? If so, explain.

VI. Conclusion (1 paragraph)

- a. Recap the main points of your argument, recalling (very briefly) how it challenges or supports the author you are discussing.
- b. Introduce no new evidence or points in your concluding paragraph.

Incorporating Quotations

In political theory, engaging the text is one of the most important skills you will develop. Using quotations to support your argument, however, requires careful thought.

- Don't over quote.
 - Direct quotes should never be more than 10-15% of your paper. So if the paper is 5 pages long, direct quotes should be no more than half a page.
 - The two main reasons to use direct quotes are as follows:
 - you want to use (or challenge) an author's definitions or assumptions.
 - you—quite literally—cannot think of a better way to say it. Hobbes' "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" is an excellent example of a strong, pithy phrase that simply cannot be made better or clearer by paraphrasing.
 - Using direct quotes to define terms or clarify an author's position is a good idea. You may want to contest the definition, but it is vitally important to be able to locate the point of agreement or disagreement in the text under discussion.
 - Use quotations only to illustrate important points – if you can paraphrase the author and still effectively convey his/her point, do so.
 - Don't substitute quotations for your own voice. Your professor and TA want to hear your argument, not a rehash of the author's argument.
- Be sure to introduce, present, and explain quotations.
 - Explain why you are introducing the quote, or provide the necessary context
 - Present the quotation or paraphrased point
 - Explain how the quote supports your argument.
 - Make sure quotation is integrated into a full sentence – So, for example: Hobbes argues that life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (37).
- Cite your sources – When you present either a direct quotation or paraphrased point, you must always include a citation. Check with your TA to see what format is acceptable.
- Use block quote formats for any quotes over four lines (on the page) long. Here is an example of how to integrate a direct quote into the text.

Another important difference between Hobbes and Locke can be found in their descriptions of political power. Locke defines political power as:

a right of making laws with penalties of death, and consequently all less penalties, for the regulating and preserving of property, and of employing the force of the community, in the execution of such laws, and in the defence of the common-wealth from foreign injury; and all this only for the public good. (12)

It is important to note, however, that for Locke, power need not exercise the right but is defined merely as having the right. Political power, then, is not defined by the exercise of law-making but by the right to do so. As a result, political power is tightly bound to the public good, and any power that works against the public good does not have the right to make laws. Both of these are important to understand how Locke's idea of power differs from Hobbes. Hobbes defines political power as...