

## WRITING WORKSHOP BRIEF GUIDE SERIES

# A Brief Guide to Writing a Government Paper

## Welcome!

So, you're writing a government paper. Maybe it's your first one, or maybe you're approaching an unusual prompt, or maybe it's in a sub-field of political science that's new to you. Whichever the case, we've been there, and we know that having some advice and reassurance can make the process a lot easier. Below, you'll find a guide that we've compiled that contains information on citing sources, conducting research, developing a thesis, organization, and more. We'll answer common questions, provide you with helpful links, and keep things concise, and we've included specific advice from a few government professors themselves. Let's get started!

### Table of Contents:

1. **Getting Started**
2. **The Writing Process**
3. **Citing Sources, Academic Honesty, and Plagiarism**
4. **Professors and Office Hours**
5. **Writing an Honors Thesis in Government**

## 1. Getting Started

### A. What are we working on?

You may be asked to work on many different types of papers within the government department. Sometimes you will be asked for short reading responses. Often, and sometimes more daunting, you'll be assigned longer papers based on texts discussed in class, literature reviews, or original research papers. Here are a few helpful approaches to each. We touch on writing techniques here, but we will elaborate more in the next section.

#### **Reading responses:**

"In a reaction or response paper, writers **respond to one or more** texts they have read. A popular assignment with instructor in the social sciences and humanities, such papers require students to **understand each text individually and evaluate how well each accomplishes its own objectives**. If you are responding to multiple texts, you must also discover how the texts relate to one another."

#### • **Questions to Consider...**

- What are the main themes?
- Where are the holes in the author's reasoning? What are some potential counterarguments?
- What particularly struck you as interesting?
- How do the readings relate, differ, or converse with one another?



- **Steps to take...**
  - Explain and summarize main points, assumptions, and important terms
  - Be fair and accurate in presenting arguments from the texts
  - Evaluate and elaborate on the relationships between the readings
  - Consider both (or all) sides of the arguments
  - Be concise; keep it short and clear

**Paper based on texts discussed in class** (a step-by-step guide):

1. Read the assignment carefully
  - a. Answer every component, and pay extra attention to directives such as *explain*, *compare*, *analyze*, *evaluate*
2. Determine which readings are most relevant for the assignment; check out library resources (see “LibGuides, etc.” below) to find any outside sources
3. Keep track of source information for citations and your bibliography as you do your research (see “Citing Sources and Plagiarism”)
4. Develop a thesis, or central argument (see “On Writing”)
5. Support your thesis with relevant evidence from your readings and outside sources; remember, everything should tie back to supporting that argument! (see “On Writing”)

## B. LibGuides, How the Library Can Help, and Resources Available to You

The library is an amazing resource, and their help goes beyond finding you the right books in the stacks of Olin.



- Start [here](#), on the library website. Frequently asked questions, such as “How do I start my research?” are answered [here](#).
- The library has already assembled guides that will point you in the right direction for your research. Guides for all majors are [here](#), but we recommend going straight to the [Government/Political Science](#) page. There, you’ll be directed to related call numbers in the stacks, get specific instructions on citing sources, and gain access to books and articles. All of the information is in one easy-to-navigate place. Sometimes, librarians will assemble LibGuides for specific classes.

If you feel overwhelmed by all that the library has to offer, [book an appointment](#). Librarians will walk you through all of the steps you may need and will ensure that your research process is more efficient.

Here is a brief overview of some of the resources available to you:

- [EndNote](#), a program that will help you keep track of sources and create bibliographies
- [InterLibrary Loan](#), so that you can get books and articles from other libraries at other institutions
- News archives (eg. New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal)
- Journal databases (eg. JSTOR, Springer, Google Scholar, ProQuest)

### Literature reviews versus original research papers:

Professor Gabriela Tafoya tells us: “Students tend to write literature reviews rather than research papers if they are not instructed in the difference between them. To me, a literature review is a **summary of the current research on a particular topic**...A research paper is different in that, in addition to the literature review, there is an **original contribution to the body of work on a particular topic**. A research paper requires a brief literature review so that the reader understands the current state of research and also to understand where the new arguments being made in the research paper. But most importantly, a research paper needs to have a **specific argument that is being proposed, defended and supported** by some kind of evidence, be it qualitative or quantitative data.”

