

TU Dortmund University
Institute for Philosophy and Political Science
Course Name
Semester
Name of Lecturer

Type of Paper
Module

Brief Guide to Academic Writing in Political Science

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1. Introduction

With this “Brief Guide to Academic Writing in Political Science” we would like to encourage you, dear students, to lay the framework for solid academic practice and academic writing skills. At the same time, you can use this guide as a template when layouting your academic papers. This guide is formatted according to the requirements specified here. Please note that it deviates from them with regard to chapter lengths and the content’s structure of academic papers. It is furthermore important that this overview serves as a general guideline rather than a dogmatic requirement. Nevertheless, we recommend you make use of the following guideline.

All examples taken from academic papers will be mentioned in blue to distinguish them from our generalised guidelines.

2. The Layout of Academic Papers

The content's quality is, of course, the most important element of your paper. However, it needs to be supported with a corresponding layout.

2.1 Title Page

The primary function of your title page is to give your reader relevant information about your paper and yourself. The following information should be included:

- The name of the university and its institute;
- the title and possibly subtitle of your paper;
- the type of paper (term paper; summary of a presentation; seminar paper etc.);
- the name of the class and the lecturer;
- the semester you took the class in (e.g. WS 2019/20);
- the corresponding module of your study programme;
- personal information about yourself, i.e.: full name, student ID number, programme, current semester, e-mail-address;
- the submission date of your paper.

2.2 Table of Contents

Orient your table of contents towards the guidelines discussed here. Do not forget to also include the page numbers of your chapters and subchapters in the table of contents respectively. We highly recommend using your word processor's function to automatically generate the table of contents because it automatically updates captions or page numbers whenever you edit them. If you choose to create your table of contents manually, you should use a table with invisible table lines. Keep in mind to only split chapters into subchapters when there will be at least two subchapters within a chapter (no 2.1 without 2.2). The page count starts with number 1 on the introduction's first page of text; both cover page and table of contents neither receive a page number nor are they listed in the table of contents. While the reference list and index of abbreviations receive page numbers and thus are listed in the table of contents, they do not count towards the required page count of your paper.

2.3 Text Body

Try to format your paper consistently. For example, always use the same fonts and sizes for specific text elements (such as titles). Furthermore, consider using the following details:

- The recommended standard font for your paper is “Times New Roman”;
- format your paper 1.5 spaced and in font size 12;
- insert page numbers (at the bottom of the page);
- leave sufficient margins for notes or comments for your readers: upper and lower margins of 2 cm; margin right: 2.5 cm; margin left: 3-4 cm;
- use full justification and activate automatic hyphenation;
- new chapters begin on new pages; subchapters can continue on the same page;
- avoid grammatical mistakes, spelling and punctuation errors. Make use of your programme’s auto-correct functions, proofread your own paper and – if possible – ask someone else to proofread your paper again;
- do not switch between different tenses;
- avoid colloquial language; apply substantive, objective language and avoid polemics, no matter how appealing this might seem;
- try to avoid directly writing from an explicitly subjective perspective (“I”), i.e. avoid using personal pronouns.

2.4 Citations/Quotations and Footnotes

When writing academic papers, keep in mind that they always require quotations and often footnotes. Thus, we recommend you use both.

It is particularly important that you cite appropriately and accurately. The purpose of your in-text citations is to clearly state the source of your information.

Generally, you have two options regarding citation styles. You can either give the source in in-text citations or refer to the source in footnotes. In either style, it is sufficient to give the author’s last name, year of publication and corresponding page number.¹ If you refer to a source more generally, hence without specific information, you do not have to give a page number. In general, use the same citation style consistently throughout your entire paper. When you quote a passage that starts on one page and continues onto the following page in the original source, you give the first page number and add “f.” to indicate that

¹ This suffices because your paper includes a reference list in which readers can find more detailed information on your sources. For further elaboration see chapter 3.1 of this guideline.

the quote continues on the following page. When you refer to more than just one follow-up page in the original source, add “ff.” to the first page number.

If you want to omit parts of a quoted passage, mark this by replacing your omission with three periods in square brackets (ellipsis mark). As an example, if you want to quote a statement found on page 17 of Sabine Saurugger’s book *Theoretical Approaches to European Integration*, such an omission could look like this:

“Functionalism led to a new and influential understanding of why states agreed to establish international organizations. Functionalist approaches [...] are considered as the cornerstones of classic integration theory” (Saurugger 2014, 17).

If you quote a source indirectly, i.e. refer to a source without giving a word by word quotation but summarize it in your own words, you also have to cite your source with page numbers!²

Luis L. Schenoni notes that despite common usage of the term ‘hegemony’ in the field of international relations, there is no commonly accepted definition (Schenoni 2019, 2).

