

The most important aspect of a political science assignment is an argument that reflects a position on a contentious problem. A political science paper is not descriptive; it is argumentative, thesis driven, and evidence based.

1) Types of Assignments

a) Article and book reviews

- These involve identifying and critically assessing the thesis made by the author of the article/book and the arguments provided to support the thesis

- There is some summary, but the emphasis is on a critical reflection on the meaning, significance and implications of the arguments made in the article/book.

b) Take home exams

- These involve clearly and concisely stating the answer to the question posed. They usually require engagement with course material to show comprehensive mastery and the ability to analyse and assess theoretical and conceptual problems in the context of particular cases or situations.

c) Research Essays

- The vast majority of political science assignments are research essays. These require a clear, argumentative thesis statement demonstrated through an organized development of arguments that relate to the main claim to be made.

- Questions may ask students to “evaluate,” or “critically assess” and may include multiple sub-questions to ensure that students effectively cover the scope of the topic.

- Research and understanding of the literature and/or perspectives on the problem are necessary. Students should narrow their scope of argument and offer sufficient examples (from case studies, citations or sources, text analysis) to demonstrate their claims in an in-depth and focused way.

- For political theory papers, a close examination and critical analysis of course texts, rather than outside research, is required. The emphasis is still on clear, concise, arguments.

2) Thesis statements for political science

Developing a strong thesis statement involves having a good *question*.

Political science arguments benefit from reflection on the following questions:

What is the *political problem* you are interested in?

Who does it *matter* to?

Why does it matter?

The thesis statement should be *clear, focused, concise, and arguable*. Above all, it should *investigate* a contentious political problem. The thesis sentence is usually the one sentence in the paper with the potential to assert, control, and structure the entire argument.

The thesis statement should *make a claim* (rather than a descriptive observation). It should *define the scope of your argument* and *shape your argument*.

For example:

The attempt to industrialize in the Global South has meant that countries have gotten into more debt than they can pay off.

This thesis statement is too general – it doesn't specify which countries, or over what time period. A better thesis statement is more specific and shapes the argument to come:

While the 1980s debt crisis in the Global South was set off by a multitude of causes (rising interest rates, an oil embargo), 'irresponsible' lending from the Global North should also be considered a significant factor.

This thesis statement acknowledges the complexity of the issue, but clearly focuses in on one key factor to be addressed in the paper.

3) Expectations of Political Science professors

- The essay is well structured. This means that the thesis statement is well supported throughout the essay by well developed points
- More analysis than description – this is particularly true for citations. Avoid integrating a citation without appropriate analysis and explanation of its relevance to the argument being made.
- Introduction is convincing and sets up the problem the paper takes up
- Conclusion reinforces the argument in the body of the paper and explains why it is significant and for whom
- Topics must be narrow and focused. While professors might offer broad initial topics, students are expected to define a smaller, more manageable aspect of the problem for the focus of their argument. For example, identifying one specific case study is often useful.
- Be specific in the claims made and avoid over-generalization. Eg. "Conservatives always argue..." is too broad.
- The meaning of large contested concepts should always be clarified as it is being used in the context of the paper. Define your terms.
- Papers may be required identify gaps or silences in the source material, or counter-arguments. Political science professors expect students to identify possible critiques of both the research their papers draw on, and critiques of students' own arguments
- Claims are supported by evidence and thoughtful reflection – move past the emotional into the reflective and maintain consistency in tone. Is the paper descriptive (describing a problem or situation) or normative (making a prescription for said problem or situation)? Political science papers often engage with contemporary polemics that speak to one's opinion. However, students should ensure that their opinion is phrased in a formal manner and supported by evidence.