#### More on literature reviews:

- **What is a literature review?**
  - A survey of scholarly articles, books, and other relevant sources regarding a specific topic
  - It should have an organizational pattern
  - It can help us see all of the existing literature in a new way
- **How do I write a literature review?**
  - Narrow your topic - it will be easier to include more relevant information if your topic is clear and concise
  - Find a focus and pay attention to ideas, rather than a presentation of a set of sources

- Research using the same strategies as you would for any other sort of paper; see “LibGuides, etc.” above for more help with research!
- Once you have your ideas and your research together...
  - **YOU STILL NEED A THESIS STATEMENT!**
  - You need an introduction, a body, and a conclusion
  - Use evidence, summarize, and organize

#### Original research papers:

- Writing an original research paper can be a daunting task, especially if lengthy papers intimidate you. For this one, especially, we stress communicating with your professor, who is here to walk you through this process! Often, professors will space out research papers with step-by-step assignments, such as project proposals, annotated bibliographies, and rough drafts.
- **How do I begin?**
  - Read the assignment carefully and meet with your professor!
  - Develop a research question
  - Develop your methodology
  - Conduct research
  - Write it up!
  - Summary of findings

Here are some more resources about:

- Reading responses
  - [Duke's Writing Studio "Response/Reaction Paper" walkthrough](#)
  - [Sample response papers](#) from Longwood University
- Papers on texts read in class
  - UVM's [Tutor Tips](#) for writing political science papers
  - Georgetown's [guide](#) to government essays
- Literature reviews
  - See the [UNC-Chapel Hill guide](#) to literature reviews for help with organization
- Original Research Paper
  - The Writing Center at UNC-Chapel Hill [gives a great overview](#) of how to go about this type of writing!

- A brief overview of what your research paper should contain:
  - Introduction
  - Problem statement
  - Literature review
  - Methodology
  - Description/evaluation of your findings

Wesleyan students and Government Department professors put together an incredibly great and [comprehensive resource](#) that you should look through!

## 2. On Writing

Now that you have an idea of the structure of, approaches to, and resources for writing an essay, let's dive into the actual writing.

### A. Thinking about a thesis, major arguments, and essay organization

In the beginning stages of an essay, consider thinking about some (or all) of the following:

- What **sources** could be relevant to the subject(s) covered by a potential paper responding to the prompt?
- What do those **sources** say about the issue(s) at hand?
- What prior **background information** -- whether from course readings and lectures or from outside of class -- related to the prompt can you recall?
- What do you **not** know in terms of information related to the prompt? What would you need to find out more about?
- What aspects, related subject(s), and/or potential responses to the prompt **interest** you?

### B. How do I start an introduction? Follow-up: how do I finish a conclusion?

The *introduction* of an essay is often the hardest part to write in any research or argument-driven paper. A traditional break-down of an introduction's components is as follows:

- **A hook** - provide a concise and interesting sentence to catch your reader's attention and to draw the reader into the essay.
- **Background** - establish quick, contextual information that is relevant to your thesis
- **Thesis** - one to two sentences that outline the overall stance you take on a(n) issue(s) or the research question you aim to answer
- **Road map** - whether it is embedded in your thesis or follows it, give the reader sign posts to look for major arguments/ideas in support of your thesis. It may be helpful to think of this as listing out the main categories that your arguments fall into (anywhere from two to four such categories, usually)

The *conclusion* to an essay is equally challenging. Here are some tips on how to approach the conclusion paragraph of your essay:

- **Summarize, but don't repeat** - provide *closure* to your main arguments/ideas by re-emphasizing your thesis and evidence/support, but *avoid* repetition from previous parts of the essay, particularly the introduction (the conclusion paragraph is *not* just a reiteration of the introduction! It's so much more than that!)
- **Alternatives and/or counter-arguments (and their responses)** - if you do not do so in a section or paragraph before the conclusion paragraph, include and address potential alternatives and/or counter-arguments to your thesis and supporting evidence. Showing awareness of and responses to possible reactions to your ideas demonstrates your knowledge of the subject(s) related to the essay.
- **"So what?"** - one way to close your paper is to draw connections to a broader issue, problem, or idea. You can provide closure to your paper by bringing your work into a broader conceptual and/or practical context.

Of course, the exact nature of your essay's thesis depends on the kind of paper you are writing (ex. response papers versus literature reviews -- see above). However, as you begin, try to structure the evidence and arguments that you collect in your research around a central hypothesis, research question, stance and/or argument. You can do this in several ways:

- A **written list/outline**, with a thesis and categories of supporting evidence/sources
- A **table** of arguments/ideas and related sources
- A **flowchart or drawn diagram** of ideas, perhaps with thought bubbles connected to related ideas

#### Summary of strategies for starting a paper:

- Make an outline (a list; thought bubbles/idea charts; etc.);
- Write down the key ideas/arguments you're interested in and/or want to discuss;
- Organize them and keep them that way through the entire process;
- Give yourself enough time to mull ideas over; and
- Look back at the readings!

