

# Writing a Political Science Essay

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Essay questions, term papers, “take-home” finals, research papers, and project reports are standard components of most political science courses. Professors may ask students to write an essay as part of a mid-term or final exam, or to hand in extended papers completed outside class that have required substantial research in the library or elsewhere. These kinds of assignments not only give professors a chance to evaluate your skills as a writer and as a critical thinker – two skills that you should take away from any university course – but they also provide the opportunity for you to reflect seriously on particular issues and to use your creative powers to address fundamental conceptual questions in the study of politics. In other words, essays, term papers and other written assignments give you the chance to “get your hands dirty” by grappling with the same broad questions that inform the work of professional political scientists. Writing essays and papers allows you to think long and hard about such critical issues as: What is democracy? What makes people vote for Party A and not for Party B? Do ideas affect the way people behave politically? Why do revolutions occur? How do states interact in the international arena? What determines the shape of a state’s foreign policy? Why do countries go to war?

In tackling essay-writing, especially in the “essay question” section of exams, students often face three problems:

- First, some students may feel that they just don’t know where to begin. “How can I answer a question that’s so broad? I just don’t have enough information.”
- Second, even if they feel they know something about the subject, they may wonder how to organize the information in order to present a coherent and convincing argument. “How do I begin to put together all the various pieces to the puzzle so that what I say makes sense?”
- Finally, students may be unsure about the relationship between the presentation of factual information and the expression of their own views on the issue at hand. “The professor never told me whether he wanted me to repeat what he had said in class, or if he was just looking for my opinion.”

Below are some general guidelines on how to deal with these troubling questions, especially in the area of writing answers to essay questions on exams. Clearly, professors have their own individual – and sometimes idiosyncratic – views on the place of essay-writing and other written assignments in university education. But the ideas below should help you begin to assess how you should approach essays, term papers and other assignments that require both extensive writing and serious reflection on important conceptual issues.

## Start at the Beginning

When you first read an essay question on an exam (or begin to think about an assigned topic for a term paper or take-home final), you should ask yourself two sets of questions:

1. What does the essay question really say? What kinds of issues is it asking me to address? What assumptions underlie the question itself?

Professors ask essay questions for a reason. They use essays as a way of getting you to go beyond the material presented in class and in the required readings for the course. They intend for you to reflect critically on the information you have read, assess its validity, think about its implications, and use it creatively in order to answer the question that has been posed. So, when you encounter an essay question,

spend a few minutes thinking about what the question really asks, and make sure that you have a clear idea of the kinds of issues and concepts that the question is trying to get you to address.

2. What are the most useful sources of information on which I can draw in order to answer the question? What kinds of data will best support my argument?

During any semester-long course, you will encounter a huge amount of information, both factual and conceptual. Many students treat essay questions as “dumping grounds” for the information that they acquired in the days and weeks preceding the exam. They pile on fact after fact, concept after concept, date after date, name after name, with little thought about whether all this information helps them answer the question. “If I throw in enough stuff,” a student may say, “at least the professor will know that I’ve been paying attention.”

Wrong. The professor will know that you have managed to cram a great deal of irrelevant information into your short-term memory. But whether you have really thought about the issues at hand and used the knowledge you have gained in order to reflect critically on an important question will remain a mystery. So, after you feel that you understand the kind of response that the essay question is trying to elicit, ask yourself about which bits of information will be the most relevant to your response. Don’t try to throw everything into the pot. Be selective. Use those facts and ideas that are most helpful in supporting your overall argument. After doing the reading and attending the lectures, you do have enough information to answer the question effectively. What is crucial, though, is to organize the information and to present it in a way that buttresses the main theme of your essay.

## **Organization Is Everything**

Because they have not stopped to ask themselves the questions above, many students plunge right into an essay without thinking about how to organize their thoughts. “If I just get enough stuff down on paper,” a student might argue, “then the professor will at least know that I’ve tried to answer the question.” Wrong again. The professor will know that you are a wind-bag – not that you have thought seriously about the question.

Once you are sure that you know what the question is asking and have spent a few minutes reflecting on the kinds of information that you want to use in attempting to answer it, spend a further few minutes sketching out the form that your answer will take. Here are a few ideas on how to begin:

## **Make an Outline**

Sketch out how you plan to structure the essay. You can even use the exam booklet or the back of the exam in order to write a brief outline, flow chart, diagram, or whatever form you find the most helpful in organizing your thoughts. The important thing is to have a clear idea of what you want to say and how you are going to say it – before you begin writing the essay itself.

