

Excerpts from Appendix from Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

## **How to Write a Paper**

I often offer the following suggestions to undergraduates writing class papers.

### **GENERAL FORMAT**

The following general format is often appropriate: "tell them what you're going to tell them; then tell them; then tell them what you told them."

### **INTRODUCTION FORMAT**

Begin your paper with a short summary introduction. This summary introduction should answer up to five (5) questions:

1. What question or questions do you address?
2. Why do these questions arise? From what literature or real-world events? Offer background that clarifies your questions and puts them in context.
3. What answer or answers do you offer? Summarize your bottom line in a few sentences.
4. How will you reach your answers? Say a few words about your sources and methods.
5. What comes next? Provide a roadmap to the rest of the paper: "Section I explains how I began my life of crime; Section II details my early arrests; Section III describes my trip to death row; Section IV offers general theoretical conclusion and policy implications." Something of that sort.

Number 1 ("What is your question?"), number 2 ("Why does this question arise?"), and number 3 ("What is your answer?") are essential: make sure you cover them. Numbers 4 and 5 are optional.

Summary introductions of this sort help readers grasp your argument. They also help you diagnose problems with your paper. A summary introduction can be hard to write. A possible reason: gaps or contradictions in your arguments or evidence, which summary exposes. Solution: rethink and reorganize your paper.

### **CONCLUSION FORMAT**

Authors often recapitulate their argument in their conclusion; however, a good summary introduction often makes a full summary conclusion redundant. If so, recapitulate quickly and then use your conclusion to explore the implications of your argument. What policy prescriptions follow from your analysis? What general arguments does it call into question, and which does it reinforce? What further research projects does it suggest?

## ARGUMENTATION

Four injunctions on argumentation should be kept in mind.

1. Use empirical evidence--facts, numbers, history--to support your argument. Purely deductive argument is sometimes appropriate, but argument backed by evidence is always more persuasive.
2. Clearly frame the general point(s) that your evidence supports. Don't ask facts to speak for themselves.

To summarize points 1 and 2: offer evidence to support your arguments and state the arguments your evidence supports.

3. "Argue against yourself." After laying out your argument, acknowledge questions or objections that a skeptical reader might raise, and briefly address them. This shows readers that you were thoughtful, thorough, and paid due regard to possible objections or alternate explanations.

Often, of course, the skeptic would have a good point, and you should grant it. Don't claim too much for your theories or evidence!

4. Use footnotes to document all sources and statements of fact. On footnote and citation format, consult and obey Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., rev. John Grossman and Alice Bennet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), in paperback. You should own a copy.

## WRITING

Good writing is essential to clear thinking and effective communication. So bear the following points in mind:

1. Your paper should make a single point or a handful of related points and should follow a simple organization. Avoid cluttering it with extra points. If you developed an argument that later became ancillary as you rethought your paper, drop the argument from the paper. This is painful ("I sweated hours on that idea!") but extraneous arguments drain power from your main argument.
2. Break your paper into numbered sections and subsections. More sections is better than fewer. Sections help readers see the structure of your argument. I recommend the following structure for sections/subsections:
  - a. Your argument;
  - b. Your supporting evidence;
  - c. Counterarguments, qualifications, and limiting conditions of your argument.
3. Start each section with several sentences summarizing the argument presented in the section. You may cut these sentences from your final draft if they seem redundant with your summary introduction, but you should include

them in your first drafts to see how they look. Writing such summaries is also a good way to force yourself to decide what you are and are not doing in each section, and to force yourself to confront contradictions or shortcomings in your argument.

Often these section summaries are best written after you write the section, but don't forget to add them at some point.

4. Start each paragraph with a topic sentence that distills the point of the paragraph. (Note: The topic sentence can appear as the second sentence in a paragraph, but should not appear later than that.) Later sentences should offer supporting material that explains or elaborates the point of the topic sentence. Qualifications or refutation to counterarguments should then follow. In short, paragraphs should have the same structure as whole sections.

A reader should be able to grasp the thrust of your argument by reading only the first couple of sentences of each paragraph.

5. Write short, declarative sentences. Avoid the passive voice. (Passive voice: "The kulaks were murdered"--but who did it? Active voice: "Stalin murdered the kulaks.")

6. Write from an outline. Outlines are major aids to coherence and readability.

7. Write at a level appropriate for college undergraduate readers--i.e., smart readers without too much background knowledge on your topic. In fact your class papers will be read by teachers who probably know something about your topic, but they want to see how you would lay out your argument for folks who don't. For more advice on writing, see William Strunk Jr., and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 3d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1979).

## VETTING

Ask a friend or two to give your paper a look before you turn it in; and return the favor for them when they have a paper under way. Two heads are better than one, and giving and receiving comments are important skills.

## GENERAL BEAUTY TIPS

Take care to turn in a neat, clean paper. Run your spellchecker. A messy-looking paper suggests a messy mind.

## HOW TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW TO WRITE PAPERS

Reread articles you or others admire and imitate their better aspects.