Quotations that exceed four or more typed lines in your paper, are indented and set in font size 10. These long quotations can look like this:

Although populism is a term that includes various different phenomena and is applied to various contexts, Kurt Weyland elaborates on several elements he considers defining for his political strategic approach:

“populism revolves around the opportunism of personalistic plebiscitarian leaders. The political-strategic approach highlights this wily leadership, which aptly makes use of available opportunities and often turns adversity into advantage. To secure this maneuverability, populist leaders avoid committing to a discourse, worldview, or ideology, however thin-centered it may be; in particular, they do not tie their political fate to ideocratic visions” (Weyland 2017: 67).

Since quotations need to be reiterated word by word, possible mistakes need to be mentioned as well. As the following example shows, you should mark these with [sic!].

² In German, you would additionally mark sources you indirectly quoted by prefacing the source with the abbreviation “vgl.” (vergleiche) which can be translated with “cf.” (confer). Example: (cf. Schenoni 2019, 2). In English, this is not as common as in German. You can, however, use it to refer to a source as a whole or for further reading recommendations, similar to a “see also”.

Besides grammatical errors, you can also mark content-related mistakes with [sic!]. This way you ensure not to quote inaccurately. Example:

“It is well understood from the [...] analysis that the Peacebuilding process in Kosovo has been leaded [sic!] and relied on the international community, so the external actors” (Gërxhi 2017, 121).

Every grammatical or syntactical adjustment within a quotation, has to be marked with square brackets as well, as the following example shows:

Similar rhetorical patterns in the reporting on Donald Trump’s presidency can be found in *The Guardian*; in her opinion piece on the value of character for leadership, Brigid Delaney says Trump “show[s] us who he is”, calling him “[...] a man devoid of character” (Delaney 2020).

Emphasis of the original quotation has to be retained, too. If you add your own emphasis to the quotation, for example by marking words in bold or italic letters, you also have to explicitly mention your changes, as the following example shows:

In a speech accepting an honorary doctorate in 2018, then president of the European Council Donald Tusk stressed how the European Union should be understood by positively defining what it stands for rather than through exclusionary thinking. He noted:

“Because the European Union – the way I understand it – is founded on **positive** [emphasis added] thinking and **positive** [emphasis added] values. There would not be our Europe – and there will not be our Europe – without reconciliation, without solidarity and without mutual respect” (Tusk 2018).

The citation style exemplified here, is one of many styles commonly used in academic writing. Among the most commonly known and used styles are APA, MLA, APSA and Harvard Style referencing. Regardless of the style you choose, it is important that you consistently use the same style throughout your paper.

Besides the possibility to cite sources in footnotes, footnotes lend themselves well to give your reader additional information that is not essential for understanding the rest of your paper. The footnotes used above serve as an example.

3. The Writing Process

In the following, we would like to elaborate on guidelines concerning the structure of your paper, the importance of concise argumentation and the considerate use of sources.

3.1 General Paper Structure

It is necessary to structure your paper appropriately. Most of the time, your papers will consist of the following elements:

- title page;
- table of contents;
- list of figures/tables/illustrations (only if necessary; not necessary when there are less than three figures to be listed);
- introduction;
- body of your paper (the paper's "main part" which is not literally titled "main part" and should consist of at least two, rather three chapters);
- conclusion;
- list of abbreviations (if necessary);
- reference list;
- declaration of academic integrity.

Both **title page** and **table of contents** have been addressed above. Simply put, the **introduction**'s purpose is to raise the reader's interest and share your structural considerations for the paper. Thus, you should start by focusing on the paper's general topic in order to explain its relevance before you discuss the paper's structure. In doing so, you present your research question and the paper's outline. Instead of simply repeating your table of contents, this requires you to explain your line of reasoning, and to show why and how chapters are connected. Additionally, you should discuss why your paper focuses on specific aspects and why others may be omitted, for example why you have chosen to analyse a specific time or apply a certain theoretical approach. In the introduction, it is important to demonstrate for your reader that your research question and outline are based on conscious and reasonable decisions. In doing so, you can protect yourself from any accusation that your work is incomplete.

As the name suggests, the **body of your paper** (which you should not mention as such) comprises the largest part of your paper. It consists of several chapters and contains the most important and detailed content of your paper. This part requires you to complete two

tasks: You should (1) describe issues and facts and (2) interpret and explain these facts and relate them to each other. In order to achieve this, you should use clearly defined terms and concise wording. Thus, you should introduce definitions of your most important concepts. To increase comprehensibility, it is important your readers understand how you use and define terms or concepts. The same is true for your method of choice underlying your research. In order to fulfil academic standards, it is furthermore necessary to strive for objectivity and value-free discussion, i.e. to present and discuss issues from multiple angles. One example for achieving this is to contrast differing opinions:

Regarding contributing factors in continuous desertification, Schmidt-Wulffen ascribes a more secondary character to strong population growth (Schmidt-Wulffen 1985, 47f.), while Yudelman classifies population growth as basis for the problems of desertification and the starting point of a chain reaction. He argues that the continuously growing population requires more food and water to survive, both of which are limited resources in the Sahel region (Yudelman 1991, 23ff.).

