

# STRATEGIES FOR WRITING A SUCCESSFUL POLITICAL THEORY PAPER

**Political Theory** papers deal with abstract ideas like justice, liberty, equality, the nature of rights, or the philosophy of the state. They examine these ideas, or they examine documents written by Political Theorists like Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, or John Locke.

Unlike Political Science papers, Political Theory papers are far less interested in quantifiable data and empirical statistics and far more interested in analyzing and interpreting Political Theorists' writings.

## CRAFTING A THESIS STATEMENT

To write a political theory paper, start by crafting a thesis statement about a particular theory or theorist. Write a logical argument about what the political theory text **says and means**, rather than a polemical argument about how bad the theorist's ideas are or whether their ideas prove true in present times. Base your argument on the political theorist's original writings -- not secondary sources about the theorist's life or how others wielded the theorist's writings.

### CORE ELEMENTS OF A POLITICAL THEORY THESIS STATEMENT:

- **A clear position/claim** -- This is the argument that you will advance throughout the paper. Your claim should be **debatable** rather than an obvious observation about the political theorist's work.
  - Example: *Tocqueville believes that moral virtue in the citizenry is necessary for democracy to coexist with liberty.*
- **Reasons supporting your claim** -- These reasons serve as the "organizing principle" that will serve as the roadmap for the rest of your paper.
  - Example: *Alexis de Tocqueville believes that moral virtue in the citizenry, **instilled through religion and the family**, is necessary for democracy to coexist with liberty.*
    - This example gives specific ways that Tocqueville seeks to support democracy with moral virtue. This sets the paper up for at least two sections, one on religion and another on the family.

For more information on Thesis Statements, see "Thesis Statements (Structure) -- Part 1" and "Thesis Statements (Types) -- Part 2" on the University Writing Lab's resource page.

# ORGANIZING THE ESSAY

## THE INTRODUCTION

Your introduction will orient the reader to the topic, person, or text that you will be exploring in your paper. Elements of an introduction include:

- **Introducing the topic** -- What is the central issue that you are trying to understand or resolve?
  - Example: *The distinguished career of the famous Roman philosopher statesman, Cicero, illuminates some of the most important questions about the often-strained relationship between philosophy and political practice.*
- **Your Thesis Statement** -- Once you have introduced the topic, you can include your thesis statement with a debatable claim and reasons supporting that claim.
  - Example: *Cicero seeks to harmonize politics and philosophy by restoring the mixed regime, promoting public spiritedness, and drawing attention to the moral power of the natural law.*

## THE BODY PARAGRAPHS

Each paragraph of the body will need to sustain the thesis statement. In a political theory paper, accurately describe the political theorist's position in the body paragraphs while arguing that your own interpretation of the text is accurate.

Make use of topic sentences to organize your paragraphs. These allow you to keep your individual paragraphs focused on a particular subject. For more information, see "Writing Strong Topic Sentences" on the University Writing Lab's resource page.

## THE CONCLUSION

The conclusion should re-emphasize the thesis statement and the main ideas addressed in the body paragraphs. If your paper addresses a particular topic, demonstrate how the political theory texts you cited relate back to that topic.

## INTEGRATING QUOTATIONS

Because a political theory paper depends so strongly on textual analysis and evidence, you will need to include quotes from pertinent political theorists' texts to demonstrate your claim. Your task is to integrate them into your paper without drowning out your authorial voice, on the one hand, or failing to engage the texts enough, on the other.

Example: *Rousseau determined that government was built on the construct of familial structures, for he stated, "The family then may be called the first model of political societies: the ruler corresponds to the father, and the*

people to the children; and all, being born free and equal, alienate their liberty only for their own advantage" (p.3). Based on this assumption or theory, those governments who do not follow a familial pattern provoke rebellion for social insecurities that may arise. However, Locke differentiated between the authority of government from that of a familial structure, having thought it inappropriate to suggest such a comparison. Locke wrote, "To this purpose, I think it may not be amiss, to set down what I take to be political power; that the power of a MAGISTRATE over a subject may be distinguished from that of a FATHER over his children, a MASTER over his servant, a HUSBAND over his wife, and a LORD over his slave" (p.4) Therefore, the greatest instance of convergence between both ideologies remains within the modern democracies, yet Locke's philosophy appears to die away as the people look more and more to government to soothe their woes rather than guide them in responsibility like a father coddling a baby rather than a mentor his pupil.

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