Guidelines for Term Papers and Theses

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(1) Introduction

Political theory is a subdiscipline of political science. It brings together ideas from philosophy, history, and sociology, among other fields. The central feature of this subdiscipline is its focus on theory. Various issues are addressed primarily from a theoretical and normative perspective. In political theory, there are different approaches to writing papers. This guide presents four approaches, each of which is grounded in critical and normative thinking.

(1.1) Critical Thinking

A central aspect of a paper in political theory is to demonstrate the ability to think critically. This means that the paper should first show that the author has independently formed thoughts on a topic. Critical thinking, as independent thinking, also involves critically questioning and examining prevailing assumptions and the theories under discussion. The mode of criticism here is one of "radical openness." bell hooks writes that this involves questioning one's own standpoint and adopting other perspectives.

(1.2) Normative Thinking

Working normatively means dealing with the question of how things ought to be—that is, why certain conditions are better or worse, or just or unjust. Several classic normative questions in political theory include, for example, "Why are state institutions legitimate?", "Why is civil disobedience morally permissible in certain situations?", or "How should a democracy be structured to realize a particular understanding of equality or freedom?"
In short, political theory deals with values and principles. Most theoretical works, therefore, focus on the value-based assessment or evaluation of theories, concepts, institutions, ideas, or existing conditions. In addition to questions about how things should ideally be, political theory also engages in a critical analysis of power and domination within existing institutions, communities, laws, and ideas, and classifies them in a way that is generally understandable.

The following section presents four types of work:

(1.3) A Study In The History Of Ideas

A paper on the history of ideas focuses on the historical (re)construction of a specific theory or school of thought. In such a paper, a theory is discussed within its historical context, and the influences that shaped the development of that theory can be historically traced.

> *One example would be the debate over whether Hobbes's theory of the state should be classified as libertarian or liberal. In this context, the basic tenets of libertarian and liberal theories could be discussed in relation to Hobbes's theory of the state.*

Another example would be a discussion of Christian Wolff's theory of pre-state human rights. In doing so, one could trace the 17th- and 18th-century ideas found in his theory that led him to define human rights as independent of social status.

(1.4) A Conceptual Paper

Conceptual work in political theory deals with specific concepts that are subjected to critical reflection. A concept is framed and defined as precisely as possible; in doing so, specific schools of thought may be distinguished from one another, and rival ideas may be discussed. However, the goal is not merely to compare different concepts with one another, but to relate them to one another normatively—the focus is on arguing for or against specific ideas derived from the concepts.

An example of a conceptual paper would be one that examines feminist theories. In such a paper, a liberal and an intersectional strand of feminism could be compared and contrasted. The starting point could be a historical shift, such as a different understanding of equality and oppression. The research objective here could be to compare and update feminist concepts.

Another example would be a discussion of concepts of democracy in the 21st century. For instance, a theory of deliberative democracy could be compared with a theory of radical democracy. One research question might be to consider which normative conception of equality should underlie these theories as a democratic ideal.

(1.5) A Philosophical and Argumentative Paper

In a philosophical-argumentative paper, an argument is justified on the basis of philosophical concepts and theories. The focus is on the normative reasons; thus, an argument should be supported and justified primarily on normative grounds.

For example, one argument in favor of such a paper could be that the countries of the so-called "Global North" have a greater moral obligation to combat the consequences of the climate crisis than countries of the so-called "Global South." Philosophically, this argument could then be discussed in the context of postcolonial theories.

Another example would be the discussion of the uncritical use of artificial intelligence at universities. One could argue, for instance, that in the production of algorithmic knowledge, problematic assumptions are carried over from the broader production of knowledge. From a philosophical perspective, theories of epistemic injustice could

be discussed, which criticize the marginalization of indigenous knowledge in scientific discourse.

(1.6) A Practice-Oriented Thesis

An application-oriented paper seeks a practical solution to a practical problem, but draws on normative concepts. The goal is to resolve a practical case using a (theoretical) argument. This type of paper in political theory is more empirically oriented.

For example, one might observe that some politicians raise concerns about the dismantling of the welfare state by citing constitutional principles. The empirical case under examination here is the dismantling of the welfare state. The normative concepts against which this development is measured are certain constitutional principles. The paper could then argue that certain measures taken in the dismantling of the welfare state violate normative foundations, such as articles of the Constitution.

Another example would be the discussion of current European border policy. In this context, one could examine which normative concepts—such as specific articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—the current border regime conflicts with.

Note: A specific work does not necessarily have to fit into one of these categories. Many works can be classified in more than one category.