#### Professor Gabriela Tafoya on the importance of grammar and structure:

"First and foremost, it is difficult to follow and understand the argument in a paper that is disorganized or has many grammatical errors. A paper that is organized in a logical way and has clear and complete sentences is much easier to understand. Second, for me, grammar and structure are an indicator of the care and time put into a paper by a student. A paper that was cobbled together the night before it was due has many more organizational problems and grammatical errors than a paper that was written more carefully and edited more than once. If the student doesn't care about the paper, more often than not, it will show in the paper's clarity. Now, that being said, if there are some long, maybe confusing sentences or some misspellings, I do not think that should go against the students' effort in making a coherent argument. The point of the paper is most important, but I find that students that take the time and effort to make a good, solid, well-researched point are also going to pay attention to spelling and sentence structure."

## ONLINE RESOURCES

Here are some helpful resources that can help you further in writing an introduction paragraph:

- "Introductions" from The Writing Center at UNC-Chapel Hill:  
<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/introductions/>
- "Introduction paragraph" from the University of Texas:  
<http://www.edb.utexas.edu/minliu/pbl/ESOL/intro.htm>
- A nicely comprehensive resource from OWL Purdue:  
<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/p rint/724/>

As a way of thinking about an essay thesis and main arguments, you can try to categorize the latter as subheadings to the thesis, much like chapters to a book. Here's an extensive web page that provides examples of outlining and structuring an essay in this manner:

<http://govthesis.site.wesleyan.edu/writing/outline-and-structure/>

### 3. Citing Sources, Academic Honesty, and Plagiarism

#### A. Citations

Preferences for citation styles can vary from person to person and class to class. One professor's favorite format might not fly with another's go-to style. Some professors will only accept MLA or APA; others will have no preference. Some look for in-text citations; others want footnotes. Two things to keep in mind when approaching source-citation in a paper are:

1. **Find out!** What, if any, style does a given professor prefer in the paper you're writing in his class? MLA? APA? Chicago? In-text citations? Footnotes?
2. **Be consistent!** Stick with one format throughout the paper, only using the citation style that you have either chosen for yourself or determined is what the professor prefers in his assignments

Be sure to reference these helpful guides for structure and examples of each common style.

#### MLA guides

- <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>
- <http://pitt.libguides.com/c.php?g=12108&p=64731>

#### APA guides

- <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/>
- <http://pitt.libguides.com/c.php?g=12108&p=64730>

#### Chicago/Turabian

- <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/717/01/>
- <http://pitt.libguides.com/c.php?g=12108&p=64732>
- <http://www.unh.edu/writing/cwc/handouts/citation/citation-chicagostyle.pdf>

#### B. Academic Honesty and Plagiarism

Properly citing your sources, references, and paraphrased ideas is incredibly important. Not only is it academically honest; it is required by the Honor Code. Plagiarism is a violation of the honor code and can result in an "F" in the course in which you have been reported as well as disciplinary action by the Student Judicial Board. If you're not careful, it's easy to forget to cite an idea or paraphrased sentence or two (especially if it's a last-minute rush to finish writing an essay).

Make sure you give yourself plenty of time to write and revise your essay to avoid those kinds of mistakes -- it's worth the extra revisions to avoid plagiarizing! If you're ever feeling unsure about whether something you've written in your essay might be plagiarism, don't be afraid to ask your professor about it, cite the source just to play it safe, or both!

#### *Professor Asha Rangappa on Academic Honesty*

"Please familiarize yourself with the University's policy on cheating, plagiarism, and documentation. It is your responsibility to understand and abide by this policy. If you do not understand or are uncertain about what constitutes cheating or plagiarism, please ask. Any cases of suspected plagiarism will be reported directly to the appropriate dean, and documented plagiarism will result in a complete loss of credit on the assignment."

## 4. Professors and Office Hours

Do this! Talk to your professors about your paper ideas, questions, comments, and concerns! Do your best to ask your professors with plenty of time ahead of a paper deadline. Also try to formulate specific questions and ideas to talk to your professor about before going into their office hours -- that way, both of you can get the most out of your meeting.

## 5. Honors Thesis with the Government Department

1. Begin formulating a topic leading up to your junior spring
2. Approach faculty members with whom you have already established a relationship, or with whom you would like to get to know more, who may be willing to be your thesis advisor. See what they think about your areas of interest!
3. Develop a clearer vision of your honors thesis project
4. Government majors must apply for a thesis advisor, usually before spring break of their junior spring
5. Access to Davenport grant!  
<http://www.wesleyan.edu/pac/davenport/>

Apply now!

<http://govthesis.site.wesleyan.edu/>

Hopefully, this guide has given you the resources you need about how to write a Government course essay. Many of the strategies and tips in this packet also apply to many other types of academic papers that you may encounter at Wesleyan and beyond. We hope this has helped!

Best,  
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