

Political Science Journal

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Political scientists are, above all else, writers.¹ We hope to communicate our ideas in print, in presentations, in classes, in conversations. One of the best ways to clarify your ideas and organize your thoughts is to write about them. Research has shown that the most effective academic researchers write with “constancy and moderation” – that is, they write a little each day, instead of saving it all up for one intense, creative, stressful, and exhausting writing binge.²

As part of the requirements for this course, you will keep a semi-structured journal in which you will explore your responses to questions or problems that you encounter in the course material. The purpose of the journal is to stimulate thinking, raise interesting questions, criticize others’ work, and to freely raise and explore creative ideas. For the most part, you will be rewarded for the process of thinking through an idea rather than the end product. The kind of writing you will be doing is called “exploratory” or “expressive” writing – that is, writing that lets you “think out loud on paper” without having to worry about whether your writing is effective for readers. This writing is primarily for you, not for others.

Journal writing of this type can help you become a more productive and more focused thinker. This assignment is designed to help you establish (or make use of) a daily writing habit. Ideally, you will want to be writing a little bit each day – on material from all of your courses, or on ideas for your research. All I want to see, however, is writing on material directly related to this course. The more you see yourself in this course asking questions and questioning answers, the more you will be thinking like a real political theorist. You should use this opportunity to try to clarify difficult passages in the texts, to identify questions that interest you (for possible research projects), and to work out ideas for your paper.

Understanding Writing as a Process

Inexperienced writers tend to believe that writing is a matter of inspiration: you have an idea, and you put it down on paper. Many undergraduate writing assignments are designed in a way that encourages this belief: students are expected to turn in a final draft of an essay, or to take essay exams in which there is no opportunity for revision or for experimentation. This gives the appearance that successful writing means producing only a polished, final piece of writing.

¹ I appreciate and thank professor Michael Ferguson allowing me to use and modify this document.

² Boice, Robert. (2000). *Advice for New Faculty Members: Nihil Nimis*. Allyn and Bacon: Boston.
pp. 14-34

Experienced writers, however, often write in a different way. They tend to spend a significant amount of time doing what is often called “freewriting” – exploratory, rough, often unorganized – but focused – writing that aims to

1. Explore an issues from many different perspectives
2. Bring into articulation ideas that are inchoate, unformed, and vague.

Journal writing brings into relief this idea that writing is a process, and not simply a final product. The freewriting assignments you will be asked to do will engage you in this process in several ways. First, they will give you the opportunity to spend time outside of class thinking critically about the course materials, in some cases exploring these ideas more deeply than we can do in class. Second, they will give you the opportunity to figure out and organize your own thoughts about the course questions and material. This will help you to contribute more effectively to class discussions. Finally, working through your thoughts on paper or on a computer will give you the opportunity to experiment with and develop ideas that can be used in the final paper.

How do I Write a Journal Entry?

I want you to employ a technique that composition teachers call focused freewriting (unless the journal assignment says otherwise). When you freewrite, you write nonstop for a set period of time. (Consider turning off the screen of your computer so you can concentrate entirely on ideas without worrying about the appearance of the text, spelling errors, grammar, and so on.) Think aloud on paper. If your mind suddenly dries up, just relax and rethink where you last thought was, and where that might lead next. In regular freewriting, your mind can wander freely from topic to topic. In focused freewriting, however, you need to keep your entire entry focused on the assigned question or problem. Your purpose is to explore your response to the question as fully as possible within the set time period.

How Long is a Journal Entry?

Unless otherwise specified, each entry should be the result of 15 minutes of concentrated thinking and writing or one page single spaced. A skilled free writer can easily write two or more pages of single spaced prose in 15 minutes. For this course, though, one page singled spaced is sufficient.

Procedures For Keeping Your Journal

Each day a reading assignment is due, a journal entry is due for those readings (unless otherwise specified). Each entry should be a response to one task. Number your entries consecutively through your journal and begin each entry on a new page. At the head of each entry, write your name, the date, the entry number, and the question or prompt that you are responding to. All journals must be typed, though of course you may find

that you prefer writing by hand and then transferring it over to a computer. All entries must be handed in in class on the day the reading assignment is due, and none can be emailed.

How Are the Journals Graded?

Out of the five journal entries, one journal will be randomly selected per week to be graded. Note: the response that I choose to read and grade may not be the same for every student that week. You should not cite and should not need to refer back to the readings once you've started writing a journal entry.

Journals are graded by both quantity (50%) and quality (50%).

Quantity. By quantity I mean the number of journal entries you turn in every week, not their length (assuming each is at least approximately one page single spaced). Grade breakdowns are as follows

0 entries: 0%
1 entry: 20%
2 entries: 40%
3 entries: 60%
4 entries: 80%
5 entries: 100%

Quality. Your writing should show that you're critically engaged, that you're grappling with the readings, and show your thought process. Some of the material that we cover may at first glance appear simple, but what is often most interesting, and what you can consider in your journals are the dilemmas, contradictions, puzzles, paradoxes, and inadequacies in the readings. Journals can provide a place to try out ideas – even those you may not agree with – in an attempt to understand another's argument or viewpoint. Of course you should not write your journal until after you've completed the reading for that day.

Unlike an essay examination, the journal gives you the freedom to make mistakes. The best journal entries will be interesting for someone else to read because they will show a mind truly struggling with ideas. In general I will not provide detailed feedback on your journal entries. If you want more detailed feedback, I'd encourage you to come to office hours.

Critical Reading Questions

The following are questions to which you should respond throughout the course, and you should choose a variety of questions to answer.

1. Summarize an important idea you have learned from the reading.
2. What, specifically, confused you in today's class or today's reading(s) and how do you understand what you find difficult to understand?
3. How does your personal experience relate to what you studied and what other questions does it raise?
4. What effect is the course having on your personal life, your beliefs, your values, your previous understandings of things?
5. How does what we have been studying recently relate to your other courses or to other parts of this course?
6. Pick a difficult passage from the reading. What does it say in plain English?
7. If you are stuck on a particular concept or passage, why are you stuck? What kind of information do you need to get unstuck?
8. If a particular question is obtuse, why is it difficult to understand?
9. If you think an author seems to be contradicting him or herself, find the passages where you think the contradiction is and explain why you think there is a problem.
10. Provide reasoned disagreement with a point that someone else made in class.
11. Raise questions about class discussion or reading material.
12. Express your excitement at a new idea you have had or encountered in this course.
13. Write a dialogue between two or more authors or class interlocutors about a problem or question you have encountered.
14. Try to explain what we have been discussing to a sibling, parent, or friend who does not study political science in ordinary language.
15. Imagine interviewing an author you are reading. What would you ask and how might he or she respond?
16. Imagine that you are teaching a group of undergraduate students the material that we are reading. How would you teach it?
17. Write a letter or email to a friend who is also an academic about the material or ideas you are thinking about (this is often called a "thought letter").
18. Try to summarize the thesis of a book or article we have read in a single sentence, and then explain why you believe this to be the best interpretation.
19. What new ideas or questions did the readings or class discussion raise for you?
20. Follow a thought process or line of thinking that you had from the reading or class discussion.
21. Pick an explicit or implicit assumption that an author uses and think through whether this assumption is accurate, fair, or widely agreed up, and how revising this assumption may affect her larger argument or thesis.
22. Choose two accepted beliefs or arguments an author makes and explore how they may be inconsistent, incompatible, or may be in tension with one another.