(2) Idea, Conception, and Thesis

(2.1) The Idea and the Subject

Political theory thrives on ideas. Ideally, students can take ideas from seminars and develop them into a specific topic. The first challenge in the writing process is to narrow down an idea so that it can be adequately explored within the required length. For example, the idea of discussing all theories of social inequality in a 15-page term paper would not be feasible. For term papers and theses, it is therefore often helpful to examine a specific theory (or school of thought) in depth. The idea should become as specific as possible during the process of identifying a topic. It helps to single out individual aspects of theories or problems and discuss them.

Note: As a general rule, it is better to use fewer arguments but to discuss them in greater detail, drawing on the work of various theorists.

(2.2) The research question and the scope of expectations:

In the next step, the idea and the specific topic are formulated into a research question. It can be helpful to first ask various questions that arise from the idea and the topic. It is important that the research question be both specific and directly related to theory.

A scope of the study is then derived from the research question, specifying not only what will be discussed in the paper but also what will not be discussed.

The scope of the study should be as specific as possible. It is important to identify the specific theories, parameters, and categories that will be used to answer the research question within the required framework.

(2.3) The Thesis

The thesis statement stems directly from the research question. The goal is to establish a modest, meaningful, but also contestable position—that is, a thesis.

Regardless of which theory is discussed or defended, you must explain why that particular theory is being addressed. Here, it is important not to assume any prior specialized knowledge; the explanation should be generally understandable. There is no need to explain a theory in its entirety; especially in shorter term papers, it makes more sense to limit oneself to individual aspects. Other theories and arguments that are discussed or criticized should be presented as favorably as possible before critique.

(2.4) Objections

In a well-written paper on political theory, potential objections are already considered and addressed alongside the author's own argument. This may involve discussing both competing theories and opposing theses from the literature. For example, this can be done in a separate chapter within the main body of the paper, in which the author's own argument is subjected to criticism.

(2.5) The exposé

The length of an exposé varies. Generally, an exposé should include the following elements:

- Topic
- Research question and scope of expectations
- Optional: (Working) thesis statement
- Preliminary literature review
- Key concepts/initial definitions of terms

As a general rule, it is advisable—or even required—to submit the idea or a synopsis describing the idea to the instructors before beginning work on the project. If you have any questions about the topic or the literature review, you can include them in the exposé.

(3) Argumentation

(3.1) The Basics of Argumentation

The foundation of thinking and working in political theory is argumentation. Generally speaking, argumentation is the discussion of reasons. In an argument, reasons are sought for or against a specific position (the thesis). The purpose of argumentation is to convince readers and listeners through well-reasoned statements.

Formally, an argument consists of premises and a conclusion. It is important to note that a theoretical argument often operates on different levels. Thus, it is rarely sufficient to provide just one reason for a position (i.e., the thesis); instead, a position must be supported by various reasons.

An important aspect of papers in political theory is the argumentative justification of a position. The purpose of argumentation is to show why the reasons cited are indeed good reasons. It is not enough to simply refer to statements by frequently cited theorists; rather, you must demonstrate why these statements are in fact plausible and convincing (or why they are not). Your original contribution to the argument does not lie in presenting arguments that no one has ever presented before (since that is impossible in most cases), but rather in independently and critically evaluating the arguments and reasons found in the literature. So instead of merely summarizing existing arguments in a narrative manner, the purpose of a term paper is to analyze and explain why certain arguments are more convincing than others.

(3.2) Example 1:

Idea: Social inequality is bad for democracy.

This thesis must now be developed into a sound argument designed to be persuasive. To do so, additional reasons are provided that are interrelated and mutually supportive; a good argument, presented as an example and simplified, would be:

1. *Social inequality is bad because it undermines people's self-confidence.*
2. *When people's self-confidence declines, they are less likely to engage in political action, and marginalization occurs.*
3. *An ideal of a functioning democracy is that all people can participate equally and freely.*
4. *The ideal of democratic participation would be undermined if fewer people had the opportunity to participate.*
5. *Therefore: Social inequality is bad for democracy.*

In this example, various assumptions are made, which in turn must be supported by theoretical concepts and empirical data.

One way to support point (2) with empirical data, for example, would be to show that people who are socially marginalized are less likely to vote and less likely to run for elected office.

Theoretical concepts that would need to be further elaborated in this example include the democratic ideal of participation and the concept of social inequality.
In a paper on political theory, however, the focus is clearly on theoretical justifications. It is important to justify each of the assumptions made and to consider any counterarguments.
One possible counterargument in this line of reasoning could be that people's lower self-confidence does not necessarily lead them to act less politically.