There is an additional advantage to writing an outline or essay plan: It may turn out that you simply budgeted your time poorly and did not have time to complete the entire essay as you had planned. But if the professor sees that you had a clear idea of what you wanted to argue, you are likely to receive at least some credit for what you have written. On the other hand, if you have managed to fill up a dozen pages without making a coherent argument, chances are that the professor will remain relatively unimpressed.

## Keep It Simple

Think back to eighth grade composition class. Remember the “three-point enumeration” essays you probably had to write? They consisted of an opening paragraph, three further substantive paragraphs and a conclusion. The opening paragraph set out the general ideas you were going to explore, the three following paragraphs expanded on each of those ideas, and the final paragraph wrapped up what you had said.

The same format – with perhaps some modifications – can be used to write responses to essay questions.

- **Opening sentence and first paragraph:** State clearly the main point that you wish to make in the essay. In other words, someone should be able to read the first sentence and know exactly how you plan to answer the question. Don’t try to be too cute, but a catchy opening sentence which states simply and clearly the line of argument you intend to take is always desirable. Other sentences in the first paragraph should then support the first sentence and sketch out the ways in which subsequent paragraphs will expand on the theme of the essay itself.
- **Body of the Essay:** For normal essay questions on exams (say, those in which you have an hour to complete two essays), you should have no more than three or four paragraphs in the body of the essay. Each paragraph should make a clear and discrete point, and that point should support your overall argument. If it doesn’t, don’t write it. Your thoughts in the body of the essay should follow on logically from the points you set out in the opening paragraph. And each paragraph should begin just like the opening paragraph, with a clear statement of the topic that the paragraph will address.
- **Concluding Paragraph:** Sum up what you have said in the essay in a final paragraph. Remind the reader of your main point, but avoid repeating it in exactly the same words. End the essay with a sentence that wraps up your thoughts and leaves the reader with a sense of closure.

## Your Opinion Is More Than “Just Your Opinion”

Essay questions are not extended short-answer questions, and they are not exercises in penmanship. A professor puts essay questions on exams not in order to see if you can repeat verbatim what he/she said in class, but in order to solicit your informed views on a particular subject that you should have mastered in the course. In this sense, essay questions do ask for your “opinion,” but it is an opinion that should be intelligent, informed and well-structured. No conceptual questions in political science have “once-and-for-all” answers. Essay questions ask you to address important issues by using your brain – constructing a coherent, logical and informed view on a given topic. After sitting in a course of lectures and doing the required reading, you are more than capable of completing such a task. Your “opinions” should have evolved and become more sophisticated, and you should have developed a reasonable level of expertise in the main issues addressed during the course itself. Your “opinions” matter, for they were what your professor was trying to get you to develop all along.

Again, essays are not simply receptacles for regurgitated factual information. Your knowledge of facts can be assessed using multiple-choice questions, true/false, identify, define, short-answer and a range of other examination formats, most of which you probably experienced in grade school. At the college level, however, you are expected to think. And thinking requires creatively using the knowledge you have acquired to take a clear position on a contentious issue.

How do you do all that? Here a few guidelines:

- **Make An Argument.** Take a stance. Stake out a position. Argue for a particular point of view. Simply reeling off dates and names – or even using political science jargon – will not do the trick.

- **Support Your Argument.** Use relevant facts, concepts and other information to buttress the points you wish to make. Throwing in irrelevant information will impress no one. It will simply cloud your argument and convince the professor that you really don't know what you're talking about.
- **Be Creative.** How creatively you make your argument is always important. Style matters. Some professors may even prefer essays that are well-structured and well-written but not particularly brilliant, to those that contain a truly original insight cloaked in language that would make Webster and Fowler turn in their graves. But be careful: Don't get cute. Writing a sonnet or a short one-act play is probably not a good idea. You should, however, bring all your skills as a writer to bear on the essay topic. After all, that's why the question is an essay question, rather than a true/false or short-answer.
- **Answer the Question.** Let me repeat: Answer the question. If you write page after page of text, but never really address the issue at hand, few professors are likely to give you much credit. Always keep your overall point in mind, and make sure that everything you write relates back to your central argument. And that argument, in turn, should squarely address the question posed on the exam.