Moreover, it is important to present issues and arguments concisely by focusing exclusively on those that are truly relevant to your research question. The various parts of your argument should be precise, well-structured and logically built upon each other; hence a common thread should be apparent throughout your paper. Focus on selected, few topics and discuss these in more detail – dare to leave out certain issues or aspects. However, justify for making these choices in the introduction. Often, papers aimlessly list many facts. Academic writing, however, should neither just summarize nor take the form of encyclopaedia entries. Instead, the content of the paper should form a logical and deliberate argument in which all parts build on each other.

Whenever you find logical errors, contradictions, or general criticism with regard to your sources, do not shy away from addressing these substantive arguments, giving reasons for your assessment, or at least acknowledging them in a footnote. This procedure allows you to distance yourself from possible errors you are not responsible for.

The **conclusion**, that should not be neglected, should briefly summarize the major results of your research and refer back to your research question. Your argument should be completed by this point. So do not add new aspects, arguments, or information that answer your research question here. Instead, the conclusion offers an opportunity to go beyond your research question. As such, it allows you to, for example, critically evaluate the literature or methods used in your paper by contrasting them with different approaches.

Moreover, you can explicitly discuss your personal opinion on issues and developments (using objective language and giving good reasons, of course), further contextualise your research in the academic field, identify possible subjects for future research, or suggest solutions to problems you discussed. However, keep in mind to remain realistic in these endeavours. All of these elements can be implemented in your conclusion. Which ones you actually choose to include in your academic paper highly depends on your research design and the focus you would like to emphasise in your conclusion. If you would like to stress realistic solutions, you could proceed like the following example:

You are writing a paper on the consequences of political realism and conclude that in the past, the confrontation of nation states has been the cause of numerous wars. In this context, you could conceivably argue that as a consequence of this conclusion, governments should destroy all of their weaponry so that technically, no more wars would be possible in the future. Although, quintessentially, this assessment may not be entirely wrong, it still is not rooted in reality. Thus, in this context, it would be more reasonable to, for example, discuss how after World War II, different European states promoted policies of integration in order to avoid future armed conflict among each other.

If you frequently used abbreviations throughout your paper that go beyond common usage, you can attach a **list/index of abbreviations** to the back of your paper. Regardless of whether or not you compile such a list, you should always introduce abbreviations when you first use them in your text. In other words, spell out the abbreviation once, give the abbreviation in brackets, and from there, use the abbreviation.

Finally, your work is concluded by a **works cited** list. The works cited consist of all sources you verifiably referred to and quoted from in your paper.³ The sources are sorted alphabetically in your works cited list. If there are several sources by the same author, you sort these by year of publication, too, from oldest to most recent publication. If there are several sources by the same author from the same year of publication, add a letter to the year, e.g. “2017a” and “2017b”, and sort alphabetically according to that letter. Besides the author’s last name, their (abbreviated) first name, and the year of publication, you should list the source’s full title and at least place of publication, if necessary, also the publisher. To improve legibility, you indent all lines but the first one of entries that exceed a single line. An exemplary works cited list can be found at the end of this guide.

³ Verifiable, in this context, means that the list only consists of sources that have actually been named in your text. Conversely, all sources named in your paper have to appear in your works cited list.

3.2 Structure of Individual Chapters

Once you have structured your paper as a whole according to your outline, you should take care that each chapter is structured coherently, too, and is connected to other chapters. For example, include reasonable thematic connections or transitions at the end and beginning of each chapter so that your readers understand how your paper's chapters are connected to both the previous and following chapters. Again, you should avoid aimlessly listing and summarizing facts in abstract lists.

Thus, the structure of each chapter is rather similar to the structure of the paper. The composition of introduction -> body -> summary/conclusion applies to chapters as well. Moreover, paragraphs within a chapter form a unit with regard to content and usually consist of multiple sentences. You should therefore make conscious use of setting paragraphs.

4. Conclusion

In this guide, we have presented and explained the basics of academic writing in Political Science. Formal basics, correct citations, and the importance of coherent structure are some of the key elements we would like to convey to you.

As addressed in the introduction already, these explanations serve as general guidelines. The more specific requirements for academic papers vary according to the specific area of research and the focus of your paper. Nevertheless, you can arrange your paper and writing process along these guidelines and take this guide as a template for the paper's layout. Any further questions, especially regarding your specific academic writing, can be answered during an appointment with your lecturer.

We hope that these guidelines prove to be helpful for you. Good luck and have fun writing!

Reference List

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