(3.3) Example 2:

Idea: Abdullah Öcalan's concept of communal democracy is good.
Objection: This argument would not be specific enough; instead, it would make sense to distinguish between the individual conceptual dimensions of democratic theory (for example, there is a gender-theoretical, an economic, an ecological, and a structural dimension). However, each of these individual points would then have to be examined from a normative perspective. For the sake of simplicity, this example will focus on the gender-theoretical dimension; the argument, greatly simplified, could read as follows:

(1) *A democratic order is good when all participants are involved in decision-making and the appointment of officials.*
(2) *In democratic systems, men have structural advantages because society distributes care work unevenly, placing the burden on feminized individuals.*
(3) *The democratically organized commune, as conceived by Öcalan, is based on directly elected, gender-balanced committees and collectively organized care work.*
(4) *Communal democracy, as conceived by Abdullah Öcalan, represents a good political system because it structurally counteracts discrimination and inequality against women.*

Assumption (1) first defines an ideal of politically inclusive participation, which could be expanded upon in a research paper.
This is followed by a brief analytical digression (in Assumption 2), where it can first be empirically demonstrated that women are disadvantaged in democratic systems and how this relates to the social distribution of care work.
Assumption (3) then demonstrates that the concept of local democracy, on the one hand, includes a provision for the equal representation of women and men on committees and, on the other hand, counteracts a cause of unequal political representation in other democratic systems through collectively organized care work.
One objection might be that the parity-based composition of committees entrenches a binary conception of gender. Another objection might be that mandating a parity-based distribution of positions would restrict the democratic rights of others. Both objections could arise in a thesis, but they themselves would have to be assessed from a normative perspective.

Note: For term papers and theses, it's a good idea to outline your arguments before you start writing and to begin with the formal structure. The first step, then, is to „build" a coherent argument—that is, to construct the premises and the conclusion. Next, you must justify the premises so that the argument is also valid in terms of content. The number of premises is irrelevant; what matters is that the premises themselves are well-supported or made plausible—empirical data, for example, can be used for this purpose. It is important that the arguments you present demonstrate independent thinking.

(4) Structure of a Term Paper or Thesis

(4.1) Introduction

Term papers and theses typically begin with an introduction that should include the following elements:

- A brief introduction to the topic (optional)
- Research question or thesis statement
- Objectives of the paper
- Explanation of the paper's structure
- Initial definitions of terms and linguistic notes (or included later as a footnote)

(4.2) Main Part

The main body takes up most of the paper; this is where the arguments are developed. It should include the following elements:

- Explanation of the theories discussed
    - Do not repeat information from the introduction; instead, focus on specific aspects of a theory
- Critical discussion
    - Here, a critical discussion of the aforementioned theory can take place; the problem being addressed should be outlined
- Argumentation
    - Here, the argument is presented, and the premises are discussed—that is, the assumptions are justified
    - In some papers, multiple arguments may be presented to support a position (thesis)
    - In addition, objections to the presented argument may be discussed here

(4.3) Conclusion

- Conclusion of the argument
- Here, the thesis can be reintroduced, though without new arguments

- You could also offer a look ahead at which aspects of a theory would still be worth discussing

Note: Neither the introduction nor the conclusion should be longer than necessary; the main body is the most important part of the paper.

(5) Writing

Writing is a process that requires time and mental space. It is important to set aside enough time and mental space for writing. A significant amount of time can elapse between the initial review of the literature and the final submission of a paper, and this time should be factored into your schedule. That is why it makes sense to start as early as possible.
When writing term papers and theses, complexity is necessarily reduced. While thinking and writing, it is important to be mindful of this reduction in complexity—that is, to focus on developing an independent line of argument. It is helpful to remember that (academic) thinking and writing can take place in the spirit of a conversation. The conversation partner cannot possibly know everything that has been gathered during the literature review. Therefore, it is necessary to keep the explanations as explicit as necessary, but at the same time as concise as possible.

(5.1) Literature Research

There are many different ways to find suitable literature for a term paper or thesis.
The first place to look for suitable literature is the required reading for seminars and lectures (including further reading). The bibliographic references from this reading are also helpful for finding leads to additional literature.
It's also worth visiting libraries and exploring their subject sections to find specific sources (such as the Potsdam University Library or libraries in Berlin). This can provide an initial overview of printed literature.
In the social sciences and humanities, many publications are readily available online. Here, too, it's worth visiting the relevant libraries (online, for example via the OPAC) and searching for literature. When searching for suitable literature, keyword searches for journal articles can also be helpful. There are platforms that provide access to journal articles, such as JSTOR, PhilPapers, ResearchGate, Academia, swiss-covery, or Google Scholar. Some articles are only accessible via a library account or through the university's VPN. Guidance is available on the website of the Chair of Political Theory under "Study and Teaching" -> "Digital Library."

