

POLS 232. Writing assignment tips

What follows are five straightforward and easy-to-implement tips to help you get the best possible grade on your take-home papers. These are things that you should be doing in all of your writing assignments. You will not score highly in this class if you do not take heed of this advice. But the good news is that none of the pointers should be difficult to weave into your essays.

1. Write a good introduction

Your introduction should be concise and incisive. It should do three things and three things only: (1) state your argument (your thesis statement), preferably in one sentence; (2) preview the reasoning behind that argument, *in brief*; and (3) give “signposts” or a “heads up” as to how the rest of the essay will unfold. In total, this should just be five or six sentences. See below for an example.

Note that your introduction should NOT include any extraneous sentences that contribute little or nothing to what you are trying to accomplish. Do not try and “set the scene.” This is not a movie script, so avoid statements of the following nature:

- “Anarchy describes the absence of government.” ← This is true, but it is not an answer to the question. Just state your argument in answer to the question.
- “There are many different answers to the question of whether a world government would be a better form of international organization than global anarchy.” ← Again, this is true, but it doesn’t answer the question. Get to the point.
- “For years, people have debated the pros and cons of a world government” ← Yawn!

Imagine you were given following question: “Is liberalism a superior analytic lens for studying world politics than realism? Why or why not?” Here is an example of an introduction with the **argument in bold**, the reasoning underlined, and *the signposts in italics*.

Liberalism is a superior analytic lens for studying world politics when compared to realism. This is because realism focuses attention on states as the primary actors in world politics and therefore cannot bring into focus the experiences of individual human beings or non-governmental organizations. Yet, the reality of world politics is that individuals and NGOs do have a demonstrable impact upon global affairs, which is something that liberalism can help to bring into focus. *In this essay, I will develop this argument for why liberalism is superior to realism in the following way. First, I will... Second, I will... Third, I will... Finally, I will...*

2. Make an argument

Making an argument means that you have to take a stance. For these take-home essays, this means that you must argue one side or the other. *Which side is right? Which is wrong? Why?*

- Which is preferable: A world system characterized by anarchy, or a world government? Why?
- Which analytic lens best captures the reality of world politics? Why?

- Which is the most important security issue facing humanity? Why?
- Is globalization worth defending and extending, or should it be rolled back?
- Is it justifiable to fight wars in defense of human rights?

All of these questions invite clear arguments. And so you must provide one. *Take a stance.* That said, your arguments do not need to be extreme or polemical. You not need to completely rubbish one point of view and lionize another. But there does need to be some kind of an assertion being made on your part. This is what makes the essay unique to yourself. Your argument is your signature.

It is important to avoid being timid or shy when making an argument. Never, ever use language such as “I think” or “I believe.” Instead, be confident and even aggressive (“I argue”).

Here are some examples of good arguments (assertions; thesis statements):

- “A global system characterized by world government would be preferable to the current anarchical system.”
- “Realism is the lens for viewing international relations that best captures the reality of world politics.”
- “Nuclear proliferation is the most important security issue facing humankind.”

Notice how all of these arguments (thesis statements) mirror the language in the question. The goal is wrap your answer around the question as tightly as possible.

Note also that the *argument* is different and distinct from your *reasoning*. The argument is an assertion. The reasoning is a series of logical propositions that justify the argument—that is, they are the reasons for why you are arguing what you are arguing.

But hold on! Your argument is not finished just because you have stated it in your introduction. Instead, you need to return to and develop your argument throughout your paper. Your argument should run like a thread through the whole essay, with every single paragraph, sentence, and word being carefully deployed in order to serve your argument. The point of the essay is to build and support your argument.

3. Do not use contractions or other informalities

Informality is increasingly common in students’ writing and there really is no place for it. You would not wear shorts and a t-shirt to a formal job interview, so do not use informal writing for a formal writing assignment. Your writing should match the occasion.

For one thing, this means that you should never use contractions in essays: never write can’t, isn’t, won’t; instead, write cannot, is not, will not. There are no exceptions to this.

Most annoyingly of all, because it betrays an ignorance of how to use apostrophes correctly, you should never say “it’s” in an essay. It is always “it is” or “its.” Again, there are no exceptions.

And do not write conversationally. There are some writing assignments where this is appropriate, but not in this class. You should always write as if it is a formal piece of writing—which *it is!*

4. Do not allow any spelling mistakes or grammatical errors

Most spelling mistakes and grammatical errors are unforgivable in this day and age. Microsoft Word has been highlighting spelling mistakes since I first used a computer in the 1980s. Of course, we all make the odd error every now and again. I certainly do. We are only human, after all. But a pattern of allowing mistakes into your paper is usually because of laziness and carelessness, which is how we will treat it when grading your papers. Spelling mistakes might be permissible in emails, text messages, tweets, and informal documents like this one—but they are not acceptable in a formal piece of finished writing. Your prose should be polished, checked, and vetted. It should be a finished product when you turn it in. So take pride in it.

Part of the problem here is that some students view their work as “finished” once they have reached the desired word count or page limit. But it is not finished at that point. It still needs to be checked, read over, edited, and fine-tuned. It might even require a complete rewrite. The truth is that essays usually require multiple drafts. If you only push out one draft of your paper, it will be very poor in comparison to what you could have produced had you undertaken several drafts.

5. Produce a draft early on and seek feedback

You already have the five prompts for the five essays in this class. Of course, it is wise to wait until you have done the relevant reading and attended the relevant lecture before you begin writing. But you can start thinking about your papers, and you can certainly finish them (and turn them in) before the specified deadlines.

The best students will be those students who produce drafts of their papers and bring them to my and/or the TAs’ office hours for feedback. We will look over your work, offer suggestions, and help you to improve. We cannot guarantee that you will get a higher grade for having visited us, but there is a good chance that your work will be better as a result of our input.

Do not let red ink be the first feedback that you receive on your paper. Why not solicit our comments and address our criticisms *before* we grade the paper, instead of only having the benefit of our comments when it is too late? Be smart.