Writing in Political Science

This guide provides a brief introduction to writing in **political science** for prospective and current students. It includes:

- A statement about the fields of political science
- A statement of threshold concepts in political science
- A description of writing characteristics valued in political science
- Expectations for how writing happens in political science

A statement about the fields of political science

Political science includes a number of subfields, including public administration, international relations, comparative politics, American politics, and political theory. These subfields differ in terms of both substance and analytical methods but are all rooted in **the systematic study of institutionalized power and critical analysis of power dynamics**. Regardless of major (i.e., political science, public administration, diplomacy and global politics), students in political science can expect to engage in disciplinary conversations about sources, manifestations, and implications of power and authority.

Threshold Concepts in Political Science

> *"Political science is the study of governments, public policies and political processes, systems, and political behavior." - American Political Science Association*

Political science (like all fields of study) is at once a body of knowledge, the development of that body of knowledge, and the practice of applying that knowledge to problems of the human experience. The fields of political science are built on certain core concepts (the building blocks of understanding). These include the concepts of authority, power, rationality, and the state, and are taught in the introductory sequence (e.g., American Political System, World Politics, Public Administration).

Fluency in core concepts is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for an education in political science. Training in political science—i.e., engaging and contributing to the body of knowledge and its practice—requires students to gain proficiency in its threshold concepts: the connective tissue of a field that, once understood, produces a shift in the learner's depth of understanding of the phenomena of interest (Meyer & Land, 2003). Threshold concepts can only be understood through dedicated and repeated practice and create a fundamentally different view of the subject matter that is essential for masterful application.

While each subfield has its own set of threshold concepts, all political science students should expect to grapple with the following throughout their coursework:

Threshold concept 1: Critical analysis of power, institutions, and argumentation

Statement: Political science is not politics (Edwards, Ki, Marshall, & Matthews, 2017). The "sensory material" or phenomena of interest in political science are the dynamics of power in collective action systems, institutions, processes, actors and their behaviors. This includes—but is not limited to—political beliefs. Political values contribute to the constitution of knowledge but are not in themselves a sufficient or legitimate position from which to study institutional power dynamics.

What it means for students: Critical analysis and argumentation requires that students use theoretical and empirical tools to draw inferences and assess causal relationships among political phenomena. These tools include:

- Quantitative and qualitative evidence
- Multiple levels of abstraction
- Deductive, inductive, and abductive reasoning
- Quantitative (e.g., regression analysis), qualitative (e.g., content analysis), and computational (e.g., network analysis) methods

Where and how we teach this threshold concept: We teach this threshold concept through a scaffolded curriculum that leads students through critical reading, writing, speaking, and data analysis to produce an integrated understanding of collective action that acknowledges, reflects on, and critiques multiple positions, compositions, and dynamics of power.

Threshold concept 2: Institutions are both material and discursive structures

Statement: Institutions, including political institutions, are petrified processes (Desai, 2012) that have been constructed through ongoing argumentation. This includes governments and organizations, but also laws, norms, values, behaviors, programs, policies, and practices through which social and political actors relate to each other within their environment.

Political institutions and the power dynamics among them operate within complex social environments according to social—not natural—laws. Argumentation, logic, and behavior—not physics, chemistry, or biology—are the foundation of such laws. While socially-constructed and -constituted, social and political institutions have physical and material effects on people's lives. These effects are felt long after the political moment that precipitated construction of the original institution has passed; as a result, the stakes of formative power negotiation are high.

What it means for students: Students must learn to recognize the underlying assumptions of various political arguments and consider if/how those assumptions are met or violated by economic, psychological, and legal conditions within various contexts. Furthermore, they will learn to consider the implications of the relative (mis)match between assumptions and conditions for the experiences of the diverse groups of actors that constitute a society.

Where and how we teach this threshold concept: We teach this threshold concept by bringing multiple perspectives to bear on the origins and operations of political institutions. Over their course of study, students should expect to be exposed to models of social organization from a range of fields, including sociology, law, economics, psychology, and philosophy.

"So you're taking a political science course": A Description of Writing Characteristics Valued in Political Science

Political scientists use behavioral, institutional, and cultural models to conduct critical analyses of power. We value systematic (rather than partisan) argumentation, and this value is reflected in what and how we write.

We tend to write in **genres such as policy analyses, research articles, response memos, and monographs**. We rarely write genres such as ethnography or laboratory reports. The writing genres of political science tend to require both substantive knowledge of a collective action problem and application of a rigorous design and analytic method. Students can expect to be exposed to these general forms, as well as more specific genres and expectations within their major (i.e., political science, public administration, diplomacy and global politics).

Professional writers in our field are understood to be **credible** when they **situate their arguments within existing literature and provide evidence for their claims**. We understand evidence to include **administrative data, field research, case studies, and coded datasets**. We generally do not expect or accept opinion, anecdote, or personal experience as evidence. Effective writing is grounded in methodical use of evidence, minimizes jargon, and advances a logically sound argument.

We tend to use APSA, APA, or Chicago citation styles in our formal writing. These citation practices reflect our values; as a field, we prioritize honoring scholarly lineages and contributions, while also positioning ourselves within a conversation with those scholars. Political scientists rarely quote directly or at length. Instead, we tend to paraphrase ideas and contributions with attributions to the original authors. We do this because we value synthesis and novel use of existing ideas as features of scholarship.

Expectations for Writing in Political Science Courses

Not every student in our classes needs to be able to write the way professional writers in political science do, nor will all students make it through the uncomfortable process of mastering threshold concepts. However, all students learning to write in our field will benefit from practice, feedback, and revision. Depending on why you are taking our courses, you should expect writing that focuses on different objectives.

- **Undergraduates taking Miami Plan or introductory courses in political science** should learn to recognize the argumentative style of our writing and practice systematic, evidence (not just value) -based persuasion. Evidence-based persuasion is relevant to multiple fields and occupations and is thus a useful practice to

develop among all students in our courses.

- **Undergraduates majoring in political science** (as well as PA and DGP) should recognize the centrality of the connection between theory and method in our writing and practice critical, systematic inquiry across all political science genres (e.g., policy memos, research papers). Over time they will need to become skilled at a range of both qualitative and quantitative methods (e.g., comparative case studies, regression analysis) and theoretical frameworks (e.g., political economy, organizational theory) in order to meet different objectives and speak to different audiences both inside and outside the discipline.

- **Graduate students in political science**, in addition to mastering the skills required of undergraduate majors, should recognize the need to situate their arguments in scholarly debates about our writing. By graduation, they need to be able to contribute to an existing scholarly debate by providing new insights through argumentation and evidence because one demonstrates mastery through participation in knowledge production.