(5.2) Thoughts While Reading

While reading, it is helpful to also look at the footnotes and general references in the texts and consider where specific concepts originate. In doing so, it makes sense to ask yourself how the

texts relate to one another—whether they "engage with one another." When it comes to key terms, it is also important to examine how theorists use them and which theoretical traditions they stem from.

For example, in a paper on democratic theory, one should note which concepts of democracy are used in the literature and why. Democracy could be defined specifically as participatory decision-making, but it is important to note that different authors also define participatory decision-making in different ways.

(5.3) Discussions While Writing

The primary goal of studying political theory is to discuss and develop arguments. In the writing process, it can therefore be helpful to discuss arguments with friends or earlier in the seminar. Intensive engagement with a topic can sometimes result in an argument that assumes too much prior knowledge. In the paper itself, this prior knowledge cannot be assumed; the argument must be explained sufficiently.

(5.4) When writing, you should ask yourself the following questions:

- Is it clear which thesis I am arguing for?
- Is it clear what my argument is and which arguments come from others—or, in other words, when I am presenting my own position and when I am referring to others? (Note: Use indirect speech, quotations, and sources!)
- Have I explicitly stated which premises I'm using and how I derive them? Have I clearly explained or derived all the premises?
- Am I drawing the logical conclusions from the examples and premises?

(5.5) Proofreading

Before turning in your finished paper, it can also be helpful to have friends read through it to catch any errors. To check sentence structure and spelling in general, it can be helpful to have a word processing program "read" the paper aloud.

When proofreading your own work (in terms of content), it can be helpful to ask yourself again whether your argument and thesis are specific enough; you should avoid vague and general passages. Additionally, you should not include more information than is absolutely necessary for your argument.

(6) Formalities and Citations

(6.1) Formal layout

Different instructors have different guidelines regarding the formal layout of a term paper or thesis. In general, however, it is important that the layout of the paper be consistent—that is, all pages should be formatted in the same way.

The following format is recommended for submitting term papers and theses:

- Font: Arial or Times New Roman
- Font size: 11 or 12
- Justified alignment
- Line spacing: 1.5
- Page numbers on all pages following the table of contents
- Consistent bibliography in a separate appendix
- A declaration of ownership

(6.2) Citation

When citing sources, it is important to clearly identify everything that has been taken from other texts and ideas. Citation styles often vary, so it is important to consistently use a single style throughout a paper. In the body of the text, a concise citation is used, while the bibliography includes a detailed reference.

(7) Definitions and Notes

(7.1) Causal and Constitutive Relationships:

Causal relationships are relationships that ask about cause or effect; for example, A causes B.
Constitutive relationships are relationships that ask about the nature or essence of something; for example, A determines B.

(7.2) Necessary and sufficient conditions:

A necessary condition for X to occur is a circumstance that is absolutely essential for X to happen or exist; for example, elections can be a necessary condition for a country to be considered a democracy.
However, the presence of a necessary condition does not automatically mean that X must occur once the condition is met; for example, there are some countries where elections are held but which cannot be described as democratic because the elections do not meet the criteria of being equal, free, direct, or anonymous.
Conditions whose fulfilment automatically leads to the occurrence of X are referred to as sufficient conditions; if a state is described as a democracy, this is a sufficient condition for elections that meet the above-mentioned criteria to be held in that country.

(8) Sample Procedure

- ✓ Gather ideas
- ✓ Create a timeline for the project
- ✓ Conduct an initial, broad literature review on the ideas
- ✓ Select a topic from the ideas and discuss it with the instructor
- ✓ Conduct further literature review on the current state of research on the topic
- ✓ Narrow down the topic and define the scope of the project
- ✓ Formulate research question(s)
- ✓ Formulate a (working) thesis statement and outline the argument
- ✓ Identify the premises and conclusion in the argument
- ✓ Conduct further literature review and research as needed
- ✓ Outline the rationale for each premise (see point 3: “Argumentation”)
- ✓ Create a detailed outline of the paper
- ✓ Write the paper
- ✓ Conduct additional literature research and analysis as needed
- ✓ Self-proofread the paper
- ✓ Format the paper according to the required style, including the bibliography
- ✓ Submit the paper